Reflections of care experienced young people on their experiences of child criminal exploitation (CCE) in the UK.

By

Danica Darley

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Supervisors:

Dr Xavier L'Hoiry
Professor Kate Morris

November 2025

For my Mum who passed away from cancer while I was in the middle of my field work. You always said I would be a doctor one day (I just took the long way round getting there!) I know you'll be there looking down, cheering me on when I cross that stage in my floppy hat.

Abstract

This thesis examines the lived experiences of care experienced young people who have been criminally exploited. Child Criminal Exploitation (CCE) in the UK is a growing and urgent social concern and while national attention has increasingly turned to county lines drug trafficking and gang-related grooming, little research has meaningfully included the experiences of those most affected: young people in and leaving the care system. Using a participatory methodology, this study centres the reflections of fourteen young people who have experienced both statutory care and criminal exploitation, revealing the complex interplay of structural disadvantage, neglect, and systemic failure they endured.

Drawing on qualitative data generated through both narrative and semi-structured interviews, the study identifies three interwoven forces, poverty, social harm, and mattering, as central to understanding young people's pathways into and out of exploitation. These factors are conceptualised collectively as the Neglect Nexus, a term developed in this thesis to describe the cumulative effects of material deprivation, emotional disposability, and institutional neglect that can render some young people susceptible to exploitation. The Neglect Nexus illustrates how the intersecting systems of care and criminal justice can reproduce harm under the guise of protection, pushing children and young people toward exploitative relationships in search of value, belonging, and survival.

The thesis contributes new empirical knowledge by foregrounding young people's voices and interpretations of CCE, challenging dominant narratives that frame them as either passive victims or active offenders. Participants reflected on how early experiences of instability, negative school experiences, and adultification shaped their susceptibility to exploitation, and how their needs were routinely overlooked or misinterpreted by professionals. Many described feeling like they did not matter within the care system, a psychosocial experience that deepened their alienation and drove them toward exploiters who, at least initially, appeared to provide validation and connection.

The thesis concludes with practice and policy recommendations co-developed with the co-researchers, advocating for child-centred, relational, and trauma-aware systems. By introducing the Neglect Nexus as a conceptual framework, the research offers a powerful tool for practitioners and policymakers to understand and address the overlapping harms experienced by children and young people in care. Ultimately, this work calls for a fundamental shift in how exploitation is recognised and responded to, not simply as a matter

of individual risk, but as the predictable outcome of systemic neglect and social abandonment.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my wonderful family for their support. Firstly, to the loves of my life, my gorgeous children Grace and Lottie, there is no doubt that doing a PhD with young children presents many challenges but having them there to make me laugh, give me cuddles and raid their chocolate stash has made it all worthwhile. Secondly, to my husband Simon who without his support none of this would be possible. Thank you for working the long hours needed both in and out of the home to help me realise this dream. I also need to thank our wonderful dog, Cinder, who we got in the summer before I started my PhD. Your constant need for love and attention has forced me to put down my books and give you cuddles whenever you have demanded them!

I am also so thankful for the constant love, support, encouragement and challenge from my sister, Tamsin. The amazing food, wine, and belly laughs that I've had with you and Mark over the last seven years is what has sustained my commitment to this project. To my stepdad Tom, your quiet cheerleading from the sidelines has not gone unnoticed, it will forever be appreciated. Finally, to my in-laws Bill and Maggy, thank you for being there to listen to me moan about academia, always encouraging me to do my best and being the best babysitters a girl could ever wish for.

To my many friends, champions, and supporters of whom there are too many to mention individually but an extra special thanks needs to go to Nikki Bradley for all the encouragement when I thought I wasn't good enough, to Jane McNulty for her amazing proofreading skills and wonderful lunches and to my fellow PhD pal Emily Lunn whose drive to continue in the harshest of circumstances has been inspirational.

I owe a massive debt of gratitude to my wonderful supervisory team. Firstly, to Xavier, who's going to be sick of seeing his name in my acknowledgements! It feels like a long time ago that I sat in your office in 2017 when you were allocated as my personal tutor on week 1 of my undergrad. The journey I've been on since then I can categorically say I could not have done without your unwavering support and friendship. Thank you so much for everything and I hope we get to carry on working together over the years to come. I've got a few left before retirement! Secondly to Kate, I feel privileged and honoured to have worked with you on this project. Your depth of knowledge, insight and criticality into the systems that are supposed to care and protect our children, and young people has changed not only this piece of work for the better but also my own practice more than you'll ever know.

Table of Contents

List of Figures

List of Tables

3	Demographic information of interview participants	109
4	Contextualising information about interview participants	124

Chapter 1: INTRODUCTION

Child Criminal Exploitation (CCE) has been described as a chronic and corrosive problem that poses a significant threat, according to the National Crime Agency (NCA, 2017). Whilst there is no statutory definition of CCE (Children's Society, 2020), it is said to happen when an individual or group takes advantage of a disproportionate power relationship to 'coerce, control, or manipulate a child under the age of 18' (Shaw and Greenhow, 2021:15). CCE is said to be particularly prolific in the relatively recent phenomenon of 'county lines' drug trafficking (Harding, 2020), a form of organised criminality in which criminal gangs ostensibly based in urban locations establish markets in rural towns (Coomber and Moyle 2018). In doing so, children who are perceived as vulnerable are used as drug runners and, at times, sellers. More recent incidents of county lines have also seen children being exploited within the same towns and cities and even across neighbourhoods (Spicer, 2021). At the heart of these drug markets is the systematic exploitation of children, particularly those in local authority care who are specifically targeted by criminal gangs due to their multiple and overlapping perceived vulnerabilities (Robinson et al. 2019). This apparent growth of CCE in county lines and more broadly in other forms of criminality has led to multi-agency calls for a different approach to tackling this concerning and ever-growing practice (Shaw and Greenhow, 2021).

Understanding the broader implications of this rise in CCE is essential, particularly in relation to how it intersects with the experiences and outcomes of children involved with statutory services. The link between the Children's Social Care and youth justice system is well established in academic and non-academic literature (see Colvin et al. 2018; Hunter, 2019; Laming, 2016; McFarlane, 2017; Mills, 2020.) The Laming Review (2016) has previously found that children in care who find themselves in conflict with the law have a higher chance of being convicted rather than cautioned. Similarly, Staines (2017) has evidenced that 33% of boys aged 15-18 and 61% of girls the same age who are in custody have spent time in local authority care. This is a staggering figure given that only 1% of all children in England are looked after by the local authority (Laming, 2016). The role that CCE plays in these figures cannot be underestimated but the reasons for this are complex and still not fully understood. In 2018, a Home Office report stated that children in care are particularly susceptible to becoming victims of exploitation due to the adversity they have faced prior to being taken into care, which can lead others to see them as 'vulnerable'. However, as Sturrock and Holmes (2015) suggest, CCE is not always recognised or understood in children who appear to have committed crimes or been involved in 'gang' activity. It has

been argued that this lack of recognition can lead to children involved in CCE being criminalised rather than recognised and treated as victims (Children's Society, 2020).

This research project took a participatory approach to better understand the experiences of young people who had been in care and had also experienced CCE. The study placed lived experiences at its centre and sought to offer feasible and impactful suggestions to addressing the harms that CCE creates. This project contributes to the body of knowledge concerning the exploitation, safeguarding and support of children in care by examining the experiences of children who are looked after by the local authority and the grooming and exploitation they face once they have been removed from the family home. The study aims to understand the lived realities of care experienced young people affected by CCE. It also seeks to produce recommendations that complement the work already being carried out by residential care staff, education providers, social workers, and other professionals who support children in care. The outputs of this research are unique insofar as they have been developed with young people who have been in care and have experienced CCE and therefore offer essential insights into the forms of exploitation young people in care can and do face, and, by extension, how they can be better supported when they experience these harms.

Where are we now? Children with Social Care Involvement

Despite a plethora of facts and figures that tell us about individual areas of a child's lives, there is little statistical evidence that seeks to understand a child's experience in its totality. Some attempts have been made to understand a child's circumstances more holistically, often around one or two areas of a child's life such as criminal justice data and data about 'race' intersected with data about children in care (Hunter, 2022; Hunter et al. 2023). This, however, has not been compared with health information or welfare and social inequality data. There are, therefore, evidently gaps in understanding in this context. What follows is a summary of data that is currently available, but it is important to note that official figures such as those reported by the Department for Education rarely differentiate between children in need[1], children on child protection plans[2], and those who are looked after by the local authority. Therefore, extrapolating accurate data solely on children in care can be difficult.

---

[1] 'Children in need' have been assessed by a social worker and found to need help and protection because of risks to their development or health, such as neglect, domestic abuse in the family, or because they are disabled.

[2] A Child Protection Plan (CPP) is developed when a multi-agency child protection conference decides that a child is at continuing risk of significant harm under the categories of physical, emotional, or sexual abuse, or neglect. The plan outlines the actions and services required to safeguard the child and promote their welfare, and it is reviewed regularly by professionals involved in the child's care. Children usually become subject to a CPP

As of 31 March 2025, in England 402,400 children were classed as in need and 49,400 children were on protection plans (Department for Education, 2025). There is currently no available data on gender breakdown, ethnicity and age from 2025 but as of March 2024, males were slightly over-represented in the children in need population; 55% were male, compared to 51% of the overall child population. Of those where ethnicity was known, 69% of children in need were white in 2024, whereas 31% were from all other ethnic groups combined which is slightly higher than the 27% reported for the overall child population in the 2021 census (Department for Education, 2024). The children in need population is ageing and those aged 10 and over now make up the majority. In 2024, young people aged 18 or over who continued to receive care, accommodation or support from Children's Services accounted for 14% of children in need. Unborn children accounted for 2%.

The primary reasons given for initial referrals to Children's Social Care were concerns about the parent/carer being the victim of domestic abuse and the mental health of the child's parent/carer, with both factors being identified in just under one third of episodes with assessment factors recorded (Department for Education (DfE), 2025). However, the social gradient is a crucial concept for understanding which children come into contact with the Children's Social Care system. While it is traditionally used to describe how health outcomes worsen as socioeconomic disadvantage increases, the idea has been extended within social care to illuminate patterns of intervention. Goldacre and Hood (2022) argue that children from more deprived families are systematically more likely to be referred to or assessed by social care services, not simply because of individual perceived vulnerabilities but because structural conditions shape both the risks families encounter and the likelihood that these risks become visible to professionals. Poverty, housing instability and financial strain can intensify everyday challenges, drawing families into closer contact with schools, health services or the police, where concerns may be more readily identified or acted upon. Recognising the role of the social gradient is therefore essential because it shifts attention away from individual blame and towards the broader socioeconomic forces that influence which families are scrutinised, supported, or intervened with. It also highlights significant inequalities within the system and strengthens arguments for approaches that address the underlying social and economic conditions that shape children's lives, rather than focusing solely on parental behaviours or isolated incidents.

---

following a Section 47 enquiry under the Children Act 1989, which is initiated when there is reasonable cause to suspect that a child is suffering, or is likely to suffer, significant harm (Department for Education, 2023b).

The numbers of children looked after by the local authority to March 2025 have not been published yet, however as of 31 March 2024, 83,630 children were looked after by the local authority in England and Wales. This is down slightly by 0.5% on 2023, bucking the trend that had previously seen a year-on-year rise of children becoming looked after by local authorities, as per Table 1 below. (Department for Education, 2024).

YEAR	Number of children in the care of a local authority
2018	75,360
2019	78,140
2020	80,000
2021	80,770
2022	82,080
2023	83,840
2024	83,630

Table 1 - Numbers of children in the care of the local authority in England and Wales (Department for Education, 2024).

In England, most children who are in care are looked after by foster carers, with only 11% of children in care housed in residential children's homes, secure homes and semi-independent accommodation (NSPCC, 2021). Most children in care are removed from the family home via a Compulsory Care Order (CCO) under Section 31 of the Children Act (1989), which means they are accommodated by the local authority as they have suffered or are likely to suffer 'significant harm'. Under a CCO, parents hold joint parental responsibility with the local authority for the care of a child. However, some children in care are accommodated under voluntary provision, as part of Section 20 of the Children Act (1989). In this scenario, parents retain full parental responsibility for their child even though they will not be living with them. Office for National Statistics (ONS) data from 2022 shows that 43% of children entered care due to abuse or neglect. Other common reasons included family dysfunction (21%) and acute family stress (14%). It is important to recognise that many of these children experience behavioural, emotional and social challenges, which may translate into a range of significant support needs (Ofsted, 2018). McLaughlin et al. (2012) suggest that adverse and traumatic

childhood experiences such as living in a family where children witness or experience difficult economic situations, violence, mental health problems, and substance use encourages the development of emotional and behavioural disorders in children themselves. Keil and Price (2006) estimate that 42% of children in care present with mental health problems with diagnoses including depression (Greger, 2017), post-traumatic stress disorder (Keller et al. 2010), and comorbidity (Lehmann et al. 2013). Further studies in this area highlight that children in care may have serious problems with the consumption of addictive substances (Leslie et al. 2010) and suicidal ideation (Bronsard et al. 2011).

Where are we now? Children Criminal Exploitation

Child criminal exploitation (CCE) has emerged as a major child protection concern in England and Wales in the past decade. CCE refers to situations where children and young people are manipulated, coerced, or forced into criminal activity by adults or peers, typically for the benefit of others (Home Office, 2018). The UK Government and safeguarding agencies define CCE as a form of child abuse, acknowledging that children cannot consent to their exploitation (DfE, 2023b).

CCE manifests in multiple ways, including county lines drug trafficking, forced labour, coerced theft, and financial exploitation. The most widely documented form of CCE is county lines, where children are recruited to move and distribute drugs, often across Police and local authority boundaries (National Crime Agency, 2023). Exploitation often includes dangerous travel, carrying weapons, and operating from 'cuckooed' homes (the takeover of a person's property for criminal use) a practice well-documented in Spicer's work on county lines and localised drug markets (Spicer, 2019; Spicer, 2021). Other documented forms of CCE include coerced involvement in shoplifting, burglary, car crime, and fraud. Increasingly, children and young people are involved in laundering money via individual bank accounts or cryptocurrencies (Children's Society, 2022). Forced labour is also prevalent, particularly in cannabis cultivation and other illicit enterprises, where trafficked or groomed children and young people perform unpaid or low-paid work under threat. While child sexual exploitation (CSE) is also a significant safeguarding concern, it is typically conceptualised as distinct from CCE; however, research shows that children may experience both forms of exploitation simultaneously and that the harms associated with CCE and CSE can overlap in complex ways (Firmin, 2018, Home Office, 2021).

Children are typically groomed through a process that mirrors techniques used in child sexual exploitation (CSE). This includes building trust through attention, gifts, or protection, before introducing them to criminal tasks. Many children believe they are part of a peer

group or 'family', only to later experience coercion, debt bondage, or violence. Grooming is also increasingly said to occur online, with recruiters using platforms like Snapchat, Instagram, and gaming apps to contact, befriend, and control victims remotely (NSPCC, 2023a).

Data from the National Referral Mechanism (NRM), which gathers information from professionals about young people they suspect have been victims of modern slavery, revealed that in 2023, 7,432 children were referred. For these young people, criminal exploitation was the most common reason for referral. UK nationals made up a significant majority of these referrals, and 78% of the UK child cases involved CCE (Home Office, 2024). These figures, however, likely underestimate the true scale of the issue, as many young people are either not identified by practitioners and/or not referred to the NRM (SPACE, 2021).

The Department for Education (DfE, 2024a) has reported that across 14,400 social care assessments in England during 2023–24, criminal exploitation was flagged as a concern, marking a steady rise year-on-year. Recent data indicate that boys are disproportionately affected: in 2024, children made up 31% (5,999) of all NRM referrals, and the most common referral for UK nationals was male children reporting criminal exploitation; county-lines-flagged referrals totalled 2,281, around three-quarters of which related to male children (Home Office, 2024). However, girls are widely understood to be under-identified within CCE data, in part because they may experience different forms of exploitation, are more frequently criminally exploited in the context of intimate relationships or may be misclassified as victims of CSE rather than CCE. These dynamics can affect both recognition and disclosure (Firmin, 2018; NSPCC, 2023b). Children in care are also markedly over-represented: although only about 1% of children are in care, 59% of children in custody in England and Wales were care experienced in 2022 (Youth Justice Legal Centre, 2023).

Despite attempts to increase awareness of CCE among practitioners in recent years, institutional responses to CCE remain inconsistent and often punitive. A major concern is that children exploited into criminality are misidentified as offenders, leading to criminal justice responses rather than safeguarding interventions (Barnardos, 2023). While Section 45 of the Modern Slavery Act 2015 offers a statutory defence for victims of trafficking who commit offences under duress, its application is uneven and often misunderstood by frontline practitioners (Anti-Trafficking Monitoring Group, 2023). The NRM process, intended to identify and support victims, has also been criticised. Referral thresholds are often unclear, and decisions can be delayed or inconsistent. Some local authorities lack the capacity or confidence to refer children, while others report that outcomes depend heavily on the quality

of evidence provided, often placing the burden of proof on the child or young person themselves (Children's Commissioner, 2024).

There are also significant racial and social disparities in victim identification and response. Black and racially minoritised children are overrepresented in CCE referrals yet often face greater scepticism from professionals. Research indicates that some are more likely to be seen as 'streetwise' or complicit, and less likely to be offered support or protection (Children's Society, 2023). These biases compound existing inequalities and further marginalise children already considered to be 'vulnerable'.

Inter-agency safeguarding is also fragmented. Schools, social care, youth offending services, and Police often work with different frameworks and priorities. Failures in information sharing and role clarity have led to missed opportunities for early intervention (IICSA, 2022). Many services are also underfunded, limiting the availability of prevention and support programmes. Recent reviews have called for significant reform. In 2024, the Jay Review concluded that the current approach to child exploitation is not working and recommended the introduction of a statutory definition of CCE, alongside a national child exploitation strategy. The review emphasised the need for a welfare-first response, treating criminally exploited children as victims of abuse rather than young offenders. Similarly, the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse (IICSA, 2022) has identified systemic failings in the protection of children from exploitation and called for clearer accountability, better multi-agency collaboration, and greater investment in local safeguarding partnerships. The Crime and Policing Bill (Home Office, 2025) currently under consultation proposes to criminalise the exploitation of children specifically, close loopholes in existing legislation, and provide clearer powers to disrupt exploiters. It also aims to strengthen the implementation of the Section 45 defence and introduce national oversight of NRM decisions.

Research Aim

This research examines the experiences of care experienced young people who have been subjected to Child Criminal Exploitation (CCE), but its contribution extends beyond documenting harm. Through a participatory and trauma-aware design, the study positions care experienced young people as co-producers of knowledge, challenging conventional hierarchies within criminological and social work research.

The overarching question for this study is:

How do care experienced young people understand their experiences of Child Criminal Exploitation (CCE)? To address this overarching question, the following sub-questions offer a framework for the study:

1. How do care experienced young people feel about the circumstances that resulted in their exploitation?

2. What do care experienced young people feel were the main drivers of their sustained exploitation?

3. What type of support/intervention do care experienced young people believe may have been beneficial to shorten their exploitation?

Why is this research important?

The exploitation of children for criminal purposes remains one of the most pressing child protection issues in England and Wales. Among those most at risk are children and young people with care experience. This research seeks to explore how these young people understand their experiences of Child Criminal Exploitation (CCE), a topic that has been significantly under-researched despite growing policy and media attention on this issue. By foregrounding lived experience and applying the sociopsychological concept of 'mattering', situated alongside an understanding of the effects of poverty on child welfare and social harm, this study responds to both a theoretical and practical gap in the fields of social work, criminology, and sociology.

Care experienced young people are widely acknowledged to be particularly susceptible to CCE. Factors such as instability in placements, exposure to early trauma, and a lack of consistent adult advocacy increase their susceptibility to grooming, coercion, and sustained exploitation (Children's Society, 2022; Jay, 2014). A recent Welsh safeguarding report described care experienced young people as living with limited adult oversight and persistent exposure to neglect, placing them at heightened risk of being targeted by exploiters (ECPAT UK, 2022). Yet, despite this acknowledgment, the voices of these young people are largely missing from both academic literature and the development of safeguarding responses.

The importance of listening to the lived experiences of children and young people has gained traction across disciplines. In social work, there is an increasing recognition that

children and young people are experts in their own lives, and their accounts can lead to more responsive and effective services (Department for Education, 2023a). Coram Voice (2023) highlights that engaging young people with lived experience of care is vital for improving social care, offering them not only a sense of agency but also recognition that their perspectives matter. Similarly, Maxwell's (2024) qualitative study of criminally exploited Welsh young people underscores how listening to survivor narratives reveals the nuanced and often contradictory meanings young people assign to their exploitation.

This study also draws upon the concept of mattering, developed in psychological literature to describe the degree to which individuals feel valued by others and believe their lives make a difference (Flett, 2018). For children in care, who often describe feeling invisible or unwanted, mattering is not just a theoretical concept but potentially a deeply personal and protective factor. Flett and Zangeneh (2022) argue that the absence of mattering, which they term 'anti-mattering', can leave young people more susceptible to harmful influences and increase the likelihood of internalising marginalisation. Applying this framework to care experienced young people groomed into CCE allows this study to explore how systemic neglect, emotional abandonment, and institutional failures may contribute to a prolonged sense of disposability and consequently an emotional landscape in which exploitation can thrive.

Moreover, this research is grounded in qualitative, participatory methods, which are particularly well-suited for uncovering the meaning that individuals make of their lived experiences. While existing literature and quantitative data have illuminated the scale of CCE, they rarely account for how young people perceive their choices, their relationships with exploiters, or the internal and external barriers to exiting exploitation. Studies such as Maxwell (2024) and Robinson et al. (2023) show that when children and young people are given space to narrate their own stories, they offer perspectives that challenge dominant narratives of victimhood and blame, revealing instead the complex dynamics of coercion, agency, survival, and unmet need.

Care-experienced young people who have been exploited often report that they were criminalised rather than protected. This problem has been raised repeatedly in recent inquiries and reviews, including the Jay Review (2024), which found that many young people caught in county lines or 'gang'-related activities were seen first and foremost as offenders. Such framing obscures their victimhood and perpetuates a punitive cycle. Listening to how young people interpret the circumstances leading to their exploitation, and what interventions they believe might have helped, can guide the development of practices that are genuinely child-centred and trauma-aware (IICSA, 2022; Barnardo's, 2023).

This research is therefore timely, necessary, and original. It responds to national calls for improved responses to exploitation, especially for children in care, and to the urgent need for practice informed by lived experience. It contributes to knowledge in three keyways: first, by documenting the lived experiences and interpretations of a highly marginalised group; second, by applying the underutilised concept of mattering to the context of CCE; and third, by using participatory, qualitative methods that centre young people's voices as knowledge producers. By asking not just what happened, but how it felt, why it continued, and what could have helped, this study aims to illuminate pathways toward earlier intervention, better support, and more just outcomes for children in care.

Methodological Outline

The study adopted a qualitative, interpretivist approach informed by principles of participatory research, narrative inquiry and relational practice. The research was designed to be child and young person-centred, trauma-aware, and reflexive, aligning with the study's aim to foreground lived experience and amplify voices often marginalised in social work, criminology, and child protection discourses.

The study was underpinned by an interpretivist ontology and a constructivist epistemology which recognise that reality is socially constructed and contextually experienced. The choice of this philosophical stance reflected the intention to understand participants' perspectives from their own terms rather than imposing a predetermined analytical framework. Knowledge was considered co-created through relational interactions between the researcher, co-researchers and participants, acknowledging the embeddedness of subjectivity in both the stories told and the act of storytelling itself. Given the complexity of CCE and the need to explore meaning, motivation, and impact from the participants' point of view, a qualitative design was employed. The research drew on elements of narrative inquiry and reflexive thematic analysis to explore not only what happened to the young people, but how they made sense of these experiences. At the heart of the research design were participatory values informed by trauma-sensitive methodologies, which guided every phase of the research process from design to dissemination.

Purposive and snowball sampling were used to identify participants with relevant lived experience. The study included 14 young people (aged 18–31) who had spent time in the care system and had been criminally exploited as children. Most of the participants were recruited through the networks of the co-researchers employed on the study. Inclusion criteria required that participants (a) had direct experience of CCE, (b) had been in the care

system at the time of exploitation or previously, and (c) were no longer at acute risk or in crisis. This approach sought to minimise as much as realistically possible the risk of re-traumatising individuals. The small sample size reflects the depth-over-breadth logic of qualitative research and the ethical imperative to ensure safety and care throughout the process.

Ethical approval was granted by the University of Sheffield's ethics committee. The study was designed with sensitivity to the risks of re-traumatisation, stigma, and institutional mistrust often faced by the care experienced and criminally exploited young people. Participants were reminded that they could pause or withdraw at any point, and the interview setting was determined in consultation with each young person to maximise comfort and safety. Anonymity was assured for all the participants using pseudonyms, and identifying details were removed from transcripts. However, it should be noted that the co-researchers decided to be named and credited for their work on the study.

Data was collected through three life story narrative interviews with the co-researchers and 14 semi-structured interviews lasting approximately 60–90 minutes each with the remaining participants. Interviews were conducted in person or via encrypted video call, depending on participant preference and logistical considerations. A flexible topic guide was used to encourage open-ended responses and allow participants to shape the direction of the conversation. Questions focused on personal understandings of CCE, the conditions surrounding exploitation, the role of the care system, and perceived barriers and enablers to support. All interviews were audio-recorded with informed consent and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Data was co-analysed by all of the research team using reflexive thematic analysis, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2019, 2021, 2022). This method allowed for the identification of recurrent patterns and themes while remaining grounded in the participants' narratives. Thematic findings were reviewed in dialogue with relevant theory, particularly concepts of 'mattering,' 'social harm,' and 'poverty'. Researcher reflexivity was embedded throughout, including the use of analytic memos and peer debriefing sessions.

To sum up, this study employed a rigorous, ethical, and theoretically informed qualitative, participatory methodology to explore how care experienced young people understand their experiences of CCE. Through participatory design, narrative inquiry and thematic analysis, it seeks to elevate voices too often marginalised in policy and practice and to inform more compassionate, responsive interventions.

Positionality

This chapter now turns to the importance of positionality in this project. Although one might usually expect a discussion of positionality to appear in a methods chapter, it is placed here at the start of the thesis to reinforce how critical it has been to the formation, delivery, and dissemination of this work. It has become apparent to me that my former personal and professional experiences have shaped the research I want to do and the impact that I would like that to have. I am inspired by people who place emotion, narrative, lived experiences and deep truth front and centre in their work (see Earle 2016, Antojado and McPhee, 2024, Buck et al. 2024). Stemming professionally from my work over the last 20 years of working with children in care, in conflict with the law or on the fringes of the criminal justice system, I strived to be an advocate for them to be heard in spaces that were often closed to them. Time in academia has allowed me to see this more clearly and afforded me the time and space to reflect on my previous practice and experience.

This reflection on my professional work inevitably led to introspection and reflection on my own life - my own 'lived experience'. As a woman who has spent time in prison who then went on to study criminology, I spent three years hiding from that truth, going through the motions of learning about our criminal justice system as an outsider and keeping quiet that I had also walked the insider's path. At the end of my undergraduate degree and before my Masters started, I was inspired by criminologists on X/Twitter who had their own stories to tell about their involvement in the criminal justice system. I 'outed' myself on X/Twitter and to one of my PhD supervisors. What followed was a life affirming experience - that the worst experience of my life could be put to some good. Years after I picked up the pieces that the devastation of my time in prison caused, I was confronted with the reality that I could do some good with it, both for me and other people who were trying to understand and come to terms with their own experiences. Perhaps more widely that there was space for those experiences to count towards changing things on a more systemic level. Both sets of experiences assured me that researching with those with lived and living experience of our systems of care and control was something I knew I wanted to be involved in. Learning about participatory research and realising that there was a body of work out there that already placed emphasis on not doing research *to* people but with people and equally valuing those different forms of knowledge felt like coming home.

This project begins with the bringing together of varied forms of knowledge, each different, but all equal, to rebalance traditional research power structures and to harness the might of academia for good (Mason and Williams, 2022). Including this at the outset is important, because it makes clear that the work is grounded in a collective ethos rather than the often-

individualised framing of doctoral research. From my perspective, stating this up front is essential: it acknowledges that the knowledge I am presenting is not mine alone, but emerges through shared dialogue, challenge, and support. From my co-researchers' perspectives, this positioning also validates their contributions and highlights their central role in shaping both the direction and the outcomes of the project.

Introducing the co-researchers

For many, the pursuit of a PhD is a solo and sometimes lonely affair. I have been privileged, however, to share this journey with my co-researchers Alice Downing, Brittany Jackson, and Holly Whyte. Their insights have not only contributed knowledge but also unsettled my assumptions, pushed me to reconsider my methodological choices, and reminded me that research is most powerful when it is co-created. Importantly, we discussed together where their voices should be placed within this thesis, and they were clear that their introductions should appear right at the beginning. Positioning them here reflects that conversation, underlines our shared commitment to collaborative knowledge-making, and signals to the reader that this is not a solitary endeavour. To me, it is clear, as in many aspects of life, that the creation of knowledge is not a solitary pursuit, but a collaborative one. What follows is a brief introduction to my colleagues and friends.

Brittany Jackson

Brittany was the glue that held this project together. She is organised, committed, intelligent and artistic. She had the ability to bring us all back to task when our minds were wandering and her commitment to completing this project was a wonder to behold. To top it all off she's doing this all while looking after her young daughter and volunteering as a peer educator in the homelessness sector. One of the things I have enjoyed most about this project is seeing the joy that Brittany has developed through becoming a researcher. I remember watching her during the first participant interview that we did together, and I saw her realise that what she was doing was important, it was impactful but more importantly that she enjoyed what she was doing and was really, really good at it. Her ability to hold space in a sometimes hard to hear and even harder to understand conversation speaks volumes about her capacity for care and empathy. Brittany's journey has not been far from easy but her wanting to share her story for the purpose of this project demonstrates her commitment to social justice and her belief that she can create a positive impact for society through highlighting the experiences of children who have been in care and criminally exploited.

Alice Downing

If you were to look up the definition of tenacious in the dictionary there would be a picture of Alice next to it. She is feisty, brave, strong, determined, super smart and generous with her skills and time. It is of no surprise to me that Alice was the first person to submit her application when I sent out the advert for co-researchers. She then doggedly emailed me on a weekly basis until I got myself together enough to organise interviews for the positions. My notes from Alice's interview say "articulate, knows her own mind, down to earth and funny". A fitting summary of the person I have had the pleasure of working with over the last 24 months and who I am proud to call my friend.

The first time I met Alice I knew everything about the project was going to work out. Her commitment to the project and more broadly to championing the causes of children in care shone through from my very first interactions with her. Her story is unique to her, yet what we have discovered through this research is that commonality, and connection to others who have had similar experiences has created a sense of community both amongst the co-researchers and more broadly across all the people that we interviewed.

Holly Whyte

Holly is the youngest member of our team (the Fantastic 4 we like to call ourselves). At her interview Holly was reserved and quiet yet showed us a small glimpse of her massive brain and even bigger personality. Holly was the one the team went to when we needed a laugh, a pick me up or a reality check. She is witty, intelligent, funny, artistic, kind, feisty and not scared to stand up for herself, her friends and what she believes in. Holly is the one who has had the most to bear during the process of this research project, she has been dealing with a set of personal circumstances that would have left me unable to do anything but survive but Holly has doubled down, recommitted to the project, and used it as her focus. Often Holly's story felt the rawest and this was because she was closer to it than some of the other people we spoke to. When she started with us, she had only just managed to escape the criminal exploitation she found herself enslaved to, but in the process of doing so had fallen off the 'care cliff' and lost the support that had previously relied upon. Her ability to carry on despite this and share her story here is a testament to the internal grit that she has and her belief that something good must come out of the multitude of negative experiences

Overview of the thesis

This thesis is organised into seven substantive chapters. Chapter 1 introduces the study by outlining the contemporary landscape of children's social care and child criminal exploitation (CCE) in England. It sets out the research aim, explains the significance of the enquiry, summarises the methodological approach, reflects on the researcher's positionality, and provides an overview of the thesis structure.

Chapter 2 presents a comprehensive literature review that situates the study within existing scholarship on childhood, state care, safeguarding practices, and the broader social and structural contexts in which exploitation occurs. The chapter traces key debates on intrafamilial and extrafamilial harm, the care system, education, and the intersections between care and custody. It then examines the current evidence on CCE, including grooming, gender, county lines, trafficking, and the victim–offender debate. This review

highlights that existing research overwhelmingly reflects professional or academic perspectives, revealing a notable absence of studies centred on the lived experiences of care-experienced children who have been criminally exploited. This gap in knowledge provides the foundation for the thesis's original contribution.

Chapter 3 sets out the theoretical framework underpinning the study. It introduces and critically examines three core concepts: mattering, social harm, and poverty. These themes are brought together to illustrate how structural inequalities and relational experiences shape exploitation, and pathways through care and criminalisation. The chapter establishes the conceptual grounding for the analytical work that follows.

Chapter 4 provides a detailed account of the methodological approach. It explains the philosophical and ethical foundations of the study, including commitments to relational integrity, reciprocity, knowledge equity, empathy, and generative justice. The chapter describes the participatory research design, the role and training of co-researchers, and the narrative methods used, including timelines, life story interviews, and semi-structured interviews. It also details the recruitment process, ethical considerations, and the reflexive thematic analysis undertaken, including co-analysis with young people.

Chapter 5 presents the empirical findings. Drawing on participants' narratives, the chapter explores their experiences of growing up, navigating the care system, and encountering exploitation. It examines key themes including poverty, adultification, mattering and anti-mattering, mental health, education, professional neglect, the mechanics of grooming, identity formation, and processes of escape. These findings extend current understandings of CCE by illuminating how care-experienced young people make sense of their exploitation, and survival.

Chapter 6 provides a theoretical discussion of the findings. Here, the thesis advances its core contributions by analysing how mattering, social harm, and poverty intersect in the lives of exploited young people. The chapter develops the Neglect Nexus, a new conceptual framework that theorises how structural and relational marginalisation create conditions for exploitation to occur and persist. It demonstrates how this framework reframes the relationship between child welfare, inequality, and criminalisation.

Finally, Chapter 7 concludes the thesis by drawing together the key insights and outlining the implications for policy, practice, theory, and future research. It revisits the Neglect Nexus and the role of mattering, sets out recommendations for practitioners and policymakers, outlines

the academic and methodological contributions of the study, acknowledges its limitations, and offers final reflections on the research journey.

Having introduced the context of this research project and provided an overview of the chapters, this thesis now turns to Chapter Two and presents a critical review of the literature.

Chapter 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter provides a critical review of the literature relevant to understanding childhood, state care, and child criminal exploitation (CCE). Reflecting the structure of the chapter, the review begins by examining the broader social, structural, and conceptual foundations that shape children's lives. The first section, Growing Up, considers how childhood is defined and understood within contemporary social policy and academic discourse. The review then turns to the role of the state in the lives of children who become looked after, analysing safeguarding practices, intrafamilial and extrafamilial harm, adultification, the functioning of the care system, and ongoing debates surrounding unregulated accommodation and recent care reform.

The chapter then explores the relationship between state care, education, and criminalisation, including evidence on the links between care and custody and the significance of school experiences for children in care. The following section examines peer relationships, contextual safeguarding, and the wider environments in which children's safety and wellbeing are shaped.

Building on this foundation, the latter half of the chapter examines Child Criminal Exploitation in detail. It reviews the literature on criminal gangs, illicit drug markets, and county lines; analyses gendered dynamics of exploitation; and explores grooming processes, perceived vulnerabilities, trafficking, and modern slavery. The chapter also interrogates debates surrounding the victim–offender binary and considers emerging proposals for more nuanced and child-centred responses to CCE.

The chapter concludes by identifying key gaps in the existing literature and highlighting the need for research that centres the lived experiences of care-experienced young people who have been criminally exploited.

GROWING UP

At the start of this journey, it's important to acknowledge that a child's life is made up of many elements; like all of us, children are a product of their biology, the physical and social environments in which they grow up, and of the larger structural conditions that surround them. It is important that consideration is given to how all these areas intersect and that we examine how each area in any child's life impacts their ability to develop trusting and supportive relationships that can ultimately help them overcome adversity and achieve their goals.

Defining Childhood

Much of the contestation in this area occurs due to the ever-evolving nature of childhood itself, its fluidity across cultures, variation in approaches to children across history and very individualised experiences (Jenks, 1996). However, in keeping with the ontological and epistemological approach that this thesis takes, childhood is understood as socially constructed and shaped by cultural norms, economic factors, and societal values. This perspective emphasises that childhood is not a universal, biologically determined stage of development but rather a socially constructed category with varying meanings and expectations across different contexts (James, 1998).

Contemporary thinking in relation to the social constructions of childhood places an emphasis on the concept of agency, defined as the ability of children to understand their own world and to act within it (Hyde et al. 2010). Whereas once children were seen as being passive, helpless, and incapable of making decisions for themselves, children today are understood as being active participants in their own lives and play an integral part in the fabric of society. As Ansell (2005: 22) states, children are 'not human becomings but [are] human beings with culture of their own'. Children are understood to be socially competent, not because they have as yet developed adult competencies but because they already successfully manage many interactions with their peers and with adults and make choices about the direction their lives will take. Importantly, this recognition of childhood as being socially constructed adds a further element of complexity to understanding of the lives of children. If we recognise that children's development is formed by the social world around them, we may consider how their intersecting identities also shape who they are and how they view the world. Additionally, a consideration of how the inequalities they face converge is also essential to our understanding. Recognising how the diversity of childhood experiences is influenced by factors such as 'race', gender, class, ethnicity, disability, and geography all intersect to shape children's identities and opportunities is deemed essential by scholars such as Alanen (2019) and others (see von Benzon and Wilkinson, 2019; Adami, 2024). Of equal importance is that we consider global perspectives highlighting the diversity of childhood experiences worldwide, challenging Western-centric assumptions about what constitutes a 'normal' or 'ideal' childhood (Wells, 2021).

However, given the contested nature of childhood explained above, it is important to acknowledge that often systems, practitioners and researchers still locate their primary understanding of childhood within biological and psychological developments (Berk, 2015). Until relatively recently, prevailing discourses presented childhood as a universal biologically and psychologically determined phase of human development. Given that much research on

children's development has been conducted in Europe and the United States, the experiences of young people growing up in these countries have become the normative standard against which childhoods around the world are measured (Nieuwenhuys, 2013; Pugh, 2014; Wells, 2021). Evans (2013) suggests that the concept of childhood has been understood as ubiquitous in the global North, defined as a time of innocence and 'vulnerability' during which children are in need of care and protection by adults due to their physical and emotional immaturity. As a result, it is argued that this is the conception of childhood that Children's Social Care and child protection systems are rooted in today (Munro, 2011).

BEING LOOKED AFTER BY THE STATE

This section will focus on how a child becomes involved in the Children's Social Care system through an examination of the role of the state, including safeguarding approaches which are often the entry point for children into the social care system. It will then go on to explore the complex and ever-changing contemporary landscape that children in care in England and Wales must navigate.

The Role of the State

Creasy and Corby (2023) argue that the role of the state in children's lives encompasses a wide range of responsibilities, interventions, and regulatory frameworks all aimed at promoting children's well-being and protection. Broadly speaking, this can be summarised as legal protection, education, healthcare, social services, child protection and youth justice. Given the focus on system-impacted children and young people in this study, this section focuses on the role of social services, child protection and youth justice before moving on to a broader discussion of the intra-familial risk-based structure of our child protection system and the state's functions as corporate parents. Primarily, the state offers various social services to support children and families; these include child welfare support services, foster care, adoption assistance, and support for children with disabilities or special needs. These services aim to ensure children's safety, stability, and optimal development (Department for Education, 2023b). Within the social services that the state provides are child protection systems designed to investigate reports of abuse, neglect, or exploitation and to intervene to ensure children's safety and well-being (Department for Education, 2023b). The state also plays a role in the youth justice system, which addresses offences committed by children and young people. Broadly, the youth justice system establishes procedures for youth court proceedings, offers diversion programs, rehabilitation services and secure estate services for children and young people (Children Act, 2004).

In considering the role of the state in social services, Fox-Harding (1991; 1997) identifies two important ideological positions in Western child welfare - laissez faire, and state paternalism and child protection. The laissez faire position reflects a belief that the state's role should be minimal, protecting the privacy of the family and recognising that there should be minimal intrusion in family life. Conversely, the state paternalism and child protection perspective advocates an interventionist role for the state, based on a belief that children should be rescued from situations where they are at risk of being abused, exploited or neglected, and that in these circumstances, parents can lose their parental rights and be excluded from their children's lives if necessary (Dingwall. et al. 2014). Parton (2017) has argued that the current child protection system in England errs towards Fox-Harding's (1991) state paternalism and child protection typology. One reason the English and Welsh system has been described as paternalistic is the reliance on the Children Act (1989). The Children Act (1989) establishes several key principles, including the concept of parental responsibility, that a child's welfare is the main consideration when the court is considering a question about a child's upbringing, and that children are best looked after by their family unless intervention in family life is essential. The Act also places a duty on local authorities to promote and safeguard the welfare of children in need in their area. Local authorities are expected to do this by providing a range of services appropriate to those children's needs and the Act sets out what a local authority must do when it has reasonable cause to suspect that a child in its area is suffering, or is likely to suffer, significant harm (Reyneke, 2024). However, critics such as Calder (1995) have argued that in practice, the stipulations of the Act are enacted by social workers and others in paternalistic ways. This includes social workers intervening with what they consider to be in the best interests of the individual, often without the fully informed consent of the person themselves (Gomersall, 2015).

Critics of the existing child protection system argue that the legislative and policy frameworks which underpin it were designed to protect children and young people from risks posed by their families and are therefore inadequate in the modern context, given the high numbers of children and young people who experience harm at the hands of their peers and people within the family home (Firmin, 2017). Jack (1997) suggests that the discourse around risk within child protection services has created systems which are inefficient at identifying the small numbers of children who are likely to be harmed within their own families. As a result, these systems tend to pull increasing numbers of families into their net, an important point when we consider the ever-increasing numbers of children and young people who are being drawn into child protection systems (see Department for Education, 2023c). Moreover, a recent report by the NSPCC, entitled 'Too little, too late' (2024) connects the increasing numbers of children being drawn into the child protection system with the deteriorating life

quality of children. Over 90% of the health, Police, education, and Children's Social Care professionals interviewed in the report suggested that the cost-of-living crisis and increasing poverty rates were a driving factor in the neglect that children and young people were facing, and the consequence of this was an increase in children being referred to social services.

One of the roles the state can play in a child's life is to ensure children's safety which can result in them being removed from the family home. The legislative mechanisms used to do this are described later in this chapter, however, essentially this sees the state operating in loco parentis. The concept of the state as parent refers to the role of government in assuming parental responsibilities for children who are under its care due to various circumstances, such as neglect, abuse, or abandonment (Kindred, 1996). The state acts as a surrogate parent for these children, ostensibly ensuring their well-being, protection, and upbringing (Dingwall et al. 2014). Within this framework, the state is charged with delivering all aspects of care and support for a child in its care - in the same way that a parent would do for a child living in a family home. This provision includes housing, educational support, healthcare, advocacy and legal representation. Overall, the state as a corporate parent is charged with providing a safe, nurturing, and supportive environment for children who are unable to be cared for by their biological parents. This role is primarily seen as safeguarding the rights and well-being of 'vulnerable' children and aiming to ensure that they can thrive (Bullock, 2021).

As described above, in the critiques offered of existing child protection systems, there are different conceptualisations of the role of the state within a child's life. These conceptualisations are complicated further when we consider how support for these children is operationalised. This will be discussed in further detail later in this chapter, but it is important to note at this point that particularly problematic when thinking about the role the state plays in parenting children are children's residential care and unregulated semi-independent accommodation. With regards to children's residential care, Bullock and McSherry (2009) suggest that many local authorities have reduced the number of children's homes significantly, which has led to several residential placements being provided by the voluntary or private sector (Shaw, 2014). James (2011) argues that numbers of residential care placements were reduced due to child welfare concerns about how home style care was better for children than group care. However, the unforeseen consequence of this is the limited availability of different types of care and privatisation of large parts of the sector (Jones, 2015). Here, we see the practical consequences of policy failing to live up to its intent, with the voices of children and their families being ignored and seeing them once again labelled as undeserving due to the lack of recognition of their vital lived experience

and knowledge both before and after policies are introduced. Furthermore, Gooch (1996) and Hayden et al. (1999) argue that policy and practice shifts toward preventive services, a change in awareness and attitudes about children's needs, and financial considerations, have all contributed to a decline in the number of spaces available in children's residential care meaning that many young people who require this level of support are having to be moved miles away from their communities or are denied the support they need altogether (Shaw and Greenhow, 2021). Connectedly, one of the main consequences of this major retraction in residential services is that the lack of beds available only leaves space for children requiring high levels of support, making the residential care task more difficult and demanding for residential care practitioners (Bullock and McSherry, 2009).

Perhaps more problematic in the context of how we operationalise child protection services in England and Wales is what happens to children and young people when they 'age-out' of the care system. Recent developments mean children leaving care should receive a Personal Adviser (PA) to help them plan for their futures. Additionally, young people who have been in foster care now have access to financial assistance to enable them to remain living with their former foster family until the age of 21, part of a 'Staying Put' arrangement. For care-leavers who go on to university, a bursary of up to £2,000 is available, and other care-leavers should be able to access financial support to help them gain education, employment and training. An additional leaving care grant (£2,000) should also be available to help care-leavers furnish their first home (Foley et al. 2022). However, this support has been criticised as inadequate (Longfield, 2020; Pierre, 2021) with, for instance, criticism that little has been done to guarantee support around housing, often resulting in care-leavers becoming homeless or living in inappropriate unregulated semi-independent living such as hostels and supported flats. Indeed, the use of unregulated semi-independent placements in England is considerable. As of 31 March 2023, around 8,980 children (approximately 11% of all looked-after children) in England were placed in unregulated settings such as semi-independent or independent accommodation (Department for Education, 2023). Moreover, in 2022–23, approximately 94% of unregistered children's homes were operated by private providers (Children's Commissioner for England, 2024) and concerns have been raised that the financial opportunity presented may attract newcomers to the market that know little or nothing about the care of children (Longfield, 2020). Furthermore, unlike children's residential care, which are legally required to be inspected by OFSTED, no such inspections are required for unregulated semi-independent accommodation (Pierre, 2021). Here we see just how out of step with the prevailing theories around the elongation of childhood current child protection services are. As Arnett (2015) suggests, children enter a stage of emerging adulthood after childhood which is a drawn out 'stage of life (rather) than a swift and

coordinated set of transitions' (Furstenberg, 2015, p.15). In contrast, what we see in the case of unregulated accommodation is young people as young as 16 being forced into adult roles with very little support and even less oversight. Alongside this, the Howard League for Penal Reform (2016) have argued that around the age of 13, young people in care start to lose society's sympathies which can result in them being propelled into the criminal justice system rather than being supported and receiving the help they need.

Safeguarding Approaches

In the context of this review, safeguarding for children is understood as the action taken by the state to promote a child's welfare and protect them from harm (NSPCC, 2021). For children in England and Wales, the Children Act (1989) sets out the thresholds of 'significant harm' and 'likely significant harm' for statutory involvement in the lives of children who have suffered from parental or carer maltreatment or neglect or are assessed as likely to do so if effective interventions does not take place (Brandon and Thoburn, 2008). This section of the Act created the framework for modern child protection services, and it continues to be the case that statutory services operate on the assumption that intrafamilial harm is the usual circumstances in which a child is in need of safeguarding intervention (Firmin, 2020).

Parton and Berridge (2011) suggest that the child protection framework that social workers operate from today was established following the tragic death of Maria Colwell at the hand of her father whilst under the supervision of social workers in 1973. With a focus on babies and young children, the framework was built on in the Working Together guidance published by the Department for Education initially in 2015 and updated in 2023. This guidance now forms the cornerstone of child protection practices in England and Wales. Working Together designates social work as the lead agency for risk management and they take responsibility for coordinating the professional input of partner agencies such as the Police, education, and health services, as appropriate.

However, as well as focussing on the needs of young children, the child protection framework is centred around intra-familial threats and the default position for most child protection conferences[3] is to examine and set out what parents need to do to ensure the safety of their child (Firmin, 2017). While parents clearly retain some responsibility for their children's safety, Firmin (2020) has proposed that for many children caught up in child

---

[3] A Child Protection Conference is a meeting between family members, the child (where appropriate), and professionals involved with the family about a child's future safety, health, and development. It is designed to look at all the relevant information and circumstances to determine how best to safeguard the child and promote their welfare (Child Law Advice, 2021).

criminal exploitation, the risk they face comes from extra-familial harm. Therefore, parents' experiences of child protection processes can feel blaming and unsupportive in instances when risk to the child is largely unrelated to parenting. The picture for children in care is even more complex, with some children taken into care due to concerns around intra-familial risk subsequently becoming at risk of extra-familial harm, perhaps because of new peer networks or from being at risk of going missing whilst in care. An extra layer of complexity is added to this if the child in care is responding negatively (perhaps understandably) to their move into care. In such instances, they may be at risk from the environment within the care home itself as well as due to outside influences. For these children especially, the formal child protection framework may not always be the most appropriate approach to take as it does little to consider and mitigate against extra familial harm (Firmin, 2017). A review by the Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel (2020), which examines serious case reviews to inform safeguarding recommendations, found that practitioners and managers generally do not see the child protection framework as a barrier in cases like these. However, they also acknowledged that the framework does not always lead to the best possible interventions or outcomes for the children involved. As a result, the report argued that while great importance should be placed on the professional judgement of those involved, a framework that creates room to consider individual circumstances, social and contextual factors is also needed (Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel, 2020).

Adultification

As mentioned above, it is increasingly recognised that the last 50 years has seen an elongation of the period known as childhood for many in society (Arnett, 2015). However, for children in care this is not often the case, with many of them leaving care as young as 16 and having to take on adult responsibilities at a very young age (Palmer et al. 2022). Schmitz and Tyler's (2016) definition of adultification states that this occurs when a child or adolescent assumes adult-like traits and responsibilities. This often takes place when children or young people are providing care to parents or younger siblings (Burton, 2007; Jurkovic, 1997). Young people who undergo early adultification often experience elevated levels of stress and psychological strain as they struggle to cope with the burden of greater responsibility (Schmitz and Tyler, 2016). Childhood adultification occurs when young people perform the 'heavy lifting in families with the intent of meeting a specific family need' typically in the absence of guardian support (Burton, 2007: 331). Adultification can lead to young people carrying out adult roles at young ages, often before they are prepared to do so and consequently see them asserting their need to be a child through risky behaviours such as running away from home (Lindsey et al. 2000). Davis and Marsh (2020: 225) meanwhile have defined adultification as occurring 'when notions of innocence and vulnerability are not

afforded to certain children'. They argue that who is 'adultified' is determined by people and institutions who hold power over young people and their lives. It is important to note that research indicates that Black children are most likely to experience adultification bias (Davis, 2022) however, it does occur in many different contexts, and this means that all children are at risk from this form of bias. Stephens (1999) suggests children who witness domestic violence in their homes are more likely to be adultified and for them this may mean taking care of younger brothers and sisters and consequently be viewed by professionals as 'resilient'. Burton (2007) also highlights how children living in poverty may be expected to support their family and take on jobs which would normally be carried out by adults within the home. Lastly, research carried out by Schmitz and Tyler (2016) suggests that adultification can occur due to homelessness, arguing that children who experience homelessness may have no choice but to take on adult roles in various forms.

The concept of childhood is clearly important when considering adultification. The category of 'child' does not describe and contain a homogeneous and naturally occurring group of individuals at a certain stage of human development, and as discussed above, what it means to be a child is socially constituted and varies dramatically by class, 'race', and gender (Hart et al.1997). The concept of childhood is especially contested for Black and Indigenous people as prevailing white supremacy frequently renders those identities inferior (Lesko, 2012). Similarly, the concept of adultification is in and of itself diverse and socially constructed. As Boo (2001) argues, families in poverty can provide the necessary circumstances for children to develop adultified behaviours such as having limited access to childcare and requiring older children in the family to provide care for younger ones (East et al. 2006). However, it must also be recognised that some young people relish taking on perceived adult responsibilities and in their work with young carers Gough and Gulliford (2020) found that those who took on roles of caring for adults reported high levels of self-efficacy. Despite these positive acknowledgements, when it causes harm to the individual, developing adultfied behaviours are problematic. If through the process of compressing childhood, we deny a young person the ability to have needs, seek help, play and be vulnerable, we risk erasing their childhood (Gilmore and Bettis, 2021).

The Care System

As noted above, most children in care in England are looked after by foster carers in private homes (Shaw and Frost, 2013). Ideologically, in England residential care is seen as a last resort for children whose foster care placements have broken down, or for older children whose behaviours are seen as more challenging (Frost et al.1999; Shaw, 2014). However, Berridge et al. (2008) and Kendrick (2012) argue that residential care should be considered

from the start when a child is taken into care. They suggest that some children may choose to live in residential care rather than in foster care and that for others, a group living arrangement may prove more beneficial. Of importance here is context and not presumption. Berridge et al. (2008) and Kendrick (2012) argue that each child should be placed in the resource most appropriate to their needs and to help them achieve the best possible outcomes. As O'Hara (2015) has also argued, there is a financial element to this debate which is especially pressing given the austerity measures that all local authorities in England have faced since the financial crash of 2008. For example, in 2022-23, local authority gross expenditure on children's and young people's services was £13.3 billion, with over £7 billion (53.1%) spent on children who are looked after (DfE, 2024). Research published by Pidd (2022) in The Guardian suggests that average prices are £4,865 a week for a local authority place, and £4,153 for a private placement. This has increased from about £3,000 in 2016 and prices are rising with providers citing the cost of food, petrol, and energy. These figures reveal that financial pragmatism is likely to be a key consideration when determining where children should be placed when they are identified as being in need.

Like other sectors such as Adult Social Care, prison and probation services, children's care has seen a vast increase in the number of private providers in recent years (Shaw and Greenhow, 2021). These for-profit providers have stepped in to fill the gaps created by cuts to local authority budgets under the austerity agenda and the resulting closures of many council-run children's homes (Shaw and Greenhow, 2021). As of 31 March 2024, private-sector providers ran approximately 83% of children's homes and supplied 77% of the available places in England's residential children's care sector (Department for Education, 2024). More recent data indicate that in 2024-25 around 84% of the 4,009 registered children's homes were privately owned, marking a rise from around 76% in 2019-20 (National Audit Office, 2025). Some organisations involved in the care and accommodation of children have questioned whether it is morally and ethically right to make a profit from children in care and whether motivation driven by profit provides the best possible outcomes for children in care (Howard League, 2018). However, Sir Martin Narey's government commissioned review of residential care in 2016 argued that there is little evidence to support the view that privately run homes offer poorer quality of care than local authority homes or those run by the third sector. Nevertheless, the increase in privately run provision since Narey's review alongside the concerns expressed in empirical research (Shaw, 2014; Shaw and Greenhow, 2021) by experienced professionals working with children in care about the care offered in privately run care homes merits further investigation.

Shaw and Greenhow (2021) are critical of the culture that they suggest is evident in many residential care homes and argue that this plays a crucial role in the poor outcomes that many children in care experience. This echoes the work of Darker et al. (2008) who suggest that residential care for children is often perceived to be an unsettled and problematic environment for children to be raised in. According to Berridge et al. (2011), part of the reason why this environment is difficult can be considered structural. For instance, they argue that residential care jobs are viewed as low status and are therefore not very well paid, with many not earning much more than minimum wage. A Howard League report (2016) found that care home managers often find it difficult to recruit staff and that many staff come into residential care work from other, non-related sectors leaving them with little prior experience or training to deal with the challenges that come from working with children in care. Combine this with the unsociable hours that residential care staff must work and the resulting pressures this can create on their own home lives, and it is easy to see how and why it is difficult to recruit and retain staff within this field. The consequences are that very often residential care workers do not have the time to understand and build the trusting relationships with children in care that are required, and the lack of training combined with poor relationships can lead to residential care staff relying on other agencies such as the Police and social work to do the heavy lifting of corporate parenting (Fitzpatrick, 2009; Laming, 2016; Nacro, 2012). For instance, issues such as low level anti-social behaviour and drug taking may often result in untrained care workers contacting the Police, resulting in the early criminalisation of children in care which is then compounded by the associated problems of being thrust into the punitive criminal justice system (Crofts, 2009). It is also important to consider whether we can ever meet the relational needs of children in residential care homes given the intrinsically diluted nature of the relationships that are forced to exist. The ever-changing rota and the frequent need to use unfamiliar agency staff, despite the best efforts of key workers, could leave any child feeling that no-one cares for them and that they do not matter. Additionally, given that we know that residential care is frequently seen as the place of last resort for children that are seen to be more challenging, we need to question whether an environment which prioritises profit over care can ever offer the relational care that children deemed as 'undeserving' need.

Unregulated Accommodation

Unregulated accommodation is intended to be a bridge for children leaving care between the care system and living independently as an adult and is generally used for young people aged 16 and over (Children's Commissioner, 2024). Many care experienced young people move into self-contained flats or hostels which may be of varying quality and have different levels of supervision by staff. Importantly, and echoing discussions of residential care

settings, staff are often poorly paid and have little experience of supporting care experienced young people. Perhaps most worryingly, there are no minimum standards for inspection requirements in these types of accommodation (Longfield, 2020). Instead, the system relies on local authorities carrying out their own checks but with such pressure on finding places for young people, many local authorities have no choice but to use unregulated providers that they would prefer not to use or have not had time to scrutinise properly (Bryant et al. 2022).

The Independent Review of Children's Social Care

The Independent Review of Children's Social Care was conducted between July 2021 and May 2022 (MacAlister, 2022) and sought to respond to concerns that have been raised in this literature review about the current state and development of Children's Social Care in England and Wales. The review proposed that a network of support for children and young people in contact with Children's Social Care was needed to develop a more tailored and joined-up response to extra-familial harm. The review suggested that a bespoke child protection pathway called a 'Child Community Safety Plan' ought to be developed so that interventions from the Police, social care and others can more holistically respond to a child who is at risk in the community. The review was also clear that although children in care often have many professionals involved in their lives, they often do not have one consistent person who is unequivocally on their side. It is suggested therefore that the current system of independent advocacy within Children's Social Care moves from an opt-in to an opt-out system stating. As the review argue, 'it is paramount that children in care have access to an adult that is unequivocally on their side and solely focused on making sure they are heard, particularly when things go wrong with the care they receive' (MacAlister, 2022: 181).

The report also addressed concerns about the so-called 'care cliff' experienced by young people leaving care. The 'care cliff' refers to the abrupt withdrawal of practical, emotional, and relational support that many young people face when they reach the age at which statutory care responsibilities end, often 16, 17 or 18. Research has repeatedly shown that this sudden transition to independence, far earlier than is expected of peers in the general population, creates heightened risks of homelessness, exploitation, criminalisation and social isolation (Stein, 2006a; Mendes & Rogers, 2020). Evidence suggests the care cliff remains a persistent problem, with recent studies showing that many care leavers continue to receive fragmented, inconsistent or minimal support during the transition to adulthood (Foley et al., 2022; Koutsounia, 2024).

As a result, the Independent Review proposed the creation of a new lifelong guardianship order, enabling a care-experienced person and a trusted adult to form a legally recognised enduring relationship. Relatedly, the report argued that 'no young person should leave care without two loving relationships' (MacAlister, 2022:190). In response, the previous Conservative government published *Stable Homes, Built on Love* (Department for Education, 2023), promising £30 million for family-finding, befriending and mentoring programmes to help children in care and care leavers establish and maintain supportive relationships. However, no such commitment was included in the Labour Party's 2024 election manifesto, and as of the time of writing, the new Labour Government has made no policy announcements indicating whether it intends to take forward any of the previous administration's proposals (Koutsounia, 2024). This apparent deprioritisation reaffirms that, despite overwhelming evidence about what children in care need to thrive, policy debates continue to circle questions of worthiness: are children in care still viewed as undeserving of sustained political and societal attention and support?

The links between care and custody

The over-representation of children in care in the youth and adult justice systems is of long-standing concern and one that is evidenced across several jurisdictions including the US (Jonson-Reid et al. 2018), UK (Shaw, 2016), Ireland (Carr and Maycock, 2019), Canada (Brownell et al. 2018), Australia (Baidawi and Sheehan, 2019), and New Zealand (Stanley, 2017). A report by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2018) suggests that across Australia, children who receive statutory child protection services because of neglect or maltreatment are nine times more likely than their peers to offend and therefore become supervised by youth justice services. As in Australia, research has also recognised that children in care in the UK are more likely to become involved with the youth justice system at an earlier age, have a greater likelihood of violent offending, are more likely to carry on offending into adulthood, and have higher rates of recidivism compared to other children who come into conflict with the law (Malvaso et al. 2017; Baglivio et al. 2016). Demonstrating the vast over-representation of care experienced children in youth justice, Blades et al. (2011) stated that in March 2011, less than 1% of children in England were in care; however, 50% of the children in Young Offender Institutions (YOIs) were or had been in the care of the local authority. The Prison Reform Trust (2011) carried out work with children who had been in care while they were in custody and found that some children felt that being in care was the primary reason for them committing crime. They went on to state that if it was not the main reason, they felt that being in care increased the likelihood of them offending. Some of the children interviewed reflected that there was a definite causal link between their offending behaviour and entering the care system. They connected this to the loss of, or infrequent

contact with, family; poor relationships with some carers; difficult relationships with peers and peer pressure; and the type and number of placements, all of which had an impact on their involvement in criminal activity (Prison Reform Trust, 2011). As far back as 1987, in 'Out of Care, into Custody' Pat Carlen examined the link between local authority care and prison. She argued that children in care, many of whom have already experienced family breakdown, buck against a system that attempts to categorise and restrict them and as a result they are thrust into the criminal justice system much earlier than many of their peers (Carlen, 1987). Research by The Howard League for Penal Reform has argued that young people aged 13 to 15 who live in children's residential homes are almost 20 times as likely to be criminalised as children who aren't in care (Howard League for Penal Reform, 2016).

Regarding girls and young women particularly, Fitzpatrick et al. (2022) highlight the multiple, overlapping disadvantages that contribute to the over-representation of care experienced females in the criminal justice system. Their study found high levels of childhood abuse, trauma, and instability among participants, alongside frequent experiences of criminalisation while in care, especially for minor incidents in residential settings. Many also reported disrupted education and described how offending escalated during adolescence and, for some, after the 'cliff edge' of leaving care. Fitzpatrick et al. argue that for care experienced girls and young women, trusted and consistent relationships are central to navigating the space between care and criminalisation. Such relationships foster a sense of mattering and agency, underscoring that the transition from childhood to adulthood is especially fluid for those in care. Crucially, they contend that supporting young women requires more than meeting basic material needs: it demands trauma-responsive practice, staff equipped to work with complex emotions, and environments in which young women feel valued, supported, and empowered.

The Education of Children in Care

As Coleman and Hagell (2022) suggest, adolescence is a time of great change for all children, and never more so than for children who are in the care system. McCrory et al. (2017) argue that children who have been exposed to childhood maltreatment show significant differences in brain development as compared to children who have not been maltreated, and this can have a significant impact on children in our care system.

Department for Education (DfE) data confirm existing concerns about the educational attainment of children who are at risk and/or in need. The DfE (2019) has reported that children who have needed a social worker do significantly worse than those without social worker involvement in their lives at all stages of their education (DfE, 2019). Children who

needed social care services were 50% less likely to achieve a strong pass in English and Maths GCSEs, with the attainment for those on a child in need plan or a child protection plan almost as low as children in care (DfE, 2019). Additionally, pupils who were children in need at the end of Key Stage 4 were around three times less likely to go on to study A Levels at age 16, and almost five times less likely to enter higher education at age 18. By age 21, half of these pupils had not achieved Level 2 qualifications (GCSE or equivalent) (DfE, 2019). Schools for those with special educational needs and Pupil Referral Units (PRUs) tend to have a higher density of 'Ever-CIN'[4] pupils than secondary and primary schools. In 81% of PRUs, 'Ever-CIN' pupils make up more than 50% of the pupil population. Overall, on average, schools rated as 'Good' or 'Outstanding' by Ofsted have a lower proportion of 'Ever-CIN' pupils compared to schools rated 'Requires Improvement' or 'Inadequate' (DfE, 2019).

School exclusion has also been recognised as an important risk factor in the development of children who come into conflict with the law (Macrae et al. 2003; Sanders et al. 2020; Lightowler, 2020) and it is important to consider how children in care are affected by school exclusions (Arnez and Condry, 2021). Data from the DfE on exclusions show that children in care are more than five times more likely to have a fixed period exclusion than children not in care. Further, children in need are approximately three and a half times more likely to be permanently excluded than those who are not deemed to be in need (DfE, 2019). Children in care are also around 2.3 times more likely to be permanently excluded than children who have not had any social work contact (DfE, 2019).

Peer relationships and Contextual Safeguarding

As previously mentioned, existing child protection systems in the UK are largely built around the risks presented by intrafamilial harm (Firmin and Knowles, 2022). However, Firmin (2017) has argued that for adolescent children in care, greater risk is often presented by those outwith the family setting. Therefore, over recent years contextualised accounts of risk for children have started to gain traction amongst those involved in working with children deemed 'at-risk'. Professionals across youth justice, child protection and voluntary sector agencies have long called for context to be placed at the centre of child safeguarding practice for all children who encounter social services (Firmin, 2020). However, Maxwell et al. (2019) argue that it is even more important that a consideration of context should be the focus of safeguarding practices for children who are considered vulnerable to exploitation. For instance, Hudek (2018) argues that children involved in county lines activity navigate a

---

[4] 'Ever-CIN' is a child who has permanent involvement with Children's Social Care.

range of contexts outside the family home, such as streets, transport hubs, fast-food outlets, parks, and the homes of adults that have been 'cuckooed', and therefore child protection responses must reflect these varied environments. In line with this, since 2017 significant work has been undertaken to develop child protection assessments and interventions that address the multiple settings in which abuse and exploitation occur, rather than focusing solely on risks within the family (Firmin, 2020). Carlene Firmin (2018; 2019; 2020; 2021) has been a leading academic proponent of this contextual safeguarding, which she defines as an approach to safeguarding children developed from Bourdieu's theory of social capital (Bourdieu,1986). It describes the relationship between children and the contexts they find themselves in, and how different forms of capital affect this. This approach considers the child's social, economic, cultural, and symbolic capital alongside their understanding of, and adherence (or not) to the social rules and norms that surround the situations they find themselves in (Firmin, 2020). A contextual safeguarding approach requires the social (often extrafamilial) conditions of harm to be included in child protection assessments and interventions and aims to change the social harms themselves - not just children's engagement with them. Firmin's (2017) contextual safeguarding framework is currently being implemented in several local authorities across England and Wales (Firmin, 2020, p.7). This movement away from intrafamilial forms of safeguarding towards a greater appreciation of other contexts in children's lives which may lead to harm represents a significant change for child safeguarding practices. The framework requires child protection systems to emphasise the social conditions of abuse, understand extrafamilial harm (EFH) contexts and appreciate and encourage partnerships with organisations where children spend their time (Firmin, 2020). However, we need to consider if our current child protection systems built on the needs of babies and young children despite being adapted for the purposes of contextual safeguarding will ever be able to effectively respond to young people at important pinch points of social and economic deprivations (Featherstone et al. 2020). More recent work by Firmin and Owens (2021) draws on the links between the application of contextual safeguarding and situational crime prevention theories. Fagan and Catalano (2012) suggest that research from the USA, Australia, and the UK, has demonstrated effective contextual interventions as part of a response to EFH. Despite variations in these responses, some of them have used situational crime prevention theories to increase the presence of trusted adults in areas associated with violence (Smallbone et al. 2012). In this approach, 'place-managers' are identified who can affect the nature of a space; and then 'guardians' and 'restrainers' are placed in that space whose role it is to look out for the welfare of children and obstruct the behaviours of those who want to cause harm to them within that space (Firmin and Owens, 2021). An alternative situational/contextual approach has been the introduction of 'bystander intervention' programmes in schools and college. These aim to

develop more protective peer cultures (Coker, 2017; Foshee et al. 2014;) and facilitate positive peer support networks within communities (Murray et al. 2016). These tools take advantage of the role of peer-influence during teenage years and seek to normalise prosocial behaviours in the spaces where children like to spend their time. It is important to note that these situational crime prevention processes are not developed in isolation but rather build upon existing relationships that the children may have. As Firmin and Owens (2021) summarise, they are still relational in approach but involve a wider network of relationships to keep a child safe within a particular context.

CHILD CRIMINAL EXPLOITATION (CCE)

Child Criminal Exploitation (CCE) is not new (Children's Society, 2019). Research has documented CCE as involving children being forced to work as part of cannabis cultivation, sell drugs, shoplift and pickpocket (Dodd, 2019). There is currently no statutory definition of CCE that is legally binding (Children's Society, 2019). However, CCE is said to have occurred when an individual or group abuses a power imbalance to control, coerce, deceive, or manipulate a child under the age of 18 (Shaw and Greenhow 2021). Additionally, the Home Office (2018) states that CCE often involves a child receiving something for completing an (often criminal) activity after the process of exploitation has taken place. It is also vitally important that it is recognised that a child has been criminally exploited even if their involvement appears to be consensual (Shaw and Greenhow, 2021).

Criminal Gangs

Criminal gangs create and drive the criminal exploitation of children. This exploitation is commonly located as county line drug dealing and children in care are frequently groomed by criminal gangs into these operations (Stone, 2018). McLean et al. (2020) argue that county lines are the most recent incarnation of the ever-evolving drugs market in Britain, explaining that although it is a very lucrative business model for those involved in organising the supply of drugs, it creates a serious threat to those who are considered vulnerable at the bottom of the drug supply ladder. Such actors are very often children in care who the suppliers of drugs feel can be easily exploited for their own financial gain.

The illicit Drugs Market

Stevens (2011) argues that illicit drugs are big business but an even bigger problem for public health. A 2021 government estimate put the societal cost of illegal drugs at about £20 billion annually (House of Commons Library, 2024). Meanwhile, the illicit drugs market in the UK has been valued at roughly £9.4 billion a year (NAO, 2023). More recent comprehensive breakdowns for the market value are limited. The market for drugs in Britain is lucrative and

there is evidence of a variety of regional and local markets that may be loosely connected with each other and used to distribute drugs (Pearson and Hobbs, 2001). Hobbs (1998) describes these markets as 'glocal' to more accurately account for how contemporary organised crime occupies simultaneously local and global domains. Within the local domains of these regional markets, large cities act as supply 'hubs' (NCA, 2016), providing smaller cities and towns with drugs to be distributed among local networks. Existing research is unanimous in concluding that there is no 'one size fits all' model when it comes to the drugs market in Britain and that it is an ever-changing and fluctuating trade, both in the types of drugs being sold and in the way that both organised criminals and urban street gangs respond to market development (McLean et al. 2019; Hobbs, 2013; Harding, 2020).

County Lines

County lines is the most common term used by the Police, academics, and other professionals to describe the practice of criminal gangs supplying drugs from major cities to market towns, rural and coastal areas. However, it should be noted that the term county line itself refers to the 'pay as you go' phone and all the associated numbers of customers that it contains which is seen as a valuable commodity in drug markets (Houseman, 2022). County lines activity is normally driven by the need of criminal gangs to seek out new customers as supply has overtaken demand in city hubs. In such circumstances, competition between suppliers tends to increase, leading to higher levels of violence in cities (Andell and Pitts, 2018; Coomber and Moyles, 2018; Robinson et al, 2019; Spicer, 2018). County lines have also been referred to as 'going country' or 'going OT' (out there) (Daly, 2016; Harding, 2020). The NCA (2017) describe county lines activity as:

> 'A criminal (group)... establishes a network between an urban hub and a county location into which drugs are supplied. A mobile phone line is established... to which orders are placed... the group exploits young or vulnerable persons who regularly travel between the urban hub and county market to replenish stock and deliver cash… the group is inclined to use intimidation, violence, and weapons' (2017: 2).

There has also been a more recent acknowledgement that in big cities county lines can include sending drugs from one side of the city to the other, or from one borough to another (McLean et al. 2020). An NCA report (2016) suggests that the supply model of county lines has led to an increase in the regularity and scale of street violence, with 88% of Police forces in England and Wales reporting county lines activity taking place within their area. While Windle and Briggs (2015) argue that drug dealers have always transported drugs from cities to more provincial areas, as early as 2012, Densley (2014) argued that gang members were

exploiting young people to explore new markets for drugs outside London.

New technology has facilitated the development of the county lines business model (Densley, 2014; Storrod and Densley, 2017). Both mobile phones, messaging apps and social media platforms serve to distance the drug dealer from the recruitment of children as well as from the drug transaction itself, therefore making it harder for them to be detected by law enforcement (McLean et al. 2020). The phone line is owned by the main dealer who stays in their hometown and 'runners' are given 'pay as you go' mobile phones (also known as 'burner' phones) to take with them to the towns ('going long') or rural areas ('going country') in which they sell drugs. Once the 'runner' is in the market town (for example), customers place orders with the dealer in the city and the runner in the town fulfils that order on the dealer's instructions. This amounts to, as Robinson et al. (2019, p. 118) describe, a '24-hour dial-a-deal delivery to your front door'.

Work by Harding (2020) and Houseman (2022) has detailed the hierarchy of criminal gangs that run county lines networks. Houseman (2022) suggests that the 'Elders' or 'Olders' are at the top of the hierarchy; they are over 17, will not be seen in the local area and will control everyone below them. The 'Links' are mainly girls who are sexually exploited and raped, often for the benefit of the men within the USG and associated county lines operation (Harding, 2020). 'Youngers' are children who are criminally exploited, they take the drugs to the local area and are then sent to work in so-called trap houses (often cuckooed homes of people with addictions issues, disabilities, or additional needs) to supply the drugs which have been sold through the county line phone. 'Runners' and 'Shotters' are 11–15-year-olds who sell the USG's drugs on the streets, they are also often sent to new areas by the 'Elders' to check on the current drugs market. Finally, Houseman (2022) argues that the 'Tinies' are one of the most valuable members of county lines operations for USGs. These are children under the age of 10 and are not able to be held criminally responsible for their actions. The hierarchy is established in such a way that all the people at the bottom of the hierarchy want to make their way to the top - ultimately aspiring to be an 'Elder'. In this way, the USG always has a supply of people willing to do what they need them to do (Houseman, 2022). Research carried out by Moyle (2019) supports this assertion, highlighting that although policing and academic narratives often frame recruitment into county lines activity as occurring through grooming and force (NCA, 2016), there is also evidence of low-level addicts using 'strategic efforts to transcend a marginal position' (Grundetjern and Sandberg, 2012: 633).

There is little doubt that the county line phone with all its associated customer numbers is a

valuable commodity. Houseman (2022) estimates that one phone can be worth up to £7000 in value to the criminal gangs who operate it. The value of the phone line as well as the drugs themselves means that it is easy for the USGs to use debt bondage as a way of further exploiting children. Once a child is involved with an USG, they may be given a phone line or drugs to take to another part of the country. If this child is arrested and the drugs or phone confiscated, or if the child is robbed, the USG will say that the child now owes them the value of the drugs or phone line and that they must 'work' for free to pay that drugs debt back (Houseman, 2022; Mclean et al. 2020).

It is now widely recognised that many children perceived as vulnerable are involved in county lines activities (McLean et al. 2020; Harding, 2020). These children are often drawn into drug dealing by the supposed financial and social advantages that it can bring. County lines have also been blamed for a marked increase in the levels of systemic violence in drug markets (Andell, 2019). Given that illicit marketplaces cannot, by virtue of their illegal status, be controlled through traditional dispute resolution systems such as contracts and the courts (Reuter, 2009), violence is often used to resolve disputes or enforce agreements (Hobbs and Antonopoulos, 2013). As a result, tackling county lines now forms a central element of more recent government policy, including the 10-year Drugs Strategy: From Harm to Hope (Home Office, 2021), which prioritises the disruption of county lines networks and the protection of exploited children. The NCA has similarly continued to report that county lines activity is linked to increases in serious violence, including gun and knife crime, and the expansion of organised criminal groups beyond major cities (NCA, 2022).

Figures published by the National County Lines Co-ordination Centre (NCLCC) (a collaboration between the National Crime Agency, The National Police Chiefs Council, and Regional Organised Crime Units) in January 2022 suggest that there were at that time 1012 active telephone dealing lines and 540 'brands', which are lines controlled by more senior figures within the criminal gangs. Of these lines, 24.4% have been linked to cuckooing and 447 under 18-year-olds have been identified as being involved with the county lines operations. Additionally, 224 individuals have been assessed by the Police as having a 'vulnerability marker', a Police threshold that indicates the person may be more susceptible to exploitation and grooming (NCLCC, 2022). It is clear therefore that a connection exists between county lines activities and the exploitation of young people perceived to be 'vulnerable'.

The Role of Gender

The media portrayal of those exploited into county lines activity often suggests that only males are involved (Robinson et al. 2019). However, work by Harding (2020) which draws on interviews with victims of CCE, argues that the role of girls in county lines activities is widespread and diverse. He suggests that many girls are used to perform administrative and business roles such as organising rooms to rent and facilitating transport, and that some girls progress to positions of county lines managers which see them controlling the drug supply lines. However, Harding (2020) also notes that girls are still controlled through sanctions based on their gender, which can involve sexual assault and rape. At times, these sexual assaults and rape will be filmed and used to force the girls into drug dealing or carrying weapons. Here, we can see how the lines between CCE and Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE) become blurred, and this is complicated further by the fact that some girls and boys who are groomed for exploitation go on to become groomers themselves (Harding, 2020).

As awareness of CCE and CSE has grown, better information has been gathered about the methodologies associated with grooming and exploitation processes, as well as the intersection of these two different, yet clearly related crimes. Work by Houseman (2022) details the different types of grooming involved in CSE and argues that within county lines offending, both CSE and CCE are often present. Houseman (2022) suggests that there are four grooming models involved in CSE:

1. Peer on peer model: where children are exploited by peers who are known to them at school, in their neighbourhood or through mutual friends.
2. Befriending model: Children are befriended directly by the perpetrator or through other children. The introductory person later introduces the child to older people who they may describe as an older sibling or cousin. The older person may offer the child attention in the form of gifts, cigarettes, alcohol, and drugs.
3. The 'boyfriend model': This is very often associated with CSE but is seen in within the context of CCE through the use of 'gift girls' (girls who are raped by criminal gangs in the pursuit of county lines activities (Harding, 2020)). In this model, older men pose as 'boyfriends' showering the children they are exploiting with attention and gifts to cause infatuation. They initiate a sexual relationship with the child (often rape as the child may be under 16 or not able to give consent), and the child is told that they owe the perpetrators money for cigarettes, alcohol, drugs and other goods and that sexual activities are one way of paying it back.

4. The 'party' model: parties are organised where children are offered drinks, drugs, and car rides for free. They are introduced to a culture where sexual promiscuity, drug taking, and violence are normalised. Drugs and alcohol are often used to suppress the child's resistance and images may be taken of them naked for the purpose of future bribery (Houseman, 2022).

Recent work by Jump et al. (2023) suggests that around 20-30% of the young people who are at risk of or involved in exploitation are girls. They go on to argue that CSE and CCE are often intricately intertwined, with many girls facing both sexual and criminal exploitation. Interviews with professionals undertaken by The Children's Society (2019) suggested an increase in girls being exploited to commit offences or being exploited to recruit other young people into criminal exploitation. Additionally, research by the Human Trafficking Foundation (2021) suggests that girls are increasingly being seen in county lines cases and that girls and young women are often being forced to store illegal items such as drugs and weapons in their homes. However, knowledge on this issue remains piecemeal, partly due to lack of access to reliable data. The Commission on Young Lives (2022) has received evidence submissions indicating there are several reasons for the lack of data available in this context. There are concerns about the under-reporting of exploitation when it comes to girls and young women as often these crimes are reported alongside other offences and therefore the exploitation goes unreported. Additionally, stereotypical gendered assumptions held by the Police and others mean that there are sometimes problems recognising girls' involvement in criminal exploitation. There are also concerns about the National Referral Mechanism (NRM) which is used to capture information about young people who may be being exploited in an attempt to create a co-ordinated safeguarding response. However, Jump et al. (2023) suggest that some professionals remain reluctant to refer girls to the NRM, often because their behaviour is misinterpreted as 'choice' or 'risk-taking' rather than exploitation, or because practitioners assume that girls are more commonly victims of CSE than CCE. These gendered assumptions can obscure clear indicators of criminal exploitation, although further research is needed to understand the full extent and drivers of this reluctance. SPACE (a parent led voluntary organisation aimed at tackling CCE) (2024) suggests that this is due to an inherent disbelief that the NRM leads to effective support rather than criminalisation for the individuals entered its system. SPACE (2024) goes on to argue that when evidence from the NRM is brought before judges and magistrates, it is often ignored as it is considered speculative and unreliable. The NRM is also problematic as it only captures a form of 'primary exploitation' and therefore does not offer the opportunity to

record the often secondary[5] forms of exploitation that girls and young women can face. However, perhaps most concerning is the perception that as girls and young women are less likely to take part in violence, this consequently means that their needs are not recognised by the professionals they may come into contact with. Relatedly, it is also clear that perhaps due to these gendered stereotypes, there is much less knowledge about the gender-specific needs of girls who are criminally exploited and the support they need, since many of the services that exist to support young people who become criminally exploited are designed with boys in mind.

Of the girls and young women that are known to be criminally exploited, it is often hard to ascertain whether criminal exploitation is the main form of exploitation or whether this is secondary to sexual exploitation (Caluori et al. 2020; The Children's Society, 2019). So enmeshed are these forms of exploitation for women and girls that it can be difficult to determine how best to support them and this can often be how they fall through the cracks of established support systems.

Grooming

The NSPCC (2021) considers grooming to be when a person develops a relationship based on trust as well as an emotional connection with a child with the intention of manipulating, exploiting, or abusing them. Although the phrase grooming is often associated with CSE (Reeves et al. 2018), grooming is the part of the process involved in all exploitation of children whether this be sexual or criminal exploitation. The Children's Society (2019) suggests that most children who are groomed for criminal exploitation are between 14 and 17 years of age, however Dodd (2019) argues that there is evidence that children of primary school age are increasingly being groomed. It is noteworthy that although grooming is often the initial mechanism used in the exploitation of children, this can progress to other methods that are designed to trap the children into committing further criminal activities. According to HM Government (2018), these other methods may include debt bondage (where the child is told they owe the exploiters money and they must work to pay it off), coercion, intimidation, and violence (including sexual violence).

Perceived Vulnerabilities

As established above, children in care are more likely than their peers who are not in care to become victims of CCE (Home Office, 2018; Stone, 2018; Baidawi and Sheehan, 2020; Shaw and Greenhow, 2021). These children are considered vulnerable due to the

---

[5] A secondary form of exploitation if captured on the NRM could offer further information about CSE that the young person may have experienced in addition to the primary form of exploitation of CCE.

experiences they have had which have led to them being taken into care in the first place. But it is also apparent that the experiences that children have whilst 'in-care' can also add to a perception of vulnerability (Shaw, 2014). These experiences can include relationships with other children in care who may also be at risk of exploitation, as well as the often-insecure environment within care itself. Shaw (2017) and Stein (2006b) argue that systemic abuse, that sees the failings of the care system exacerbate existing problems and cause new ones, adds to feelings of rejection, isolation and loneliness many children in care can feel. This systemic abuse combined with a 'care culture' that can see children moving homes many times, being placed miles away from where they grew up, and constantly changing social workers and care staff, all contribute to the perception of children in care as vulnerable (Coy, 2009; Wood and Selwyn, 2017). The Howard League (2018: 1) goes as far as to suggest that 'the current structure of the residential children's homes sector and the lack of central government oversight… is putting children in danger and enabling the spread of exploitation… around the country'.

Lillywhite and Skidmore (2006) argue that the needs of children in residential care homes are often seen by professionals as too complex and their behaviours too challenging to be placed in kinship or foster care. Therefore, this ought to mean that children placed in residential care require proper support that meets their needs to ensure they are protected from those who may wish to exploit them. However, Shaw and Greenhow (2021) argue that often the approach to parenting taken by corporations doesn't meet the basic welfare needs of the children in their care. One consequence of this is that children who live in residential care homes are more likely to go missing which can make them more susceptible to becoming victims of exploitation (Beckett et al. 2017; Home Office, 2018; Lerpiniere et al. 2013). One of the reasons why children in care who go missing are more likely to become victims of exploitation is due to the way that their status is categorised by care home staff and the Police. If the Police are notified about a child in care who is not at home when they are meant to be, they can be deemed 'absent' or 'missing'. If a child is marked as missing, more Police resources and time are allocated to finding that child. However, a previous review by HMIC (Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary) suggests that the category of 'absent' was used more frequently than 'missing' for children from care homes (HMIC, 2016). This categorising is important because the amount of Police resources which are allocated to finding a child is directly related to how that child is categorised, and therefore children who are at risk may not be receiving the action that is needed to keep them safe. Across different Police areas and even individual care homes, procedures vary when a child is deemed missing or absent and Shaw and Greenhow (2021) suggest that a default position of children in care being categorised as missing rather than absent would help to safeguard

them further from exploitation. However, although perhaps offering a technical fix, questions remain as to whether a more ideological solution is needed in order to respond effectively to this deeply ingrained issue.

An additional problem in this context is highlighted by Shaw and Greenhow (2021) who explains that not all care homes are fully regulated by Ofsted inspections. The All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) for Runaway and Missing Children and Adults have previously described unregulated accommodation as a 'frightening, twilight world… for (those) aged 16 plus' (2019, p.2) and many Police forces and other practitioners are concerned about the numbers of children living in these settings (Harding, 2020). Razzall (2019), reporting for BBC Newsnight, described the children living in these homes as 'abandoned to crime gangs' with children increasingly falling victim to exploitation.

What about 'race'?
As in many areas of the criminal justice system, there is an overrepresentation of Black and minoritised children identified as being criminally exploited (Black, 2020; The Children's Society, 2019; Wroe, 2020). As Lauren Wroe (2020) highlights, 49.7% of children and young people referred to a service to safeguard and support children and young people exploited through county lines in London were Black. Furthermore, research examining 21 cases involving children who had died or experienced serious harm via criminal exploitation between 2018 and 2019, found that 15 of these children were from Black or minoritised backgrounds (The Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel, 2020). In relation to Children's Social Care, The Howard League for Penal Reform (2018) has found that Black children in residential care who have been sent to live in an area where most of the population are White are at greater risk of being criminally exploited. However, what is unclear is whether Black and minoritised children are more likely to be targeted by exploiters or whether biases, stereotypes and racism results in these children having more contact with the Police and social services (The Children's Society, 2019; Wroe, 2020). This necessitates us to think about CCE in an intersectional way, as Marshall (2022) argues it is essential that our understanding of young people involved in county lines activity is shaped by the various intersecting aspects of their lived experiences. Building on this proposal, Koch et al. (2024) argue that our understanding of CCE and specifically county lines is shaped by racialised policing and 'gang' enforcement. Racially minoritised people are six times more likely to be stopped and searched by the Police, with young Black people particularly 'at risk' of encountering the Police and being made subject to searches under Section 23 of the Drugs Misuse Act (1971) (Ministry of Justice, 2021). Understandably many young Black people may have an inherent distrust of the Police and other statutory services as a result of being

profiled by the Police and multi-agency safeguarding partners at a hugely disproportionate rate; they fail to be entered into the National Referral Mechanism; the help needed fails to be extended to them even where they have been entered and been found to be 'modern slaves'; they continue to be prosecuted for drug offences, despite being found to have been victims; and, worst of all, they now also face charges for human trafficking under the Modern Slavery Act itself. (Koch et al. 2024: 13).

Special Educational Needs, Developmental Disabilities, Learning Difficulties
Research has shown that children with special educational needs (SEN), developmental disabilities or learning difficulties are often targeted by exploiters as they are deemed to lack capacity and will therefore be easier to control (Children's Commissioner, 2019; Home Office, 2018). For many children with additional needs, exploiters will prey on their feelings of isolation and offer them a sense of community and belonging that they may not have felt before (Commission on Young Lives, 2021). Research also suggested that children and young people with learning difficulties may self-medicate which can further increase their risk of exploitation through incurring drug debts (The Children's Society, 2019).

Impoverished or low Socio-Economic Status backgrounds / Affluent or high Socio-Economic Status backgrounds
Children who live in deprived areas have also been found to be at increased risk of criminal exploitation (Commission on Young Lives, 2022; Home Office, 2018; Scottish Government, 2021; The Children's Society, Victim Support and National Police Chief's Council, 2018). Poverty often results in children and young people being deprived of basic needs required to survive or other goods that would help them feel the same as their peers. Exploiters target this by offering the child food, clothing, money, and other basic goods that they could not afford otherwise (Local Government Association, 2021; National Crime Agency, 2019; Singh et al. 2021; The Children's Society, 2019). Annan et al. (2022) have found that children sometimes join gangs as they feel this is the only way to improve their financial situation and to relieve financial pressures on their families (Annan et al. 2022). However, it should be noted that not all victims of CCE are impacted by poverty. Olver and Cockbain (2021) suggest that children and young people from affluent backgrounds are also targeted by exploiters as it is thought that they are more likely to avoid detection by Police as they do not fit into the stereotypical idea of a 'drug runner'.

Mental Ill Health
Children with mental ill health are also more likely to be exploited than their peers with good mental health (Commission on Young Lives, 2021; Olver and Cockbain, 2021; The

Children's Society, 2019). The Children's Commissioner (2019) has found that children referred to Children's Social Care with concerns of being involved in 'gangs' 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 compared to children referred for non 'gang' related reasons.

Substance or Alcohol Misuse

The Children's Commissioner (2019) also found that children and young people referred to Children's Social Care with concerns over being involved in 'gangs' were eight times more likely to be misusing substances than other children with social care referrals. For example, research undertaken by Robinson et al. (2019) found that all of the children and young people in their Merseyside cohort of 26 participants were frequent cannabis users. They go on to explain that criminal gangs used this to their advantage by allowing young people to buy cannabis 'on tick',[6] consequently forcing them into drug debt and subsequent criminal exploitation.

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and Trauma

Children and young people who have had Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and trauma are more likely to be criminally exploited than their peers (Children's Commissioner, 2019). These negative and traumatic experiences are often intersecting and experienced in very individual ways. For example, children and young people with absent parents or who have experienced parental separation or a breakdown of the family unit, are more likely to be criminally exploited than their peers and children. Young people who have experienced parental neglect are also at greater risk of criminal exploitation (National Crime Agency, 2019; The Children's Society, 2019). Additionally, the impact of parental substance misuse is also significant on the risk of children being criminally exploited. For instance, children and young people referred to Children's Social Care for 'gang' involvement were 41% more likely to have a parent or carer misusing substances. For the same group of children and young people, 39% were more likely to have been the victim of domestic abuse compared to other children referred to Children's Social Care (Children's Commissioner, 2019). For children and young people in conflict with the law that were said to be 'gang' involved, 76% were more likely to not have their basic care needs met at home, 37% were more likely to have witnessed domestic violence, 68% were more likely to have a parent or carer misusing substances, and 41% were more likely to be experiencing violence from a parent compared to other children in the criminal justice system (Children's Commissioner, 2019).

---

[6] 'On tick' means that goods are received with an agreement to pay for them later.

Considering these data, ACE scores are becoming an increasingly common approach for understanding childhood adversities, and this offers persuasive evidence in policy making and practitioner circles alike. However, their use is also controversial. Research by Lacey and Minnis (2020) found that alternative ways of considering adversity such as examining single adversities or using theoretically or empirically driven methods may have advantages over ACE scores. Lacey and Minnis (2020) conclude that the ACE score approach risks over-simplistic communication of risk/causality resulting in deterministic and stigmatising practices.

Links to Crime, 'Gangs'[7], and other Criminal Associations

For children and young people who have familial links to crime, 'gangs' or other criminal associates, the risk of being criminally exploited is higher (Collins et al. 2022; The Children's Society, 2019). Children and young people referred to Children's Social Care for suspected ''gang'' involvement 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). Peer influences are also important here, and research has shown that when peers are being criminally exploited, they may go on to recruit other children and young people (Annan et al. 2021; Home Office, 2021; Rescue and Response, 2020).

Human Trafficking and Modern Slavery

Sturrock and Holmes (2015) suggest that the duplicitous nature of CCE often makes it hard to recognise, especially when the children involved have been groomed or coerced into criminal activity. Consequently, children are often prosecuted rather than receiving the support they need, and the groomers go unpunished (Harding, 2020). Recent attempts to rectify this has seen Police and other professionals use wider legislation to support children who are criminally exploited. The Modern Slavery Act (2015) can be used to prosecute adults who traffic and exploit children. However, these prosecutions still rely on the statements and involvement of the children who have been arrested for working a county line (McLean et al. 2020). For a conviction to be secured, the child needs to feel able to and be willing to pass on details to Police about the people that exploited them (Harding, 2020). However, and importantly, nationally, prosecutions using human trafficking and modern-day

---

[7] The term 'gang' is used in quotation marks to signal its contested and socially constructed nature. Scholars have long argued that the label is inconsistently applied, often reflects racialised and classed assumptions, and may not correspond to how young people understand their own peer groups (Hallsworth and Young, 2004; Alexander, 2008). Using quotation marks indicates critical distance from the term and avoids reinforcing potentially stigmatising or sensationalised narratives.

slavery legislation have been slow to materialise. Harding (2020) states that in 2019, only two successful prosecutions regarding trafficking of children took place. However, partly due to the media attention these cases received, case law has been able to be established meaning that prosecutions under the Modern Slavery Act (2015) for victims of CCE may now be easier. Some professionals feel that the use of Modern Slavery legislation regarding CCE can be useful as it helps to identify young people through modern slavery and human trafficking processes who can be referred to the national referral mechanism (NRM) (SPACE, 2021). Data collected via the NRM also helps the Police and others to develop enhanced understandings of the scale of the problem of modern slavery, trafficking and CCE. In 2017, there were 2018 children referred into the NRM, representing a rise of 66% on 2016 (Missing People, 2018). This may be seen as positive development since it suggests more victims were able to access the support they require, but it is also indicative of the problem faced in this context of victimhood and perceived vulnerability. It is also apparent that the NRM is not without its own problems, as discussed earlier. The third sector organisation Stop and Prevent Adolescent Criminal Exploitation (SPACE) suggests that the NRM only shows a tiny percentage of the children who are criminally exploited, arguing that referrals to the system are complex and strictly gate-kept through the Police and social services therefore denying support to others who are in need (SPACE, 2021).

The Victim/Offender Debate

Children who run county lines are exploited and are therefore victims. However, they are often arrested, prosecuted, and treated as offenders. The debate around who is a victim and who is an offender is complex, and scholars have called for a more nuanced approach (Robinson et al. 2019). The relationship between those that govern the county lines and those that 'run' them is completely unequal. Some children and young people may receive a 'wage' for 'going country', others may be doing it to serve debt bondage, and some are outright forced into it. This disparity is what leads to the complexity around how those who run the drugs in county lines operations are viewed as victims or offenders. Windle et al. (2020) suggest that one of the problems with the 'debate' about victim or offender is that the children involved in county lines may become criminalised rather than safeguarded. Sturrock and Holmes (2015) further argue that the process of criminalising a child means that their complex needs and the risks they face may not be recognised. The process of criminalisation may reflect the punitive nature of the youth justice system in Britain, which assumes rational choices have been made in relation to offending, therefore shifting the entire responsibility for these choices on to the child (Hobson et al. 2021). Additionally, The Howard League for Penal Reform (2016) suggests that societal attitudes towards children in care change as they reach adolescence. They argue that around the age of 13, young

people in care lose society's sympathies and rather than receiving the safeguarding response that they need they are often treated as offenders. Linked to this is how victims are constructed and viewed. Nils Christie's (1996) classic work argues that 'ideal victims' are often the very old or very young, completely blameless, and those that are considered respectable. Society's response to 'victims' that don't fall into one of these categories is often to victim-blame, assuming that these actors somehow played a part in their own victimisation. Children who 'go country' do not fit neatly into this box of 'ideal victims', despite the obvious exploitation that occurs as they are still involved in the sale of drugs which can and do cause harm to others (Gunter 2008). As such, while policies may demand safeguarding, it can be difficult for some Police and other professionals to see these children as victims. Spicer (2021) develops this victim/offender nexus further by examining county lines in the context of more recent austerity measures and the resulting increase in social exclusion. He argues that children involved in county lines activity have been scapegoated by the media, Police, and other formal institutions to divert attention away from how the harm their communities have seen was created in the first place. More recently, however, work by Marshall et al. (2024) argues that there has been a notable shift in recognising and responding to the problem of victimisation for young people arrested for drug offences. They go on to explain that they have witnessed a shift in policy which has led to a greater willingness to conceptualise some young people who may have previously been criminalised for their involvement in illicit drug markets as victims. Consequently, this change in policy means that for young people who may previously have been criminalised for their involvement in supplying drugs, there is now a possibility that they may be identified as victims of exploitation. It is, however, important to note that very little academic research has been carried out into how the policing response to county lines drug offences have evolved and any implications arising from this.

The way forward

The Children's Society (2019) called for a unified national approach to child criminal exploitation (CCE). Based on FOI responses that year, it reported that only 50 of 141 upper-tier local authorities in England had a CCE strategy in place or in development. No more recent national audit has been published, and inspectorate findings in 2023–24 continue to highlight significant variation in local responses (HMICFRS 2023; HMICFRS 2024).The Children's Society (2019) suggests that drawing on local pockets of knowledge and research does not provide the sound evidence base that is needed to prevent children becoming victims and, instead, a universally agreed upon national strategy must be developed. Evidence from a child safeguarding practice review supports this call (Drew, 2020). In this case, Jaden Moodie was a 14-year-old boy who became involved in county

lines activity and was murdered in London in 2019. During a review of his case, it was found that poor communication between geographically diverse agencies meant that every opportunity to safeguard Jaden was missed. The conclusions of the review echoed The Children's Society's (2019) call for a national system for responding to the exploitation of children by county lines gangs (Drew, 2020).

Following on from this, the Conservative government's Pathfinder Programme[8] published a series of recommendations in 2022 designed to overcome barriers to effective local practice in tackling county lines activities. These recommendations sought to address:

1. Differences in local and national approaches - The recommendations suggests that existing approaches to tackling youth violence at national and local levels hinders the wider effort to tackle county lines criminality.

2. Access to education -The evaluation argues that exclusion can act as both a driver and a consequence of a child's exploitation and suggests that keeping children in full time education is a key protective factor and should be both a local and national priority.

3. Data and information - The evaluation goes on to argue that there is a distinct lack of infrastructure in place to support effective tracking of children who are criminally exploited.

4. Regulation of accommodation and placements - Current approaches to regulating placements for children in care is inadequate.

5. Funding and resources - There is a lack of adequate resources and appropriate funding to meet the demand required to effectively keep children safe from criminal exploitation.

The evaluation also addressed some of the enablers of effective local practice when it comes to tackling CCE, suggesting that increased adoption of these practices would stop as many children as possible becoming criminally exploited. These were identified as:

1. Victimisation not criminalisation - Criminalisation still tends to take precedence over safeguarding in cases of CCE and the victim-offender line is often blurred due to the numbers of children who are known to statutory agencies already being involved in criminal activity.

---

[8] The County Lines Pathfinder Programme was a cross-area programme that aimed to support children, families and practitioners who were at risk of CCE.

2. Multi-agency approaches - To combat county lines effectively, there must be a coordinated response between Police, children's services, youth offending services, schools, health services, charities, and all other local, relevant parties.
3. Awareness-raising sessions and training - There is still a need for additional training around the indicators of youth violence and CCE. (Traverse Ltd, 2022).

However, as Shaw and Greenhow (2021) argue, much work needs to be done to move beyond sentiment and good intentions, and towards consistent and widespread practices that prioritise the safeguarding of children in care over criminalisation.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has critically explored the intersecting literature on care experience and child criminal exploitation (CCE), highlighting how dominant systems often compound the marginalisation of young people already perceived as vulnerable. It has shown how care experienced children are disproportionately over-represented in CCE statistics and, more significantly, how they are often positioned as both victims and perpetrators within a criminal justice system that frequently fails to account for their complex needs and contexts. This chapter has drawn attention to the structural inequalities, including poverty, and exclusion from education, that underpin many CCE pathways. It has also examined how state responses, particularly within the care and criminal justice systems, can be complicit in deepening harm, often through risk-centric and punitive frameworks. Conceptual frameworks such as contextual safeguarding and relational models of care and protection were considered, revealing both their potential and their limitations when applied to the lives of care experienced young people vulnerable to or involved in exploitation.

Together, these strands of literature establish a compelling rationale for this study: to contribute to knowledge that does not merely describe systemic harms but actively seeks to challenge them. The review reinforces the urgency of research that centres the voices of those most affected by care and CCE systems, not only as subjects of study but as partners in the production of knowledge. This commitment underpins the remainder of the thesis, which will now turn to the theoretical and conceptual frameworks adopted in this study.

Chapter 3: Theoretical Framework

Introduction

In contemporary social science, understanding the conditions that enable or hinder human flourishing has become a central concern across disciplines. Three interrelated concepts, mattering, social harm, and poverty, offer powerful frameworks for examining how individuals and communities experience value, marginalisation, and injustice. While each of these ideas has emerged from distinct intellectual traditions, their convergence reveals a shared emphasis on the relational and structural factors that shape well-being. Mattering, a psychological and sociological construct, highlights the essential human need to feel significant to others and to make meaningful contributions to society (Flett, 2018; Prilleltensky, 2020). Social harm, advanced through the field of zemiology, challenges traditional criminological boundaries by interrogating the broader systems, economic, political, and cultural, that cause preventable suffering (Hillyard et al, 2004; Pemberton, 2015). Poverty, meanwhile, stands as both a manifestation and a generator of social harm, deeply entrenched in the unequal distribution of resources and opportunities (Townsend, 1979; MacDonald and Shildrick, 2012).

This chapter explores how these frameworks collectively deepen our understanding of inequality and exclusion in the UK context. It examines how individuals' sense of mattering is eroded by systemic poverty and how this erosion contributes to social harms, particularly among marginalised groups. Drawing on empirical research and theoretical insights from psychology, criminology, education, and sociology, the chapter interrogates how institutions, schools, welfare systems, and the criminal justice apparatus, either reinforce or mitigate these harms. It also emphasises the role of public narratives and policy in shaping lived experiences of dignity, belonging, and autonomy. By situating mattering within the broader social harm framework and examining poverty as a central mechanism of harm, this chapter offers a multidimensional analysis of structural injustice and its human consequences. The goal is not only to understand these issues, but to point toward more humane, justice-oriented solutions which are relevant to the experiences of care experienced young people who have been subject to CCE.

The Importance of Mattering

The concept of mattering has emerged as a crucial construct in psychology, sociology, education, and criminology, representing a foundational human need to feel valued by others and to contribute meaningfully to society. Although seemingly intuitive, the idea that

individuals require affirmation and recognition to flourish has only recently become the subject of systematic academic inquiry. As modern societies struggle with rising mental health issues, social fragmentation, and violence, the relevance of mattering as a theoretical and practical lens is more apparent than ever. Across the fields that have engaged with this concept, a common thread unites the work: when people believe they matter, they are more likely to thrive; when they feel they do not, the consequences can be harmful, even tragic.

The idea of mattering was first introduced by Morris Rosenberg and Claire McCullough in their 1981 paper, where they defined mattering as the sense that one is significant to others. Their research, conducted primarily among adolescents, demonstrated that young people who felt they mattered to parents, peers, or communities were less likely to experience depression or engage in delinquent behaviour (Rosenberg and McCullough, 1981). This foundational work laid the groundwork for understanding mattering as an essential psychological need, comparable to belonging or self-esteem, but distinct in its relational emphasis.

Building on this foundation, Nancy Schlossberg (1989) operationalised the concept within educational contexts, especially in addressing transitional periods such as entering university. She argued that students who feel they matter, who are noticed, cared for, relied upon, and appreciated, are better equipped to cope with academic and social challenges. Schlossberg delineated five key dimensions of mattering: attention, importance, ego-extension, dependence, and appreciation. These components serve as actionable categories that institutions can use to design inclusive and supportive environments (Schlossberg, 1989). Schlossberg's work remains especially influential in higher education, where policies and practices increasingly aim to affirm student significance. Orientation programmes, mentoring schemes, and mental health services are often built upon her insights. But her argument extends beyond the classroom, suggesting that mattering is a lifelong concern. People in midlife transitions or retirement, for example, may suffer from a diminished sense of mattering as their social roles shift.

Psychologist Gordon Flett has significantly advanced the study of mattering within clinical and developmental psychology. In The Psychology of Mattering (2018), Flett proposes that mattering is a fundamental psychological need and that its absence, which he terms 'anti-mattering', can lead to profound emotional distress. According to Flett, mattering is different from self-esteem because it focuses on the belief that others notice and value one's existence. His model includes several core dimensions: attention (being noticed), importance (being cared about), dependence (being needed), and appreciation (being recognised).

Flett and colleagues have conducted extensive research showing that individuals with low levels of perceived mattering are more susceptible to depression, anxiety, self-harm, and suicidality (Flett, 2022). Conversely, those with a strong sense of mattering show greater resilience, motivation, and social engagement. These findings have direct implications for therapy, suicide prevention, and educational programming. Campaigns like 'You Matter' in the US or peer support interventions in schools and universities explicitly draw from this body of research.

A significant contribution from Flett is the idea that mattering can be cultivated. Unlike more static psychological traits, a person's sense of mattering is malleable and responsive to relational environments. Therapists, educators, and community leaders can all play a role in reinforcing mattering by acknowledging individuals' efforts, listening actively, and promoting reciprocal relationships. While psychologists often explore mattering as an individual experience, scholars like Isaac Prilleltensky have expanded the concept to include political and philosophical dimensions. In his work Mattering at the Intersection of Psychology, Philosophy, and Politics (2020), Prilleltensky defines mattering as a dual experience of feeling valued and adding value. This formulation stresses reciprocity: to thrive, people must not only be appreciated but also be able to make meaningful contributions to others.

Prilleltensky situates mattering within critiques of neoliberal society, where hyper-competition, market logic, and individualism undermine collective well-being. He argues that these social structures alienate individuals by stripping them of opportunities for authentic contribution and community belonging. Under such conditions, many people feel disposable, and their search for mattering can lead to adverse outcomes such as aggression, depression, or alignment with populist or extremist ideologies (Prilleltensky, 2020). For Prilleltensky, a just society is one in which mattering is equitably distributed. This requires aligning institutional practices with values of dignity, fairness, and inclusion. Community programmes, for example, should not only provide services but also affirm each member's capacity to contribute. In education, students should be given real decision-making power. In politics, marginalised voices must be heard and acted upon. Prilleltensky's framework therefore extends mattering from a therapeutic concern to a criterion for evaluating social justice.

Perhaps one of the most innovative applications of mattering is found in criminology, where scholars Luke Billingham and Keir Irwin-Rogers have developed the concept within the context of youth violence in their book Against Youth Violence: A Social Harm Perspective (2022). They suggest that when young people become involved in violence, it is often less about inherent criminal tendencies and more about a struggle to be recognised and valued.

In this sense, youth violence can be understood as a painful response to feeling overlooked or invisible. Billingham and Irwin-Rogers go on to examine how systemic inequality, marginalisation, and institutional neglect undermine young people's sense of significance. In deprived communities, where educational and employment opportunities are scarce and adult support is inconsistent, young people may turn to gangs or violence to gain respect and social status. The violence, while harmful, can also be understood as an attempt to assert visibility and consequence (Billingham and Irwin-Rogers, 2022). Their approach reframes youth crime as a public health and social justice issue. Rather than focusing solely on punitive responses, they call for structural interventions that affirm young people's value. This includes funding youth services, creating meaningful educational pathways, and involving young people in shaping the policies that affect them. Such strategies are grounded in the belief that when young people feel they matter, they are less likely to harm themselves or others.

Building on these ideas in practical settings, Jade Levell (2024) introduces the concept of sonic mattering, a creative approach to working with marginalised young people through music. In her work with criminalised young men in custody and on probation, Levell uses music elicitation sessions to explore how participants express identity, pain, and aspirations through sound. These sessions are not simply therapeutic, they are collaborative, with the young person positioned as an expert. This reversal of traditional adult-youth power dynamics is central to the idea of sonic mattering. By listening actively to the young person's musical choices and validating their meaning, facilitators communicate care, respect, and interest, key components of mattering. Levell found that participants who had long been disengaged from other forms of support opened up in these sessions, often describing them as the first time they felt truly heard (Levell, 2024). Levell's work exemplifies how mattering can be operationalised in criminal justice settings. It suggests that even in punitive environments like prisons, relationships built on empathy, creativity, and mutual recognition can provide a corrective emotional experience. These findings also align with trauma-informed approaches, which emphasise safety, trust, and empowerment.

Although not writing within the same theoretical framework, Erich Fromm anticipated many of the core ideas later articulated in mattering research. In Escape from Freedom (1941), Fromm argued that modern individuals, though politically liberated, often feel isolated, anxious, and insignificant. The loss of traditional community structures, he suggested, left many people feeling unmoored and invisible. This sense of insignificance, in Fromm's analysis, made individuals vulnerable to authoritarianism, as they sought belonging through conformity and control. In later works like The Art of Loving (1956) and To Have or To Be?

(1976), Fromm developed a vision of human flourishing grounded in connection, authenticity, and care. Love, in his conception, was not sentimental but active, a commitment to nurturing the life and growth of another. To love someone, then, was to affirm that they matter. Fromm's work thus provides a rich philosophical backdrop for contemporary discussions of mattering, reminding us that the need to be seen, valued, and connected is not merely psychological, it is existential.

Across psychology, education, criminology, and community work, the concept of mattering has emerged as a powerful lens for understanding and addressing human suffering and potential. Despite differences in emphasis and methodology, scholars across these disciplines agree that the experience of being valued, and being able to contribute, is essential for well-being, development, and social cohesion. Mattering is not just a personal feeling but a social condition, shaped by family, institutions, and broader political structures.

Social Harm and Zemiology

The concept of social harm, or zemiology, represents a transformative departure from traditional criminology's focus on legally defined acts of crime. It shifts the lens from narrow juridical definitions to broader understandings of harm, those that are structurally embedded, politically sanctioned, or socially normalised, yet profoundly damaging to individuals and communities. This framework challenges the foundations of criminal justice systems and opens a space where issues of inequality, marginalisation, and systemic violence are brought to the fore as essential subjects of study and redress.

The roots of social harm theory lie in radical criminological critiques, particularly the work of Herman and Julia Schwendinger in the 1970s. In their pioneering article, 'Defenders of Order or Guardians of Human Rights?', the Schwendingers (1970) argued that criminology's fixation on legalistic definitions of crime was a moral and political failure. They proposed that any violation of basic human rights, whether deemed illegal, should be treated as a crime. Acts such as poverty, racial discrimination, and state violence, often perpetrated or neglected by powerful institutions, were identified as central concerns of justice. Their work laid the intellectual foundation for what would later be recognised as zemiology.

Building on this, a landmark intervention came with the publication of Beyond Criminology: Taking Harm Seriously by Hillyard, Pantazis, Tombs, and Gordon in 2004. In this text, the authors made a bold claim: crime has 'no ontological reality', meaning that what is recognised as crime is not an inherent category, but rather it is a social and political construction (Hillyard et al. 2004). In their view, criminology's preoccupation with street crime

obscures deeper and more pervasive harms, such as environmental destruction, structural poverty, exploitative labour, and corporate fraud. These harms, while often legal or underregulated, inflict immense suffering and damage. The authors called for a reorientation of criminological inquiry away from traditional crime metrics toward a holistic framework focused on harm reduction and social justice.

This thesis was extended and popularised in a follow-up report, Criminal Obsessions: Why Harm Matters More than Crime, which offered a more accessible critique of society's obsession with criminalisation (Dorling et al. 2005). The authors argued that media, policy, and political discourse prioritise visible, interpersonal crimes, while largely ignoring systemic harms. They identified corporate negligence, unsafe work conditions, and inequality as examples of socially tolerated yet devastating injuries. The report urged a shift in public policy, advocating for criminology to realign itself with social care, public health, and welfare-oriented approaches.

One of the key thinkers to develop this approach further was Simon Pemberton. His article on minimum wage regulation made a powerful case that poverty wages, though legal, constitute a form of economic harm (Pemberton, 2008). When wages fail to meet basic subsistence needs, they entrench exploitation and social exclusion. Pemberton argued that such harms should be considered just as seriously as crimes, particularly as they stem from state-sanctioned economic policies. In his later work Harmful Societies, Pemberton (2015) developed a more comprehensive account, examining how structural inequalities produce harms across housing, health, education, and employment. Using empirical data, he demonstrated that these harms are not incidental but inherent in how welfare systems are organised and resources distributed. His work served to bridge criminology with social policy, arguing that any system that compromises human flourishing deserves critical attention.

A similar line of argument was pursued by Cooper and Whyte (2017) in their edited collection The Violence of Austerity, which documented how austerity measures in the UK inflicted widespread social harm on populations perceived to be vulnerable. Drawing on case studies, the contributors exposed how budget cuts to housing, mental health services, and disability benefits contributed to rising homelessness, increased suicidality, and premature deaths. These outcomes, they contended, were not unfortunate side effects but predictable consequences of economic policies driven by neoliberal ideology. In this framing, austerity becomes a form of state violence, with structural harm inflicted through policy. Their analysis echoes earlier concerns raised by Schwendinger and Schwendinger, underscoring that state actions, even if legal and politically sanctioned, can generate grave human suffering.

Steve Tombs (2017), another prominent scholar in this field, expanded the argument further in his report Social Protection After the Crisis. Focusing on the post-2008 financial crisis era, Tombs examined how the withdrawal of social protections, such as environmental regulations, food safety inspections, and workplace enforcement left communities vulnerable to otherwise preventable harms. For instance, fewer workplace safety inspections led to increased injuries and fatalities, yet these harms rarely feature in crime statistics or public discourse. Tombs called for a reinvigoration of the welfare state as a protective institution, capable of mitigating harm through proactive, redistributive policies.

The application of social harm theory has extended beyond economics and governance into the world of labour. In The Harms of Work, Anthony Lloyd (2018) employed an ultra-realist lens to interrogate the modern service economy. His ethnographic research revealed how precarious employment, low pay, and exploitative conditions produce chronic stress, anxiety, debt, and ill-health among workers. These experiences, though legal, reflect deeply harmful social arrangements. Lloyd's work situates employment as a site of structural harm, demonstrating how the normalization of economic precarity disguises its destructive impact on human lives. In a more contemporary re-evaluation of the field, Boukli and Kotzé (2018) edited Zemiology: Reconnecting Crime and Social Harm, a collection that revisits the relationship between crime and harm in the 21st century. Contributors to this volume debated whether zemiology should be integrated into criminology or stand as an independent discipline. The book explored harms that defy traditional boundaries, including environmental degradation, algorithmic injustice, digital surveillance, and migration-related harms. The collection exemplifies the expanding scope of zemiological inquiry, which now encompasses global, transnational, and technological dimensions of harm.

Social harm theory also provides a critical lens through which to view the intersection of child welfare and youth justice. Billingham and Irwin-Rogers (2022) propose that statutory systems designed to safeguard children, such as social care and youth justice, may themselves become sources of harm. They define social harm as 'something that compromises human flourishing in a manner that could have been prevented' (Billingham and Irwin-Rogers, 2022, p.43) and, importantly, argue that this definition allows for the inclusion of harms caused by well-intentioned but poorly implemented state interventions.

This is particularly salient in the context of 'crossover children', those with simultaneous involvement in the care and criminal justice systems. Scholars like Baidawi and Sheehan (2019), and Wroe (2021), highlight the paradox facing these young people, who are often treated as both victims and perpetrators. For instance, as discussed above, children exploited in county lines drug operations may be criminalised despite being clearly exploited.

Social harm theory potentially enables a reframing of this issue, allowing practitioners and policymakers to identify the harms embedded within statutory responses themselves.

The typology of harm developed by Canning and Tombs (2021) offers a useful analytical framework for this purpose. They categorise harm into six distinct forms. The first is physical harm, which includes both direct violence (e.g., abuse and murder) and indirect harms, such as preventable deaths resulting from policy negligence. The second is emotional and psychological harm, encompassing mental illness, anxiety, and trauma. These harms are often hidden and can only be understood when individuals are empowered to speak about their experiences, drawing on the trauma-informed insights of Herman (1992).

The third category is economic harm, which spans from personal financial hardship to the effects of macroeconomic mismanagement. Poverty, unemployment, and economic inequality all fall under this form of harm. The fourth, cultural harm, includes the destruction or imposition of culture and the misrecognition or degradation of identity. Drawing on Fraser (2000) and Pemberton (2015), this form of harm is particularly salient for racialised and marginalised groups who are 'othered' or pathologised by dominant institutions.

The fifth category is environmental harm, a domain increasingly recognised within zemiology. Industrial pollution, climate change, and ecological degradation are forms of harm that disproportionately affect poor communities while often remaining outside legal frameworks. The sixth and final category is autonomy harm, referring to restrictions that impede individuals' capacity to act freely or to participate in society. Barriers to education, employment, housing, and healthcare diminish personal agency and thus constitute a form of harm that is both systemic and preventable.

Zemiology, as described by Canning and Tombs (2021), is not merely an intellectual pursuit but a discipline with a radical ethos. Its purpose is to unearth the systems, policies, and decisions that generate harm, document their effects, and propose transformative strategies to mitigate or eradicate them. It critiques the use of criminal law as a tool for social control, particularly over the poor, the racialised, and the politically excluded, and calls for an approach grounded in social justice.

By integrating social harm thinking into child protection, criminal justice, labour studies, and welfare policy, scholars like Parton (2019) and Wroe (2022) demonstrate how this framework can reorient practice away from punishment and toward prevention. When viewed through the lens of zemiology, the task of social care becomes not merely to respond to harm, but to prevent its institutional reproduction. As Bywaters et al. (2016) have shown, child

maltreatment and family breakdown are not evenly distributed across society, they are shaped by poverty, housing insecurity, and unequal access to services. Thus, addressing social harm means addressing inequality itself.

In conclusion, the social harm framework compels us to reconsider what we mean by justice. It insists that the absence of crime is not the same as the presence of safety, dignity, or well-being. Through a zemiological lens, we see that harms may be legal, normalised, and institutionalised, yet no less destructive for that. From poverty wages to care system failings, from austerity policy to environmental collapse, the harms that shape modern life demand attention not just from policymakers and scholars, but from every institution that claims to serve the public good.

Poverty

Poverty in the United Kingdom remains a deeply entrenched and multifaceted issue, marked not only by a lack of financial resources but by a broader deprivation in health, education, housing, and social participation. Far from being a static condition, poverty interacts with structural inequalities, institutional systems, and political ideologies, resulting in widespread harm, especially to children and marginalised communities. To understand its scope and impact, sociologists have applied diverse theoretical perspectives, from functionalism to postmodernism, each illuminating different dimensions of the poverty experience.

The concept of poverty has long transcended basic income measures. Peter Townsend's (1979) influential definition posits that poverty entails being excluded from the standard of living customary to one's society. This framing highlights how poverty is relative and socially constructed, encompassing not only economic hardship but also an inability to fully participate in civic and cultural life. In the UK, the government defines relative poverty as living in a household earning less than 60% of the national median income (DWP, 2024).

Recent figures show that 21% of the UK population, approximately 14 million people, live in relative poverty after housing costs, including a staggering 4.3 million children, which accounts for 30% of all children (CPAG, 2024). These numbers represent a sharp reversal from earlier progress made in the 2000s, with poverty rates increasing steadily since the onset of austerity policies in the 2010s (Alston, 2019).

Challenging the outdated stereotype that poverty primarily affects the unemployed, recent data reveals that 72% of children living in poverty belong to working households (House of Commons Library, 2025). This phenomenon, known as in-work poverty, results from low wages, zero-hours contracts, and part-time or insecure work that fail to provide a living

income (JRF, 2023). Many families, especially in high-cost urban areas, are unable to meet basic needs despite consistent employment, illustrating that poverty in the UK is increasingly a problem of income inadequacy rather than unemployment.

Poverty is not evenly distributed. Lone-parent households, most of which are headed by women, face a poverty rate of 44% (CPAG, 2024). Ethnic disparities are also stark: 51% of Black British children and 47% of Pakistani and Bangladeshi children live in poverty, compared to 24% of White British children. Disability further exacerbates poverty risk, with families containing disabled members more likely to live in deprivation (DWP, 2024). These statistics reveal the intersecting forces of gender, race, and ability status in shaping poverty outcomes.

Poverty has profound consequences for individuals and communities. Children born into poverty are more likely to suffer from poor health, experience educational failure, and face barriers to upward mobility (Shildrick and Rucell, 2015). These disadvantages often persist across generations. MacDonald and Shildrick (2012) have shown how poverty becomes intergenerational, as those born into poverty remain poor into adulthood. Additionally, the stigma surrounding poverty, fueled by political discourse and media representation, can lead to social exclusion and mental health issues (Lister, 2004; Goffman, 1963).

Different sociological perspectives offer contrasting interpretations of poverty's role in society. The functionalist perspective, rooted in the work of Davis and Moore (1945), argues that poverty serves a purpose by motivating individuals to fill socially necessary, albeit undesirable, roles. Herbert Gans (1972) expanded on this, asserting that poverty performs various functions for society, such as maintaining the labour supply for low-paid work and upholding the legitimacy of elite classes.

In the UK, this perspective implies that sectors like care work or cleaning are economically viable because they are staffed by underpaid workers from impoverished backgrounds. However, critics argue that this framework legitimises inequality and overlooks the suffering poverty causes (Shildrick and Rucell, 2015). In contrast, Marxist theorists view poverty as a structural outcome of capitalist exploitation. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels (1848) emphasised that capitalism inherently generates poverty as a means to sustain wealth accumulation for the ruling class. In modern Britain, Marxist scholars point to neoliberal austerity policies and welfare retrenchment as key mechanisms deepening inequality (Alston, 2019; MacDonald and Shildrick, 2012). According to this view, poverty is not incidental but integral to sustaining economic hierarchies.

Feminist sociologists focus on the gendered nature of poverty. Women, especially single mothers, experience higher rates of poverty due to the gender pay gap, disproportionate childcare responsibilities, and systemic welfare inadequacies (Williams, 2018). The feminisation of poverty is compounded when race, immigration status, or disability intersect with gender, leading to complex layers of disadvantage (Shildrick and Rucell, 2015).

Symbolic interactionism, particularly influenced by Goffman's (1963) concept of stigma, examines how poverty affects self-identity. In Britain, narratives around those in receipt of benefits have led individuals to distance themselves from welfare dependency stereotypes, often emphasising their work ethic as a form of self-protection (MacDonald and Marsh, 2005; Jensen and Tyler, 2015). This lens highlights how stigma and institutional labelling shape people's lived experiences of poverty.

Postmodern perspectives argue that in a consumer-driven society, poverty is not only about deprivation but also exclusion from cultural consumption. Zygmunt Bauman (2005, p.38) has described the poor as 'flawed consumers' who are marginalised for their inability to participate in material culture. Ulrich Beck's (1992) concept of the risk society further suggests that modern individuals face new insecurities in work and welfare, leading to a responsibilisation discourse where poverty is framed as a personal failure rather than a systemic issue (Shildrick and Rucell, 2015).

There is ongoing debate between structural and cultural explanations of poverty. Structural theorists argue that poverty stems from systemic inequalities in the labour market, housing, education, and welfare systems. Deindustrialisation, precarious employment, and housing crises are cited as root causes (JRF, 2023; Shildrick and Rucell, 2015). Austerity measures since 2010, which have slashed public spending and reduced welfare entitlements, have exacerbated these issues, disproportionately affecting low-income households (Alston, 2019).

In contrast, cultural explanations posit that poverty persists due to attitudes and behaviours within poor communities. Charles Murray (1990: n.p) infamously claimed that an 'underclass' existed in Britain, characterised by welfare dependency and a lack of work ethic. However, empirical research by MacDonald and Shildrick (2012) found no evidence of widespread intergenerational worklessness. Rather, they found that most people in poverty valued employment but were constrained by factors such as illness, discrimination, and lack of opportunities. Cultural explanations are therefore widely criticised for promoting victim-blaming narratives and ignoring systemic barriers (Lister, 2004).

Poverty plays a central but often overlooked role in child protection. Ofsted (2019) reported that over one in four children in care were placed in areas with the highest crime levels, while children of colour were disproportionately placed in high-deprivation areas (Youth Justice Board, 2020). Moreover, the Department for Education (2019) have found that 41% of children in need were eligible for free school meals, a common indicator of poverty. The Child Welfare Inequalities Project (Bywaters et al, 2020) has provided robust evidence linking poverty to child protection interventions. Families experiencing material deprivation were significantly more likely to have contact with social services. However, social workers often failed to explicitly acknowledge poverty in their practice, partly due to efforts to avoid stigmatising families by invoking 'underclass' discourse (Morris et al, 2018). As a result, poverty is treated as an invisible backdrop rather than a central concern in safeguarding work.

Morris et al. (2018: 370) describe poverty as 'the wallpaper of (child protection) practice', so pervasive that it becomes normalised and unchallenged. With this in mind, Krumer-Nevo (2016) calls for a poverty-aware social work framework that recognises how economic hardship contributes directly to family difficulties and child maltreatment.

Historical narratives continue to shape public attitudes and policy responses to poverty. The division between the 'deserving' and 'undeserving' poor remains pervasive in political rhetoric. The former are viewed as morally upright and worthy of support, such as those affected by illness or disability, while the latter are blamed for their situation, often associated with laziness or irresponsible behaviour (Bridges, L. 2017; Katz, 2013). Romano (2017) critiques this dichotomy as overly simplistic, arguing that it obscures the structural roots of poverty. Edmiston (2018) notes that such rhetoric is strategically employed by political actors to justify punitive welfare reforms, often aimed at policing or disciplining the poor. Wacquant (2008: 237) links these attitudes to the neoliberal production of 'stigmatised neighbourhoods' marked by crime, deprivation, and systemic neglect. Pitts (2008) further traces this trajectory back to deindustrialisation in the 1980s and 1990s, which created conditions of disenfranchisement, unemployment, and crime in marginalised communities.

In response to concerns about the overrepresentation of poor children in care, the Social Model of Child Protection was developed by Featherstone et al. (2018). This model shifts the focus from family-level risks to broader socio-economic and cultural barriers. Research shows that poverty-related stress, such as insecure housing, low income, and poor health, contributes to family dysfunction and negatively affects parenting capacity (Benach et al. 2014; Pendall et al. 2016). The Social Model promotes community-based, co-produced services tailored to local needs. It calls for a move away from top-down interventions by

professionals and instead advocates for preventative, rights-based support systems (Featherstone et al. 2020). These include adequate income support, housing, education, and healthcare. The model acknowledges the interconnection between psychological harm and socio-economic conditions, and it aims to address both in a unified framework.

Crucially, the model calls for understanding the lived experiences of care experienced children, especially those at risk of criminal exploitation. These children often belong to marginalised communities where poverty intersects with race, gender, and class, influencing their pathways through both the care and criminal justice systems. A holistic approach is essential to address the systemic structures that create and perpetuate harm.

Poverty in the UK is not a fringe issue; it is a structural reality affecting millions. It intersects with race, gender, disability, and geography, and it causes significant harm, especially to children. While cultural narratives about worklessness or moral failure persist, the evidence overwhelmingly supports structural explanations: poverty is created and sustained by unequal access to employment, housing, education, and social support.

Sociological theories help reveal the complexity of poverty. Functionalist and symbolic interactionist perspectives show how poverty is both systemically useful and subjectively harmful. Marxist and feminist analyses underscore the role of exploitation and structural inequality. Postmodern and late-modern theories contextualise poverty within consumer culture and individualised risk. Together, these approaches demonstrate that poverty is a multidimensional harm requiring systemic solutions.

Conclusion

The themes of mattering, social harm, and poverty interweave to reveal the profound ways in which societal structures and narratives impact individual and collective well-being. As this chapter has demonstrated, mattering is far more than a personal sentiment, it reflects relational recognition and institutional inclusion. When people are made to feel invisible, whether through marginalisation in education, neglect in policy, or demonisation in public discourse, they are not only deprived of emotional support but are exposed to concrete harms with lasting effects (Flett, 2022; Billingham and Irwin-Rogers, 2022). These harms, viewed through a zemiological lens, extend beyond legal definitions of crime to encompass the preventable injustices embedded in systems of welfare, employment, housing, and justice (Hillyard et al. 2005; Tombs, 2017).

The persistence of poverty in the UK reflects this systemic neglect. Far from being an aberration or a result of individual failings, poverty is sustained by policy decisions and

structural inequalities that deprive people of autonomy, opportunity, and dignity (Alston, 2019; JRF, 2023). It is in this context that mattering becomes not just a psychological need but a political imperative. When individuals are valued and given the means to contribute meaningfully to their communities, the cycle of harm can be disrupted. This requires not only supportive interpersonal relationships, but also structural reforms rooted in equity, care, and justice.

Addressing social harm, then, demands a reimagining of societal priorities: shifting from punitive to preventative models, from exclusion to inclusion, and from blame to support. Whether through community-based youth work, trauma-informed education, or poverty-aware social policy, the path to a more just society lies in recognising that every individual matters. Only when this recognition is embedded into our institutions and cultures can we begin to reduce the harms that undermine human flourishing.

Chapter 4: Methodology

INTRODUCTION

This chapter will discuss the methodological approach taken for this study. A participatory study of this level is unusual within the context of a PhD, and to highlight some of the benefits and challenges this brings, I have documented several of my reflective field note entries throughout the chapter. These reflections are intended not only to provide transparency in the research process but also to underscore the collaborative and evolving nature of the work. The study was rooted in a belief that traditional research models often fail to fully capture the complexities of lived experience, particularly those of care experienced young people who have been affected by child criminal exploitation (CCE). As such, the methodology reflects a commitment to inclusivity, shared authority, and a rejection of the traditional researcher–participant hierarchies. This approach is grounded in constructivist epistemology and relativist ontology, which together informed both the design and execution of the project. It was essential to create a space where knowledge could be created together rather than simply extracted.

Consequently, the chapter will first discuss the aims of the project before exploring the values from which the methodological approach is drawn. This is followed by a summary of the methods used and a detailed description of how the research was carried out. The chapter will also engage with the ethical challenges encountered, and how these were addressed in practice. Additionally, the chapter recounts the recruitment and training of peer researchers, an uncommon feature in doctoral work, and concludes with an explanation of the co-analysis process we undertook.

RESEARCH AIM

This research aims to explore the experiences of care experienced young people who had been victims of Child Criminal Exploitation (CCE). The overarching question for this study is: How do care experienced young people understand their experiences of Child Criminal Exploitation (CCE)? To address this overarching question, the following sub-questions offer a framework for the study:

4. How do care experienced young people feel about the circumstances that resulted in their exploitation?

5. What do care experienced young people feel were the main drivers of their sustained exploitation?

6. What type of emotional and/or practical support/intervention do care experienced young people believe may have been beneficial to shorten their exploitation?

RESEARCH PHILOSOPHIES

Drawing on a relativist ontology, which recognises that multiple realities exist for us to know and understand (Bryman, 2012; Guba and Lincoln, 1994), I began this project convinced that reality is not a single, objective 'thing out there' but a collection of experiences shaped by culture, history, and personal circumstances (Denzin and Lincoln, 2018). From this stance followed a constructivist epistemology: knowledge is created through the ways researchers and participants come together to tell their stories. This meant positioning three young people with lived experience of care and child criminal exploitation not as 'subjects' but as co-researchers, whose timelines and insights were interpreted alongside my own (Berger, 2015; Holland et al. 2008). Practically, this commitment required immersion in life-story interviews and timeline exercises, working collaboratively to co-construct meaning (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000). When analysing the data, we followed Braun and Clarke's (2019) reflexive approach, treating themes as being generated through iterative dialogue rather than through the imposition of a fixed coding template. This dynamic process kept the analysis open to new insights while recognising my interpretive role. Central to this was participatory action research (PAR). From their introduction to the project, the co-researchers helped to design interview questions, supported recruitment activities, and co-analysed transcripts. In doing so, they claimed epistemic authority over the study, challenging the typical power imbalance which positions the researcher as the knowledge authority (Trainor and Bouchard, 2013). To ensure reciprocity and to reflect the commitment to valuing the co-researchers as knowledge producers rather than subjects, we embedded their methodological training within a Level 2 NVQ in peer research methods. This approach offered not only fair pay but also recognised the importance of the co-researcher's professional development, reinforcing the constructivist stance that knowledge emerges collaboratively and should benefit all those involved in its creation.

By combining relativist ontology, constructivist epistemology and value-laden axiology, this study not only describes constructivist approaches in theory but enacts it in practice. It disrupts testimonial and hermeneutical injustices (Fricker, 2007) by validating care experienced young people as knowledge holders and creators and by providing them with the resources (training, remuneration, emotional support) to bring their insights to the fore. In

doing so, the study sought to move beyond detached observation to an emancipatory research process, one that I believe both deepens our grasp of child criminal exploitation and models a more just way of producing knowledge.

However, relativism is not without critique, and it is important to understand the criticisms that may be levied at this study and its findings. Philosophically, it may face accusations of self-refutation; if all truth is relative, then so is the claim that truth is relative (Guba and Lincoln, 1994). Critics argue that this undermines the possibility of any knowledge being dependable or verifiable in a consistent way (Hammersley, 2002). Others argue that it tends to underemphasise material and structural conditions that shape experiences, thereby limiting its ability to explain systemic inequalities or power relations (Bhaskar, 1975; Archer, 1998).

Methodologically, critics highlight several limitations such as limited generalisability. Although constructivist studies often yield deep, context-specific insights, these may be difficult to apply across wider populations or settings, arguably reducing their impact on broader policymaking or theory-building (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Findings from qualitative studies can also be criticised for a lack of standardisation, that without shared, objective criteria, the validity or reliability of the findings can be questioned, especially by positivist-oriented disciplines (Seale, 1999). Qualitative work has also been criticised for a risk of bias as relativist research is inherently subjective, it is susceptible to confirmation bias or the romanticisation or glamorisation of certain perspectives (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). Practically, some argue that relativist research may lack policy relevance. Without the ability to produce generalisable or prescriptive findings, such work can be dismissed as lacking impact or utility (Silverman, 2013). Additionally, the tendency to avoid normative judgements, especially out of cultural relativism, can lead to ethical ambivalence in response to harmful practices (Tracy, 2010).

While a relativist ontology offers a powerful tool for recognising and valuing diverse perspectives, particularly those marginalised in traditional research, it also faces significant philosophical and methodological challenges. Nonetheless, when paired with participatory methods and reflexive practice such as those employed in this study, constructivism can help democratise knowledge and promote epistemic justice (Fricker, 2007). It reminds us that understanding the world requires more than detached observation, it demands engagement, empathy, and a willingness to share epistemic authority.

ETHICS

Ethical Considerations

Given the sensitive nature of this study, focusing on care experienced young people and their experiences of CCE, ethical considerations were central to every phase of the research. The study's approach was shaped by both institutional ethical frameworks and the relational, evolving ethics of participatory research practice (Banks et al, 2013; Alderson and Morrow, 2020). Ethical approval was sought through the university's formal processes, and I engaged in a multi-stage ethics application that reflected the dual challenges of working with a population viewed as 'vulnerable' and embedding participatory values meaningfully within the study.

A core ethical concern was the safeguarding of participants, many of whom had experienced trauma, stigma, and marginalisation through the care and criminal justice systems. To minimise the risk of re-traumatisation, we adopted a relational, care-centred approach to all interviews, which included offering participants control over the timing, format (face-to-face or online), and depth of their engagement (Etherington, 2007). Participants were sent the questions in advance and reminded at multiple points of their right to withdraw or pause the interview, and we prioritised emotional safety and dignity in all our interactions.

Another major consideration was working with the co-researchers, all of whom had lived experience of care and CCE themselves. While this greatly enhanced the relevance, trust, and relational quality of the research, it also raised complex ethical issues around role boundaries, emotional labour, and power dynamics. With the co-researchers, I sought to address this through extensive training and regular check-ins that enabled co-researchers to voice any concerns and adjust their involvement as needed (Boylan et al, 2019). Their dual role as researchers and members of the community under study was treated with care and respect, recognising both the risks and strengths this positionality brought to the project (Chavez, 2008).

We also encountered ethical challenges in the adaptation of the research design. After receiving initial ethics approval, the co-researchers requested changes to both the research questions and some of the proposed methods. This led to a necessary revision and delay in the start of fieldwork. While logistically inconvenient, this was ethically essential: it honoured the co-researchers' voices and preserved the integrity of the participatory process, which is grounded in shared decision-making and responsiveness to evolving, iterative work (Shaw, 2003; Iphofen and Tolich, 2018).

Throughout, I was acutely aware of the power asymmetries between myself, co-researchers, and the participants. We sought to address these not only through shared analysis and interpretation, but also through deliberate efforts to embed care, accountability, and reciprocity at every stage of the project. This included sharing findings with all participants, inviting them to validate or reshape their representation in the final report, and ensuring that all contributors were acknowledged and, where appropriate, financially compensated for their time and expertise (Torre, 2009; Banks et al. 2018).

Informed Consent

Informed consent is a cornerstone of ethical research, but in participatory approaches, particularly those involving care experienced young people and issues like CCE, it must be seen as far more than a single form-signing exercise. Instead, consent should be understood as an ongoing, relational and dialogic process, a commitment to ensuring that participants are genuinely informed, feel safe to withdraw or question their involvement at any time, and maintain control over their contribution throughout the study (Alderson and Morrow, 2020; Guillemin and Gillam, 2004).

As the research developed, it became clear that many of the young people we hoped to speak with would be friends or acquaintances of the co-researchers. This introduced a unique dynamic that required us to pay careful attention to how we ensured real, meaningful consent was given, particularly given the likelihood of pre-existing relationships and the emotional weight of the topics discussed. From the outset, care was at the heart of our approach, not only in the collaboration with co-researchers but also in how we engaged potential participants. As a team, we had numerous conversations about how to communicate clearly, compassionately, and accessibly what the research involved and what we were asking of participants. Eventually, we co-developed a creative and accessible way of sharing this information: an informed consent animation. This short, three-and-a-half-minute video was truly a collaborative effort, drawing on the strengths of the whole team: Alice's technical skills, Brittany's creative flair and drawing abilities, and Holly's knack for simplifying complex concepts into plain language. The animation covered the study's aims, what participation would involve, how anonymity would be protected, the voluntary nature of participation, and participants' rights to withdraw. It was designed to be clear, engaging, and empowering, especially for participants who might find traditional written documents inaccessible, overwhelming, or uninviting.

The link to the animation we created can be found here:

<u>Children in Care and Child Criminal Exploitation (CCE) peer research project information video. (youtube.com)</u>

The animation was sent to prospective participants along with more conventional information sheets and consent forms. Importantly, this was not the end of the consent process. We followed up with personalised conversations, whether via phone, video call, or face-to-face chats, to give potential participants the opportunity to ask questions and confirm their understanding. These informal follow-ups allowed us to build trust, clarify expectations, and ensure that no one felt pressured to take part simply because they knew one of the co-researchers. This approach aligns with what Miller and Boulton (2007) describe as process consent, a flexible, evolving practice that respects the emotional and cognitive realities of participants, especially in complex, sensitive research settings.

Ongoing informed consent also remained a priority throughout participants' involvement. At the beginning and end of each interview, participants were reminded that they could stop at any time, skip questions, or retract anything they had shared. This was not only a matter of procedural ethics, but also of developing relational accountability and emotional safety (Torrance, 2012). During the participant-checking stage, when we shared drafts of the findings chapter, we again sought explicit consent for how their narratives were represented, further reinforcing their agency and ownership over their contributions (Banks et al. 2018).

Anonymity and confidentiality were also key ethical concerns. All participants selected their own pseudonyms, giving them ownership over how they would be represented in the findings. Interview recordings were deleted after being transcribed and anonymised by the co-researchers who had conducted them, and data was stored securely on a university-approved drive. During the analysis and writing stages, we returned to participants to share how their stories were being represented, another step in our commitment to relational ethics (Banks and Brydon-Miller, 2019). Participants had the opportunity to clarify, challenge, or amend their contributions before anything was finalised however, none chose to do so.

This ethos extended to the work with co-researchers as well. Their roles were fluid, and their proximity to the issues and communities involved required a dynamic approach to consent. At key stages, such as the transition into data collection, co-analysis, and dissemination, we revisited consent to check in on their comfort levels, workload, and evolving sense of contribution. As a participatory researcher, I recognised that people's roles, risks, and

boundaries can shift throughout a project, and we tried to create space for these conversations to happen openly and without judgement (Boylan et al, 2019).

Ethical Clearance

The process of applying for ethical clearance in this study highlighted the complex and often non-linear realities of participatory research, particularly when institutional systems interface with flexible, participatory methodologies. Ethical scrutiny formally began at the Confirmation Review stage, which acted as the first point of assessment for my ethics application. This application had to be submitted in advance of the Confirmation Review, and one of the reviewers, who had significant expertise in participatory research, focused extensively on this aspect during the review meeting.

Shortly after the review, I received the initial feedback on my application. It included 27 required changes, a volume that felt disproportionate when compared to peers whose projects, despite being categorised as 'risky', received far fewer revisions. While the high number of required amendments initially felt discouraging, I recognised that the 'high risk' designation applied to my research, due to the involvement of participants perceived as vulnerable and the sensitive nature of the topic, invited greater scrutiny. As Morrow (2009) notes, ethical review boards often err on the side of risk aversion, particularly when research involves young people or people who have experienced trauma.

Many of the suggested changes related to issues of clarification and procedural detail, such as how safeguarding would be managed or how participant consent would be verified. I made the required edits and resubmitted the application. Four weeks later, further feedback was received, this time with only four additional changes, which I addressed promptly. One of the main issues flagged focused on the composition of the proposed initial method of focus groups, specifically the proposed mixing of 14- and 18-year-olds. The ethics committee suggested these age groups be separated, citing concerns around appropriateness and power dynamics.

However, in consultation with my supervisors who have extensive experience working with care experienced young people, it became clear that this recommendation did not align with the social realities of the participants. As my supervisor observed, many young people in care are already familiar with mixing across age groups in residential settings, schools, or through local authority activities. Imposing an artificial separation risked disrupting natural relational dynamics and could have undermined trust and participation. This tension reflects a broader critique in the literature about how ethics committees can sometimes apply rigid,

protectionist models that do not account for the nuanced, contextual realities of participants' lives (Shaw, 2003; Alderson and Morrow, 2020).

Ethical approval was eventually granted, nearly three months after the original submission, but the process did not end there. Once the co-researchers joined the project, it became clear that several elements of the original design required rethinking. They brought valuable knowledge and insights, and it quickly became apparent that they wanted to reshape the focus of the study and adapt the proposed methods to better reflect their priorities and the realities of the communities they represented. This led to an amendment of the ethics application, shifting the research questions to focus on people who had left care rather than those currently in care, and adopting semi-structured interviews as the primary method of data collection. Although these changes delayed the start of fieldwork, they were ethically essential: they honoured the co-researchers' voices and preserved the integrity of the participatory process, which rests on shared decision-making and responsiveness to evolving, iterative work (Shaw, 2003; Iphofen and Tolich, 2018).

This phase revealed one of the key tensions in participatory research: the disconnect that can occur when ethical approval is sought before communities are fully engaged in designing the research (Banks et al. 2013). The changes proposed by the co-researchers required revisiting parts of the ethics application and delayed the commencement of fieldwork. While inconvenient, this iterative process ultimately strengthened the research and helped ensure the involvement of the co-researchers was not merely tokenistic. It also taught me a critical lesson about the value of approaching ethical approval for participatory work as a two-stage process, one that allows for flexibility and adaptation once community voices are fully integrated.

Reflecting on this experience, I now believe that unless a project is collaboratively developed from the outset, where the research questions and methods emerge directly from the community involved, it is essential to build in a second ethical review point after co-researchers have had input. Participatory research is messy, iterative, and fundamentally relational, and these qualities often sit uneasily within linear, institutionalised ethics frameworks (Iphofen and Tolich, 2018). Ethics committees are often positioned as gatekeepers of safety and legitimacy, but they must also be encouraged to act as enablers of democratic, inclusive inquiry, capable of supporting change and dialogue throughout the research process (Gallagher et al. 2014).

This experience has underscored the reality that ethical clearance in participatory research is not simply a hurdle to be overcome, but a living process that must evolve alongside the

research itself. Risk aversion, while understandable, must be balanced with trust in the researcher–participant relationships and the capacities of those involved. As I move forward, I intend to advocate for ethics procedures that are more reflexive, dialogic, and responsive to the collaborative ethos of participatory research.

Insider/Outsider Research

As I reflect on my position within this participatory research project, I find the insider–outsider framework a useful, if imperfect, lens. Traditionally, this framework categorises researchers as either insiders, those who are part of the community they study, or outsiders, who observe from beyond. However, I align more closely with the view that insider and outsider roles are fluid, shaped by relational, contextual, and intersecting factors (Merton, 1972; Dwyer and Buckle, 2009).

While I am not care experienced myself, I have spent time professionally over the last almost 20 years working with children in care. I have also spent significant time building trusted relationships with the co-researchers and participants, and in many ways, I now occupy what Dwyer and Buckle (2009: 60) term 'the space between'. Working with co-researchers who are themselves care experienced, I have seen the value of insider knowledge first-hand. These co-researchers are uniquely placed to build rapport, access deeper, richer narratives, and offer interpretations that I, as an academic outsider, might miss. Their presence aligns with Chavez's (2008) assertion that insiders often elicit more authentic, culturally nuanced insights. In a project like this, which centres stories of exploitation, mistrust of professionals, and systemic failure, their insider status has been essential in enabling emotional safety and meaningful participation.

However, I am also acutely aware of the methodological risks that insider research can pose. Over-identification or assumed shared understanding may lead to gaps in data or analysis (Delamont, 2002). I have worked to mitigate this by embedding structured co-analysis processes, where different perspectives, insider and outsider, can be surfaced, questioned, and held in productive tension. As Brannick and Coghlan (2007) suggest, this kind of collaborative reflexivity strengthens rather than weakens research rigour. Ethically, I have found insider contributions to be profoundly powerful, especially in how they support relational ethics. Participants have often shared difficult, painful experiences of CCE and the care system, and knowing that co-researchers have similar life experiences helped create spaces of trust. I have taken seriously Cahill and Dadvand's (2018) call for participatory research to centre safety, care, and wellbeing. This has meant putting in place emotional

support, offering flexibility, and always being guided by the co-researchers' comfort and consent.

Still, I do not seek to romanticise the role of the insider. I have witnessed the emotional labour the co-researchers had to carry, sometimes re-encountering their own trauma while listening to others. As Chavez (2008) notes, this emotional entanglement requires careful management. I have responded by creating regular opportunities for debriefing, providing wellbeing resources, and promoting a group culture where it is okay to pause or step back. This has been a balancing act: enabling the co-researchers to use their lived experience as a strength, without placing undue burden on them. While I bring an outsider lens that allows me to see broader structural patterns or academic frameworks, I do so alongside, not above, insider perspectives. I am constantly learning from the insights and emotional intelligence of the co-researchers. This dynamic reminds me of Narayan's (1993: 681) argument that the real value lies not in declaring oneself 'native' or 'foreign' but in engaging responsibly with one's positionality.

In this research, I understand that I am neither a full insider or a detached outsider. My position is one of engaged closeness, shaped by trust, care, and ongoing reflexivity. The co-researchers have brought a level of authenticity and depth to the project that I alone could never provide, while I have tried to bring critical structure, safeguarding, and institutional leverage to ensure their voices are centred. Together, we inhabit the 'cramped space' (Bell and Pahl, 2018: 108) of participatory research within formal academic settings, doing our best to balance rigour and care.

GUIDING VALUES

Rather than being driven solely by methodological considerations, this study was grounded in a set of core values that shaped every aspect of its design, implementation, and analysis. These guiding values, reflexivity, relational and emotional integrity, reciprocity, empathy, knowledge equity, and generative justice, provided both an ethical compass and a practical framework for doing research in a participatory and humanising way. In work involving care experienced young people and issues as complex and emotionally charged as child criminal exploitation, adhering to procedural ethics alone is insufficient. The values outlined below reflect a deeper commitment to relational accountability and meaningful collaboration, ensuring that the process of knowledge production remained inclusive, respectful, and transformative. They were not ideals applied after the fact but were embedded from the outset, informing how decisions were made, how relationships were built, and how stories were shared, heard, and represented.

Reflexivity

From the outset, it was clear that this work needed to be grounded in a deeply reflexive stance. Reflexivity was not a methodological add-on but a core value that shaped how the research was imagined, conducted, and interpreted. It was understood not simply as a self-awareness exercise, but as a continual, intentional process of linking thought to action (Bassot, 2017). This value manifested through the careful recording of reflections immediately after each session with co-researchers and participants. These field notes, uploaded to a secure drive and eventually forming a detailed 11,000-word fieldwork diary, were not just an account of the process, but a vital space for emotional and analytical reflection of my own experience.

Crucially, revisiting this diary allowed me to remain accountable to the values of transparency, relational integrity, and emotional honesty. It helped me not only to recall decisions but to consider the emotions involved and ethical implications. This care and attentiveness shaped a more grounded and honest interpretation of the findings. Without this grounding in reflexivity, a researcher risks reproducing dominant narratives, interpreting others' experiences through a disconnected or overly intellectualised lens, and, in doing so, missing the emotional and relational dimensions that are vital to participatory work.

Relational and Emotional Integrity

One of the most significant challenges, and fulfilling aspects, of this work was navigating its emotional complexity. This research demanded far more than intellectual energy; it required emotional presence, relational investment, and an ongoing commitment to ethical care. The stories shared were not abstract case studies; they were deeply personal accounts of pain, loss, harm, and survival, including those of the co-researchers and, at times, my own. Being guided by a value of emotional integrity meant acknowledging and working through these feelings, rather than suppressing them. This was not incidental to the research, it is necessary for ethical, humanising research.

Emotionally engaged research, particularly on sensitive topics, requires deliberate strategies to protect both researcher and participant wellbeing. Scholars such as Dickson-Swift et al. (2009) and Mallon and Elliott (2019) argue that emotional labour in qualitative research should be anticipated. Their work shows that researchers often experience secondary distress, anxiety, or emotional exhaustion, particularly when dealing with trauma or injustice. Yet institutional ethics frameworks rarely provide adequate support for this dimension of the work. For me, emotional integrity meant building a reflective practice and ensuring that I had

both professional and personal support structures in place. I leaned on my previous experience supporting care experienced young people to help create emotionally safe, trauma-informed, and boundaried spaces in the research context. Without this grounding, the emotional toll of the work, on myself and the co-researchers, could have been overwhelming.

As researchers like Rogers-Shaw et al. (2021) and Kumar and Cavallaro (2018) note, attending to emotional labour is not just a matter of self-care, but of research quality. Emotions signal where power, connection, and ethical tensions sit. Damping them down in the name of 'objectivity' does not cancel out their impact; it only hides the need to act with care and reflexivity. A core tension I encountered throughout this project was in occupying multiple roles: researcher, employer, facilitator, ally. In more traditional research paradigms, overlapping identities may be considered methodologically risky or ethically inappropriate. However, feminist and relational methodologies (Ellis, 2007; Tillmann-Healy, 2003) remind us that research is always relational and that denying those relationships can lead to harm. Rather than striving for artificial detachment, I approached these roles with intentionality, openness, and reflexive attention to the power dynamics they carried.

In participatory contexts, this multiplicity of roles is not a methodological failure, it is a feature of the work. Participatory Action Research (PAR), as Carroll (2009) and others argue, positions the researcher not as a distant observer but as a co-traveller, ally, and collaborator. In this study, those blurred lines were essential to the trust and care that developed between me and the co-researchers. This allowed us to build a research space that was emotionally rich, ethically responsive, and generative of knowledge.

Of course, these roles needed to be constantly (re)negotiated. I was acutely aware of the risk that my position as a university-employed researcher, and as the person who hired the co-researchers, could reproduce hierarchies we were actively trying to dismantle. I took care to remain transparent about my positionality, to check in regularly with the co-researchers about how the process was working for them, and to ensure they had real decision-making power in shaping the research. This practice reflects what Wilson (2008) and Smith (2012) describe as relational accountability, the idea that in ethical research, we are responsible to the people and communities we engage with, not just for protecting them, but for honouring the relationships that we hold.

Without this commitment to emotional and relational integrity, the research could easily have become extractive. A researcher who enters emotionally complex spaces without doing the inner work of reflexivity, without building reciprocal relationships, and without acknowledging

their own emotional responses, risks turning participants into sources of data rather than recognising them as co-creators of meaning. As Fisher and Monahan (2023) argue, emotional labour is not a byproduct but a core component of ethically and methodologically robust research. Ignoring this dimension not only harms relationships, but also diminishes the trust, richness, and depth that participatory research can produce.

Reciprocity

Reciprocity was a value intentionally woven throughout every aspect of this project, not as a simple exchange, but as an ethic of mutual respect, benefit, and accountability. Inspired by Trainor and Ahlgren Bouchard (2013), we understood reciprocity as a holistic principle that must be embedded across the entire research journey. For me, this meant ensuring that co-researchers were materially and professionally recognised as contributors: they were employed as research assistants by the University of Sheffield and undertook a Level 2 NVQ in peer research methods. This commitment extended beyond formal recognition. We considered emotional, relational, and developmental forms of reciprocity. Co-researchers were provided with consistent support, skill development opportunities, and reflective space to process the emotional content of the work. We prioritised relationship-building, ensuring the project was not extractive but instead promoted a sense of shared ownership and growth. Decision-making processes were made transparent and collaborative and spaces created for ongoing feedback and development.

This value of reciprocity demanded that we continually ask: what are the co-researchers gaining from this? How is the process itself part of the benefit, not just the outcome? Without this lens, participatory methods risk becoming performative. Simply involving people with lived experience without ensuring mutuality can become a form of exploitation dressed up as inclusion. True reciprocity required ongoing attentiveness to power dynamics, an openness to rebalancing roles, and a willingness to let go of traditional academic control in favour of genuine shared meaning making.

Empathy as Practice

Empathy was not a soft, sentimental add-on to this research; it was a deliberate, active practice that shaped how relationships were formed and how conversations were held. Drawing from Douglas (2022), we treated empathy as an intentional action, one that supports presence, trust, and connection. It was not simply about 'feeling with' someone, but about being attuned, listening deeply, and creating emotionally safe spaces. Empathy shaped our methods: from the use of emotional touchpoint cards at the start and end of

sessions, to the slow and deliberate building of relationships before any data collection began. We approached empathy as a skill to be practised not presumed, and one that required reflexivity and emotional labour. This was particularly important in a context where participants shared experiences of trauma, loss, and exploitation. We recognised the ethical weight of asking individuals to revisit traumatic or complex life events, and empathy guided us to proceed gently, never prioritising data over the person in front of us.

Knowledge Equity

At the heart of this project is a commitment to knowledge equity: the belief that lived experience is not secondary to academic expertise but a valid and vital form of knowing in its own right. This principle aligns with broader calls for epistemic justice (Fricker, 2007; Bellingham et al, 2021) and pluralistic ways of knowing that challenge hierarchies of knowledge production (Lazaroiu, 2012; Smith, 2012). By centering the voices of care experienced young people, the research does not simply include them as data sources, but as co-creators of meaning. Their contributions offer insights that are not only rich and contextually grounded but also more likely to inform change that is relevant, respectful, and actionable.

Including lived experience in research without addressing the structural and institutional inequities that have historically devalued such knowledge risks reinforcing the very injustices it seeks to challenge (Torre, 2009). Knowledge equity requires more than inviting people to the table; it demands transforming the table itself. It calls for recognising and redressing the power imbalances that shape who get to speak, whose voices are heard, and what counts as legitimate knowledge (Smith, 2012; Bhattacharya, 2016).

In this study, the emphasis on knowledge equity informed every stage of the process, from co-designing the research questions to the collaborative analysis and shared authorship of findings. Co-researchers were acknowledged not just for their insights but for their interpretive contributions to the project. This approach moves beyond the extractive tendencies of conventional research, where lived experience is often mined for insights while decision-making remains in the hands of academics (Madden and Speed, 2017). Instead, the project aimed to redistribute epistemic authority, recognising that those closest to the issues often have the deepest understanding of what is needed for meaningful change.

Generative Justice

This project also drew deeply from the emerging concept of generative justice (McNeill, 2022; 2023), which emphasises relationships of solidarity, reciprocal concern, and collective

benefit. Unlike extractive models of research that prioritise institutional or academic gain, generative justice insists that value, whether material, epistemic, or social, must circulate back into the communities from which it emerges (McNeill, 2022; 2023). These values shaped how we related to each other, how we envisioned change, and how we held space for transformation. It required us to engage not just in research, but in ethical relations of care and responsibility (Tronto, 1993).

Generative justice also resonates with decolonial and feminist methodologies, which call for research practices that centre the well-being and autonomy of marginalised groups (Smith, 2012; Tuck and Yang, 2014). In this study, this meant creating structures of shared decision-making, emotional support, and long-term engagement. Knowledge and action were not extracted from co-researchers but were generated with and for them, through mutual learning, collaborative analysis, and collective reflection. As such, generative justice functioned not only as a value but as a design principle for the project. This ethos was reflected in the lasting connections formed among co-researchers and in the shared drive to contribute to change that extended beyond individual outcomes. Projects rooted in these forms of transformative justice aim to leave behind more than reports or publications, they aim to cultivate networks, confidence, and resources that support participants well after the formal research ends (Fine and Torre, 2021). Without this orientation, participatory work risks becoming short-lived or self-serving, producing outputs that reinforce institutional prestige rather than redistributing power or creating sustainable impact.

A Note of Caution

What is clear, however, is that this approach cannot be reduced to a checklist or toolkit. The guiding values outlined here are not optional extras, they are the foundation on which ethical, impactful participatory research sits. To attempt this kind of work without rooting it in reflexivity, empathy, reciprocity, and knowledge equity is not only ethically dubious, it is methodologically flawed. It risks tokenism, re-traumatisation, and the reinforcement of existing power imbalances. True participatory research demands care, time, presence, and a willingness to be changed by the process. These values are not just theoretical, they are the compass by which we navigate the work.

It is also important to reflect on the dynamics of participant recruitment. There is no doubt that the involvement of co-researchers improved the study's access to participants and made it more likely that young people with lived experience of criminal exploitation would engage with the study. However, this was not the reason why I took a participatory approach. To reduce the involvement of co-researchers to a means of gaining access would

be to completely misunderstand the reciprocal and relational principles that guided this work. Co-researchers were not gatekeepers or brokers, they were contributors whose involvement shaped the design, delivery, and interpretation of the research at every stage. The relationships they had in the community were honoured, not instrumentalised, and the trust they held was part of a wider commitment to relational and reciprocal practice. Attempting to replicate this approach for the sake of access alone would be exploitative and risk further marginalising the very communities the work aims to support.

RESEARCH DESIGN

This research project was undoubtedly ambitious in the methods it used. The mixture of qualitative methods outlined below aimed to place participants at the heart of the research and not only give the co-researchers the tools they needed to devise and carry out the research, but also to develop key skills that they could use beyond the study itself. Inspired by work carried out by Liddiard et al. (2019; 2024) and McMellon et al. (2024), the hope was that the research process in and of itself would be beneficial to the co-researchers, as well as the findings and outputs of the study. All the methods used were anchored by a Participatory Action Research (PAR) approach which saw the project recruit and pay three care experienced young people as co-researchers. The co-researchers helped design and deliver the research design described below and in doing so, they chose their own stories to form the backbone of the thesis. Following recruitment of the co-researchers, the study used the following methodological phases:

- Timeline and life-story interviews with the three young care experienced co-researchers about their experiences of the care system and of being criminally exploited.
- Semi-structured interviews with 14 people reflecting on their experiences of the care system and of being criminally exploited.

Participatory Research

The study was grounded in participatory approaches, more specifically the study was developed and carried out with young people who themselves were care experienced and had been criminally exploited. These co-researchers were involved with the planning, fieldwork, analysis, and dissemination phases of the study. In the context of research involving children and young people, Cummings and Daria (2017) propose that participatory approaches may be thought of as a response by the academic community to ensure the implementation of young people's rights to participate in research and to make a positive change towards fighting adult centrism. Co-production can be seen as one element of a

participatory approach which places the democratisation of knowledge at the heart of the research process, centring lived and living experience and in doing so aims to challenge power dynamics and social injustices (Kim, 2016). Johnson et al. (2021) suggest that participatory approaches can help communities traditionally seen as marginalised to feel empowered and therefore have significant potential for social change for system-impacted young people. Smithson and Jones (2021) argue that young people in conflict with the law are among the most marginalised in society, making co-produced research an appropriate approach for this study. Increasingly, co-production is recognised as a marker of value in social research, highlighting the importance of lived experience for capturing day-to-day realities and informing meaningful change (Atkin et al, 2020). However, full co-production across all stages of a project, from development through to analysis, knowledge exchange, and impact, remains rare. In our study, co-production was central, though not all-encompassing: while the co-researchers shaped the design and contributed to analysis, this fell short of full co-production at every stage. Sanders (2020: 20) argues that this kind of shift in research approaches is necessary to counteract the relative powerlessness care experienced children and young people often feel, with many describing care 'as something that is done to them, not with them,' leaving them with little control over their lives. Approaching research in this way is therefore vital, as it actively redistributes power, challenges dominant narratives, and creates opportunities for young people to influence the knowledge produced about their own lives.

Models of Participation

This study occupies an ambitious position within the landscape of co-production models, aligning with many of their ideals while navigating the practical constraints of doctoral research. Although the study could not be described as co-produced, an inevitability given the institutional and funding frameworks typical of a PhD, it evolved into a richly participatory project, demonstrating authentic power-sharing, deep reflexivity, and a commitment to epistemic justice. Its methodological approach resonates strongly with the established participatory models (Hart 1992; Lundy 2007; Cahill and Dadvand 2018; Shier 2001; Treseder 1997), as well as with Freire's work on dialogical participation (e.g. Freire 1970) and Fricker's theory of epistemic injustice (Fricker 2007).

Hart's (1992: 9) Ladder of Participation provides a foundational model for understanding varying levels of youth involvement, ranging from tokenism to full youth-adult partnerships. This study initially aligns with the 'adult-initiated, shared decisions with youth' rung, as the early stages of the project, namely the design and ethical approvals, were shaped

predominantly by me due to the requirements of doctoral timelines and institutional oversight. However, once the co-researchers were recruited, the project moved upward on Hart's ladder, transitioning into 'youth-initiated, shared decisions with adults (1992: 9). Co-researchers were meaningfully involved in shaping research questions, designing data collection methods, conducting interviews, and participating in analysis and dissemination. In a similar vein, the study closely follows the structure of Lundy's (2007) Model of Participation, which moves away from hierarchical ladders and instead focuses on four essential elements for meaningful participation: space, voice, audience, and influence. The study created a safe and inclusive space for the co-researchers, facilitated their voice through storytelling and narrative interviews, provided an audience for their insights through presentations and planned co-authored outputs, and ensured their influence by embedding them in all stages of the project, including data analysis and dissemination. The emphasis in Lundy's model on process rather than hierarchy is especially relevant to the ethos of the research, which continuously revisited the conditions of participation to ensure ongoing collaboration and reflection.

Helen Cahill's (2018) framework of seven domains, purpose, positioning, perspective, power relations, protection, place, and process, offers perhaps the most precise reflection of the study's methodological landscape. The purpose of the research was firmly anchored in a commitment to justice and reform, explicitly aimed at amplifying the voices of care experienced young people impacted by child criminal exploitation (CCE). The positioning of co-researchers as equal collaborators, with formal contracts, qualifications, and naming rights in the final outputs, demonstrates a break from tokenistic models. Power relations were continually interrogated and addressed, including through reflexive practice and shared experiences (e.g.: the mutual sharing of personal timelines). The place, both literal and figurative, of collaboration was crafted through activities like a co-analysis three-day retreat in Wales, while the process of research was intentionally open, iterative, and attuned to the emotional and epistemic needs of all participants. Similarly, the study reflects many of the principles in Shier's (2001: 10) Pathways to Participation. In particular, the project reached Shier's highest level of participation, that 'Children share power and responsibility for decision-making'. The institution, despite its inherent constraints, made space for this level of participation through adaptations to hiring procedures, flexible support structures, and ethical frameworks that legitimised the co-researchers' input at all stages. While full organisational change was beyond the remit of the project, the study represents what Shier would consider an advanced pathway towards institutional commitment to participation.

Phil Treseder's (1997) non-hierarchical model of participation emphasises the contextual appropriateness of various modes of involvement. From this perspective, the study's evolving structure, from initial adult-initiated design to co-produced execution, reflects a responsive, context-sensitive approach. Rather than forcing a rigid ladder logic, the study allowed for flexible degrees of participation, all of which met a baseline of informed, respectful, and empowering engagement. Importantly, Treseder's (1997: 20) framing encourages critical questions such as 'Is this the highest level of participation possible under current conditions?', a question this research explicitly addressed and revisited throughout.

Beyond these participation-specific models, the study also aligns with Paulo Freire's (1970) pedagogical principles, particularly his emphasis on dialogue, co-creation, and critical consciousness. The co-researchers were not merely recipients of training or assistants in data collection; they were engaged in praxis, the reciprocal cycle of reflection and action that Freire sees as central to liberation. Their involvement in shaping the second phase of the research, including developing informed consent materials and deciding on inclusive methods, speaks to the Freirean ideal of restoring people's humanity by enabling them to 'name the world' (1970: 69) and act to change it. My reflexive fieldnotes, which detail the emotionally rich interactions that took place in this project, further reveal the project's commitment to dialogical and relational research practices. They capture not only the content of exchanges but also the dynamics of listening, responsiveness, and mutual vulnerability, illustrating how knowledge was co-constructed in the moment between myself and the co-researchers. Additionally, the study's ethical stance is deeply influenced by Miranda Fricker's (2007) theory of epistemic injustice. It challenges testimonial injustice by deliberately centring the voices and knowledge of care experienced young people, not as data sources but as co-theorisers. Through shared authorship, co-analysis, and public dissemination, the study confronts the structural marginalisation of these young people in dominant knowledge systems. It also addresses hermeneutical injustice by providing interpretive tools through narrative and reflexive dialogue that allow participants to make sense of, articulate, and share their experiences in ways that are respected and valued.

Finally, the study embodies the utopian orientation to co-production advocated by Bell and Pahl (2018: 105). It attempts to operate 'within, against, and beyond' academic structures, working within the university to produce a thesis, pushing against its limits by embedding co-researchers, and reaching beyond it by imagining new ways of doing participatory research. While the structural constraints of a PhD programme - time limitations, authorship requirements, academic rigour - prevented total transformation, the study subverted these limitations wherever possible. It included co-created outputs, made space for shared

storytelling, and actively valued care, emotion, and lived experience as epistemically rich resources.

This study does not claim to be fully co-produced in the sense suggested by some of the models discussed above, but it does represent a meaningful and rigorous enactment of participatory work within a PhD framework. It engages deeply with the principles of participation, reflexivity and care, pushing the boundaries of what doctoral research can look like.

Challenges of doing participatory work at Doctoral level

While the models above articulate ambitious visions of shared power and equitable knowledge creation, implementing co-production in doctoral research presents significant challenges.

Firstly, power dynamics and institutional hierarchies present a fundamental barrier. Although co-production calls for shared control, PhD students remain embedded within university systems where final accountability lies with them. Universities, funders, supervisors and examiners hold structural power, which can marginalise community voices despite the researcher's best intentions (Bell and Pahl, 2018). This can lead to what Bell and Pahl (2018) term a co-opted co-production, one that appears participatory but ultimately reinforces existing hierarchies. Role ambiguity compounds this difficulty. Co-researchers may expect shared ownership over data, findings, and outputs, while the PhD structure requires individual authorship and academic rigour. Doctoral students can therefore experience tensions between their participatory commitments and academic obligations, leading to potential conflict, ethical dilemmas about authorship, and questions of legitimacy (Banks et al. 2018).Time constraints are also significant. Genuine participatory processes require time to build trust, develop relationships, and adapt research questions collaboratively. Yet doctoral programmes are time-bound, often requiring submission within three to four years. The open-ended, cyclical nature of participatory research can be at odds with the linear and product-driven nature of PhD milestones (Banks et al. 2018). Methodological tensions may also arise between academic standards and participatory epistemologies. Community partners may prioritise actionable insights or creative outputs, while universities require theoretical depth and formal presentation. Balancing these different expectations without undermining either constituency is a delicate task (Bell and Pahl, 2018). Finally, emotional and ethical labour is heightened in participatory work. PhD students often carry the weight of managing relationships, resolving conflicts, and mediating between community and academic interests. This emotional labour can lead to burnout, especially in

the absence of institutional support or prior experience with community-based work (Banks et al. 2018).

In this study, overcoming many of the practical and institutional barriers to conducting participatory, ethical research was not simply a matter of following formal procedures, it was fundamentally about relationships. Making things happen often relied less on established processes and more on interpersonal connection, persistence, and navigating informal networks within the university. Building positive relationships with academic staff, administrative teams, and IT personnel was instrumental. While these colleagues often insisted, they were 'just doing their jobs', I was acutely aware of the extent to which their willingness to go the extra mile felt like a favour, particularly when navigating non-standard requests related to payments, data security, or ethical procedures. My background as a mature student helped significantly in navigating these complexities. Returning to academia with a strong academic foundation, a First in my undergraduate degree and a Distinction in my Masters, gave me confidence in my legitimacy as a researcher. I also knew the department well and felt comfortable approaching staff, asking questions, and admitting when I did not understand something. Importantly, I did not fear 'looking stupid,' which is a barrier I believe disproportionately affects students who enter PhD study straight from formal education, without the benefit of prior professional roles.

Through conversations with other mature PhD students, I saw a pattern: those with established careers and life experience were often better positioned to challenge bureaucratic obstacles, such as rigid rules around participant reimbursement. For example, some were able to successfully negotiate the use of cash over vouchers, despite institutional resistance rooted in paternalistic assumptions (e.g. concerns over misuse). These victories were not achieved through formal channels alone, but through the ability to frame persuasive arguments, ask the right questions, and identify the right people to speak to. This reflects a broader concern: not all students have equal access to the social capital and confidence required to advocate for ethical and inclusive research practices. For many doctoral students, particularly those younger or less institutionally embedded, these informal barriers can significantly undermine their ability to carry out participatory work. In my case, some degree of confidence, lived experience, and familiarity with the institutional landscape were critical in overcoming these challenges and ensuring the integrity of the project.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness is a foundational concept in qualitative and participatory research, replacing traditional notions of validity and reliability with criteria that are more appropriate for

collaborative, context-rich inquiries. Rather than aiming for objective detachment, participatory research focuses on co-constructing knowledge with participants. Trustworthiness, therefore, reflects the degree to which findings are credible, contextually relevant, ethically grounded, and genuinely reflective of participants lived and living experiences (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Lennie, 2005).

Lincoln and Guba (1985) introduced four key criteria for trustworthiness in qualitative research: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. In participatory contexts, these criteria are infused with relational and ethical considerations. Credibility is achieved when findings resonate with participants and accurately reflect their experiences, often through techniques like prolonged engagement, triangulation, and member checking (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Transferability refers to the extent to which findings can be applied in other contexts, supported by detailed, 'thick' descriptions that allow others to judge applicability. Dependability focuses on the stability of the research process over time, typically documented through audit trails. Confirmability ensures that findings are shaped by participants' voices rather than researcher bias, supported by reflexive journaling and transparent analytic procedures.

Participatory researchers also highlight the importance of authenticity and relational ethics in evaluating trustworthiness (Rossman and Rallis, 2010). Authenticity includes fairness, ensuring all voices are heard, and catalytic authenticity, meaning the research contributes to change or empowerment. These values align closely with co-production, where participants are not just data sources but co-creators of knowledge, helping to define research questions, interpret data, and validate conclusions (Israel et al. 1998). Reflexivity plays a key role in maintaining trustworthiness. Researchers must continually examine their own positionality, biases, and the influence of their role in the research process. This is especially critical in participatory work, where the line between researcher and participant is intentionally blurred. Reflexive practice helps build trust, ensures transparency, and validates interpretations (Mertens, 2009). Ethically, trustworthiness is underpinned by relational accountability, a concept rooted in Indigenous and feminist methodologies which emphasises the importance of long-term, respectful, and reciprocal relationships (Wilson, 2008; Smith, 2012). In this context, trustworthiness is not merely a technical standard but a moral and relational commitment. As Rossman and Rallis (2010) argue, the trustworthiness of a study can be judged by how ethically and respectfully relationships were handled.

Ultimately, trustworthiness in participatory research is deeply embedded in how the research is conducted ethically, collaboratively, and transparently. It goes beyond technical rigor to include moral obligations to the community, such as reciprocity, fair representation, and the

potential for social change. As the National Institutes of Health (NIH), Community Engagement Alliance (CEAL) initiative (2021) asserts, trustworthiness and reciprocity are interlinked: communities must see that the research honours their knowledge, contributes to their goals, and is conducted with genuine care and accountability.

Ensuring Trustworthiness

This study demonstrates a high degree of trustworthiness, grounded in the principles of participatory research, emotional and relational integrity, and reflexive praxis. This study has sought to draw from Lincoln and Guba's (1985) framework of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, as well as authenticity and relational ethics (Rossman and Rallis, 2010; Wilson, 2008).

This study's credibility was strengthened by the deep, ongoing relationships developed with the co-researchers and to some extent the participants. Prolonged engagement through months of collaborative preparation promoted trust and emotional safety amongst me and the co-researchers, which enabled more authentic and meaningful contributions from all involved. The use of emotional check-in tools whenever we met, regular debriefings, and intentional reflexivity further supported the richness of the data collected. Importantly, co-analysis was embedded in the process. The co-researchers were actively involved in reflecting on themes, shaping interpretations, and bringing their own insights to the findings. This collaborative interpretation process enhanced the contextual relevance and accuracy of the analysis. Moreover, we checked the findings with the participants that we interviewed by sending the draft findings section back to all participants for feedback. This ensured the themes and interpretations we had developed resonated and were accurate from the perspectives of those whose experiences were represented.

Confirmability is also evident in the commitment to reflexive practice. My own positionality, emotional responses, and multiple roles (researcher, facilitator, employer, ally) were critically examined throughout. The audit trail, field diary, and co-analysis process all contribute to demonstrating that the findings are grounded in participant data rather than researcher bias. The study also exemplifies relational trustworthiness through practices rooted in empathy, care, and reciprocity. Co-researchers were employed, trained, and meaningfully involved, not only in data collection but also in shaping the process and interpreting the outcomes. These commitments reflect values of fairness, empowerment, and mutual respect.

Narrative Inquiry

Narrative inquiry is a qualitative research methodology grounded in the understanding that humans make sense of their lives through stories. Rooted in the work of scholars like Clandinin and Connelly (2000), narrative inquiry privileges lived experience and views storytelling as both a method and a form of meaning-making. In the context of participatory and co-produced research narrative inquiry offers a powerful framework for centring voices that are often marginalised and misrepresented. This study utilises narrative inquiry to co-create knowledge with care experienced co-researchers affected by CCE. The narrative method was chosen due to its capacity to value lived experience, foreground emotion, and build relationships rooted in trust, care, and reflexivity. Drawing on Clandinin's emphasis on the 'three-dimensional narrative space' (interaction, continuity, and situation), the research explored not only what was said in the stories but how stories were co-constructed within a specific temporal and social context (Clandinin, 2013: 38).

Importantly, narrative inquiry in this project was not simply a method of data collection but a relational practice. The storytelling process enabled me and the co-researchers to build rapport and trust over time, recognising that the co-researchers had histories of trauma and disrupted relationships. This aligns with Cahill and Dadvand's (2018) emphasis on ethical care, safety, and emotional labour in youth participation. The study responded to Freire's (1970) concept of praxis, the combination of reflection and action, by enabling the co-researchers to reflect critically on their experiences and co-create knowledge with me. The co-researchers were not passive subjects but active narrators of their own lives. This approach challenges dominant deficit narratives often found in policy and practice around care experienced youth and CCE. As Bell and Pahl (2018) argue, co-production has utopian potential when it reconfigures who holds power in knowledge production.

The use of storytelling also resonated with Banks et al's.(2018) community development approach to co-produced research. Stories were not just data; they were a means of connection, a form of resistance, and a method of building collective insight. The process facilitated capacity-building among co-researchers, who developed research, analytical, and reflective skills. The co-analysis retreat in Wales, for example, functioned as both a method of shared learning and a form of community-building. This retreat mirrored Clandinin's notion of the research text as collaboratively negotiated space (Clandinin, 2013). Further, the narrative inquiry design allowed for 'vulnerability' and emotion to be treated not as risks to be managed but as integral components of ethical and transformative research. This reflects Cahill's (2010) call for participatory methods to be relational, reflexive, and responsive to emotion. Rather than following a rigid interview schedule, the project allowed for stories to

emerge in conversation, influenced by shared experiences, body language, and trust. This underscores the co-constructed nature of narrative data and aligns with the broader ethos of participatory action research (PAR).

The research also demonstrates how narrative inquiry can work 'within, against, and beyond' institutional structures (Bell and Pahl, 2018: 105). While the PhD format required a formal thesis, the project went beyond academic norms by developing youth-friendly, public-oriented, creative outputs. These included visual timelines and youth-facing reports, which were not only more accessible but also aligned with the co-researchers' desires to impact practice and policy. The flexibility of narrative inquiry allowed these outputs to emerge organically from the process.

Timelines and life story interviews

Timelines and life-story interviews with the three co-researchers were used to craft narratives of their experiences of being in care and of CCE. Often these were done chronologically, starting with early family life, moving onto talk about their involvement with the care system and then focussing on how they were recruited by criminal gangs, the nature of their exploitation and how they escaped from this victimisation, as well as their current circumstances and their hopes and wishes for the future. However, importantly all the co-researchers were given the time and space to craft these in any way that they saw fit. Therefore, they were able to highlight and place emphasis on the parts of their story that they felt were the most crucial. These narratives not only helped to provide in-depth understanding of the processes and environments that led to the co-researchers' experience of the care system and involvement in CCE but also helped us decide how to shape the second phase of the research which saw us talking to other young people about their experiences of the care system and of CCE. The life story interviews that I carried out with the co-researchers based on the timelines were an important part of this programme of research as it allowed scope for the authentic voices of the co-researchers to be heard. This also underpins the centrality of storytelling to the study. Stories help us to develop greater understanding of the subjective experiences of individuals (Wilkins, 2000; Pollock and Bono, 2013) and allows us to have greater insight into the ways in which experiences of the care system can contribute to child criminal exploitation (CCE).

Interviews

The second phase of the project was designed with the co-researchers and saw us interviewing 14 people about their experiences of being in the care system and of being criminally exploited. In discussion with the co-researchers, we agreed that semi-structured

interviews were particularly appropriate for this study given the sensitive, complex, and highly individualised nature of both care experience and child criminal exploitation (CCE). This method allowed us to maintain a flexible, participant-led approach, ensuring that the young people could shape the direction of the conversation while still enabling us to explore specific themes relevant to our research questions. Unlike structured interviews, which can be restrictive and impersonal, semi-structured formats offer a balance between consistency and adaptability, allowing researchers to probe for depth while remaining responsive to each participant's story (Bryman, 2012). This was especially important given the diversity of experiences among our participants, whose placements spanned kinship care, foster care, residential and secure settings. Semi-structured interviews also support the development of trust and rapport, which is crucial when working with young people who may have experienced trauma or mistrust of professionals (Graham et al. 2015). In line with narrative approaches, this method respects participants' autonomy and emotional boundaries, while still enabling the co-construction of meaning (Clandinin, 2013; Etherington, 2007). Moreover, the flexibility of the interview guide allowed co-researchers who often had lived experience of care themselves to adapt their style and language, further reinforcing a sense of peer-led, participatory inquiry (Boylan et al, 2019).

To summarise, the following fieldwork was carried out:

- Timeline and life-story interviews with the three young care experienced co-researchers about their experiences of the care system and of being criminally exploited.
- Semi-structured Interviews with 14 people about their reflections on their experiences of the care system and of being criminally exploited.

The next section of the chapter explores in greater detail how the study and its methods were realised.

METHODOLOGY AND PLANNING

Co-researchers

A critical factor in the success of this project was the recruitment and involvement of co-researchers with lived experience of being in care and child criminal exploitation (CCE). Recruitment commenced following ethical approval and constituted a complex and protracted process due to institutional challenges. The university's existing systems were not designed to facilitate the employment of young people as co-researchers, particularly those

facing significant barriers to employment. This necessitated extensive problem-solving and negotiation, particularly by professional services staff who worked within departmental and university-level bureaucracies.

After securing funding from the Welland Trust and obtaining internal approvals, collaboration with the Human Resources (HR) department and professional services staff was essential to adapting the standard Research Assistant job profile. The revised job description prioritised lived experience over conventional academic qualifications, reflecting the unique requirements of the role. This adapted profile and corresponding person specification was required to undergo HR approval before the commencement of formal recruitment.

A key institutional requirement was the inclusion of an interview process involving two university staff members, in alignment with the university's recruitment standards. This posed potential challenges as the formality of interviews could be intimidating for prospective co-researchers, many of whom had no prior interview experience. To mitigate this, careful consideration was given to designing a supportive and inclusive process. For example, Dr Katie Ellis (University of Sheffield), an academic with substantial experience in participatory research and working with care experienced young people, was involved in the interviews. Her expertise provided a critical understanding of the potential challenges faced by applicants, ensuring a more empathetic and accessible approach.

The recruitment strategy was further refined by simplifying the application process. Rather than requiring a formal application, candidates were invited to express their interest through an email, letter, or message outlining their motivation and alignment with the criteria. The eligibility criteria were intentionally broad, emphasising lived experience in the care system and CCE in any form. This approach ensured that the process was not only compliant with institutional requirements but also inclusive and tailored to the unique needs of the target group.

A total of 18 applications were received for the three available positions. However, only five applicants met the essential criteria outlined in the person specification. All five eligible candidates were shortlisted for interviews; however, one candidate withdrew prior to the scheduled interview date. To ensure accessibility and equity, the interviews were conducted online via Google Meet. This approach was selected to accommodate candidates residing in various parts of the country, for whom travelling to Sheffield for in-person interviews would have posed significant logistical challenges. The following entry captures my thoughts immediately after the interviews:

Field notes entry (21/3/23):

'We've just done the interviews for the co-researchers with Katie, we interviewed four people and they've just been brilliant. So amazing, and I think we're going off the positions to three of them. Britney, Alice, and Holly. Holly is only 18 and probably the most recent care-leaver and has the most recent and probably the most experience of criminal exploitation and being in lots of different settings. She's currently on a section in a mental health hospital and not getting out until May or June but she would be amazing at the project. I had a nice chat with Katie afterwards about how we offer Holly some hope and we give her a chance to do something she's really passionate about, making changes and supporting care experienced people who have had similar experiences to her. I just think that all of the ethics stuff in terms of ethics as a tick box exercise will tell me that I shouldn't be working with someone who I may re-traumatise, who is already potentially in hospital because of those sorts of experiences. But I feel like we're offering her hope. She's not got any formal qualifications, and she can get an NVQ out of it. I feel like we should be able to make this project work for her. Potentially the other really lovely thing about it is I feel like Britney and Alice could be aspirational for her, that she could see where she could be in four years' time, where she could be in seven years. Britney's got child and Alice is at university about to do her master's and they've had experiences akin to her own. I just feel like she's the person I got involved in this project for. I'm feeling really emotional about the whole thing, like how well it went, just how potentially amazing it could be for the project.'

The demographics of the co-researchers are provided in Table 2 below.

NAME	AGE	GENDER IDENTITY	ETHNICITY
Alice	30	Woman	White
Holly	19	Woman	White
Brittany	25	Woman	White

Table 2: Demographics of co-researchers

Induction Process for Co-researchers

Alice and Brittany began their roles as co-researchers on 1 May 2023, and Holly joined on 1 July 2023, with all employed at grade 6.1 until 29 February 2024. A hybrid induction allowed Alice to join online from Wales, while Brittany attended in person. The session focused on setting boundaries to avoid re-traumatisation, discussing how co-researchers wished to be

credited, and ensuring their comfort with sharing personal stories. Emotional touchpoint cards were used to gauge feelings, and both Alice and Brittany reported feeling 'happy, supported, and trusted.'

NVQ Qualification for Co-researchers

To ensure reciprocity, co-researchers were compensated equitably and offered formal recognition through a Level 2 NVQ in peer research methods, provided by The Young Foundation. As Principal Investigator, I developed a framework linking their work and training to the qualification's learning outcomes. The NVQ, while valuable for future opportunities, posed challenges due to time constraints and the co-researchers' personal circumstances. To address this, we set aside specific days to complete the qualification collaboratively. At present, co-researchers are halfway through, with plans to finalise their NVQs in the coming months.

Timelines and life story interviews

When the co-researchers started, we talked through what timelines were and I asked them to do their own timeline prior to carrying out the life story interviews. The timelines formed a useful elicitation device for the subsequent life story interviews. Most of the co-researchers carried out their timelines in chronological order. I provided all the co-researchers with sharpies, flip chart paper and notebooks and told them they were free to do their timeline in any way they wanted to. Brittany and Holly chose to draw out their timelines one in a book, one on paper and Alice chose to do hers on the computer, adding in digital photographs at memorable points.

I was keen to do the timelines with the co-researchers because it was important for me to share my own timeline with them. This did two things for the project. Firstly, it started to build a relationship of trust between us, that we were sharing things about ourselves that we didn't necessarily share with everybody. Secondly, it was a good way for us to get to know each other. I believe that through sharing my own timeline I opened up about some of the most difficult parts of my life as I was asking them to do that about theirs and we talked about these together. I also feel the sharing of the timeline was useful in terms of attempting to equalise some of the power imbalances that are obvious within any type of research hierarchy. Through sharing the timelines, we opened ourselves up to being vulnerable and this vulnerability was met with empathy which helped build trust and set the tone for the rest of the study. At the end of our project all the co-researchers spoke to my supervisors about the experience of working on the project and emphasised the importance of us getting to

know each other at the beginning of the project. For them, central to this was the trust that we had established at the beginning through the sharing of our timelines and suggesting that this made the relationship between us feel more equal from the start.

The timelines we all made were shared at the start of the life story interviews. I carried out one to one life story interviews with all the three co-researchers. Life story interviews are a well-established method of narrative enquiry within qualitative research that are particularly useful when the intention is to make sense of sometimes complex life experiences (Brannen, 2013). Built on our traditions of oral storytelling, life story and narrative interviews leave space for the storyteller, the listener to better understand their own journeys and therefore facilitates meaning making (Atkinson, 2012). Consequently, I asked the co-researchers to talk me through the timelines they had made; the sessions were very unstructured and felt like I was listening to a story being told. There were many points of conversation when I would ask clarifying questions or empathise with the experiences that Alice, Brittany and Holly had been through. All the life stories were two to three hours in length and were recorded and transcribed.

Interviews with participants with experience of CCE

Alongside the timelines being developed and the life story interviews being carried out, the co-researchers and I started to develop the second part of the study. All that we knew at this point was that we wanted to examine the experiences of other young people who had been victims of CCE. How we designed the study was completely open for the co-researchers to decide. What follows is an extract from my field note diary that details some of the conversations we had during the design phase of the project.

Field notes entry (21/6/23):

> *'Last week we spent a lot of time thinking about what real informed consent is, what methods we can use and how we go about recruiting for the participants we want to interview. We also talked about how we ensure that the care that we have taken with each other continues as we broaden out the research. We have spent time thinking about the consequences of talking to other people about their experiences when we don't necessarily have the trust that we have established between us with others. This led to some really interesting conversations around gatekeeper organisations and the networks that Alice and Brittany are connected to. We were keen to try and ensure that we speak to people that we know have support around them so that when we leave that situation, they have people who they can go to if it brings up*

issues for them. We started having further conversations about different types of methods and what methods we could use. I spoke about how focus groups were the methods in the original ethics application. Brit and Alice were so insightful about this, questioning why we have to focus on a specific method. They were keen that participants were free to respond to us in any way that they wanted to, in a way that was most comfortable to them. Of course, this sparked lots of questions for me around analysis and consistency but actually what I hear from them is that they've appreciated the space that I have given them to tell me their stories and now they want to do that for others.'

This moment reflects an important aspect of reflexivity in the research process, as it highlights the need to critically examine my own assumptions, perspectives, and approach when doing collaborative research. This process of reflexivity led to the realisation that the initial research questions were framed in an overly academic manner, underscoring the influence of my own positionality and the potential for disconnection from the lived experiences of my co-researchers and participants. Brittany and Alice's feedback shifted the focus from an intellectualised framing to one that prioritised emotional resonance. This reflexive engagement prompted a recalibration of the research approach, ensuring that the questions were not only accessible to participants but also aligned with the priorities and perspectives of those with lived experience. This illustrates how reflexivity can enhance the inclusivity and relevance of research by fostering a deeper awareness of how academic norms might inadvertently marginalise or overlook essential emotional and human aspects.

Recruitment of interview participants

As described above, many of the individuals we engaged in the second phase of the research were accessed through the personal and professional networks of the co-researchers. This approach led us to adopt a form of convenience sampling, shaped primarily by who the co-researchers already knew and trusted (Lopez and Whitehead, 2013). While this strategy provided a natural entry point for participant recruitment, particularly given the sensitive nature of the topic, it also profoundly influenced the scope and direction of the research.

Because the co-researchers' networks were closely tied to their own experiences, the sample reflected environments and settings familiar to them, particularly hostel accommodation, which emerged as a recurring and influential context in many of the narratives we heard. This pattern was not initially anticipated but became central to the

findings, offering rich, insider insights into how housing instability and peer dynamics in these spaces could increase susceptibility to exploitation. This reinforced the importance of allowing the research design to remain flexible and responsive to participants' realities rather than rigidly adhering to pre-set categories or expectations.

Ultimately, we spoke to 14 participants, comprising four men and 10 women with ages ranging from 18 to 33 years old. All participants had experiences of being in care and involvement in or proximity to CCE. This gender distribution, while not intentional, reflects the demographics of the co-researchers' networks and underscores one of the potential limitations of convenience sampling: the lack of control over the representativeness of the sample (Etikan et al. 2016). While the findings generated were deeply meaningful and aligned with the lived experiences of our co-researchers, they may not capture the full breadth of variation across care experienced populations or across different regions and service systems.

Another challenge of using co-researchers' networks lie in the potential for role conflict. In several cases, the co-researchers had prior peer or support relationships with participants, which could blur the lines between researcher and friend or confidant. This raised ethical and emotional questions about how to maintain boundaries, confidentiality, and emotional safety, both for the participants and for the co-researchers themselves (Chavez, 2008; Banks et al. 2018). We addressed this by offering support throughout the recruitment and interview process, encouraging the co-researchers to reflect on their roles, and creating space to discuss any dilemmas or discomforts as they arose. For example, when one co-researcher, Alice, suggested interviewing a peer who was struggling with her mental health, we decided collectively not to proceed in order to prioritise her wellbeing. Managing this as a team not only helped resolve the ethical dilemma but also reinforced our shared commitment to care and responsibility within the research process.

Furthermore, relying on pre-existing networks can risk reproducing existing social silences, unintentionally excluding individuals who are more isolated or disconnected from peer communities (Bryman, 2012). Young people with less stable peer ties, those in secure placements, or those marginalised due to their gender identity, neurodivergence, or background may not have been reached through our network-based approach. This highlights a broader equity issue in participatory research: that inclusion is shaped not only by method but by the relational geographies of who has access to whom (Nind, 2014).

Despite these limitations, the sampling approach had significant strengths. Most importantly, it enhanced trust and rapport, which are vital when exploring experiences marked by trauma,

stigma, and institutional involvement. Participants were often more willing to open up knowing they were connected to a peer who understood their context and respected their experiences. This helped counter some of the mistrust that is commonly reported by care experienced youth when interacting with professionals and researchers (Holland et al. 2008).

Interview participants had diverse and often complex experiences of the UK care system, including placements in kinship care, foster care, residential care, secure care, and semi-independent living arrangements while still subject to care orders. This heterogeneity added valuable depth to our understanding of how care pathways intersect with vulnerability to child criminal exploitation (CCE). However, the sample also reflected some of the limitations of our recruitment approach. Notably, the vast majority of participants were white, which we recognise as a significant limitation given the disproportionate targeting of young people of colour in CCE contexts (Firmin, 2020; Bernard and Harris, 2019). The role of race and structural inequality in shaping both 'vulnerability' and institutional responses is well-documented, and future research must do more to centre the experiences of racially minoritised young people in care (Gabe and Calvert, 2020).

Interviews

In total, four interviews were conducted in person, and ten were conducted online using Google Meet. This was largely in response to participant preferences but also due to geographical distance from Sheffield, where I and some of the co-researchers were based. Digital methods offered a practical and accessible solution, aligning with recent scholarship that highlights how online interviewing can reduce barriers for participants, especially those with trauma histories or mobility constraints, while still enabling rapport and depth (Archibald et al. 2019; Lobe, Morgan and Hoffman, 2020). While face-to-face interviews have traditionally been considered the gold standard in qualitative research, we found that online interviews often allowed for greater flexibility and comfort, especially when participants were given control over timing, setting, and levels of disclosure.

Each interview was carried out by me and one of the co-researchers, with pairing decisions based on pre-existing relationships and trust. This decision aligns with best practice in participatory and trauma-informed research, where relational dynamics can play a critical role in enabling safe and meaningful engagement (Cahill and Dadvand, 2018). In three cases, due to scheduling issues, co-researchers interviewed participants they did not already know. While these interviews were still rich and productive, we observed that the most emotionally open and conversational interviews tended to emerge when trust had previously been established between the co-researcher and participant. This reflects findings

from other peer-led and co-produced studies, which emphasise the importance of peer familiarity and shared experience in eliciting honest, in-depth narratives (Boylan et al, 2019).

One of the most notable features of the interviews was their conversational tone. Rather than adhering rigidly to a structured interview schedule, we approached each session with flexibility and responsiveness, enabling participants to lead the direction of the conversation. This aligns with narrative inquiry and trauma-informed approaches, which recommend minimising power imbalances and allowing participants to tell their story in their own way (Clandinin, 2013; Etherington, 2007). All the interviews lasted over an hour, reflecting the participants' willingness to engage deeply with the questions and themes. We began each interview by inviting participants to choose a pseudonym, which was used not only for anonymity but also to help them later identify their contributions when reviewing the findings. This helped reinforce their ownership and agency within the study and supported our later participant-checking process.

After each interview, the Google Meet automatic transcriptions were downloaded, reviewed for accuracy and coherence, and then anonymised by the co-researcher who had conducted the session. These transcripts were then uploaded to a shared and secure university drive. Once transcription and anonymisation were confirmed, all audio recordings were permanently deleted in line with our ethical commitments and data protection protocols. The process of co-researchers taking responsibility for checking and preparing their own interview transcripts contributed to their sense of research ownership and aligns with participatory best practice (Banks et al. 2018). The table below provides basic demographic information about the interview participants.

NAME	AGE	GENDER IDENTITY	ETHNICITY
James	24	Man	White
Dolly	24	Woman	White
Ed	32	Man	White
Andi	23	Man	White
Francis	26	Man	White
Lilly	29	Woman	White
Harriet	18	Woman	White

Chanel	24	Woman	White
John	26	Man	White
Chelsea	29	Woman	Dual heritage
Hannah	33	Woman	White

Table 3: Demographic information of interview participants

ANALYSIS

Reflexive Thematic Analysis

Braun and Clarke (2019; 2021) and Clarke and Braun (2018) suggest that reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) is a methodological approach often used in qualitative research to analyse interview data. RTA was deemed suitable for this project for several reasons. RTA is a flexible process allowing us to adapt the analysis to fit our specific research questions and context. This flexibility was particularly useful in the study due to the number of people involved in analysing the data as well as the amount of data that we had. Additionally, Jankowski et al. (2017) argue that the process of reflexive thematic analysis stems from feminist methodologies and therefore lends itself well to the deep understanding and analysis that is required of the narrative accounts that our participants offered. Terry and Hayfield (2020) go on to suggest that RTA also allows us to gain a deeper understanding of the underlying themes and patterns within our data. It helped us focus on the real meaning of participants' experiences and perspectives, leading to a rich and nuanced understanding of their experiences of being in care and of CCE. Reflexivity is an integral part of this study and therefore it made sense that we used a process of analysis that encourages reflexivity among researchers. Throughout the whole study we aimed to be reflexive about the processes we undertook, however this was even more important in the analysis phase of the study where it was essential that we took the time to actively reflect on our own perspectives, thoughts, and feelings. At the beginning of this chapter, I discussed the importance of this work building from the ground up and therefore it was important that the process of analysis of the findings was also iterative in its approach. As described by Braun and Clarke (2021), the process of RTA saw us revisiting the data, refining our codes and reconsidering generated themes. Perhaps most importantly to us, given the process of co-analysis that we were undertaking was the accessibility of the process that we chose to use. RTA is relatively accessible to researchers with varying levels of experience in qualitative research methods and while it most definitely requires careful attention to detail, it does not necessarily require specialised training or expertise beyond an understanding of qualitative research principles.

Co-analysis

While participatory and co-produced research increasingly emphasises collaboration in data collection and dissemination, the process of co-analysis -working with participants or co-researchers to make sense of the data - remains a developing and underutilised practice. Despite growing recognition of the importance of shared power and epistemic justice in research with marginalised communities, analysis is often retained by academic researchers alone, creating a disconnect between data generation and interpretation. Yet co-analysis holds transformative potential: it invites participants into the heart of meaning-making, values their lived knowledge, and challenges hierarchies that persist even in participatory settings (Jacquez, Vaughn and Wagner, 2013; Bigby, Frawley and Ramcharan, 2014)

Literature in this area demonstrates that co-analysis not only enhances the authenticity of research findings but also strengthens participant ownership, empowerment, and skill development. These insights strongly resonate with my own approach to this research, particularly regarding our co-analysis process. A consistent theme is that involving participants in the analysis stage deepens the interpretive power of the research. For example, in Ozer et al's (2010) Participatory Action Research (PAR) project with middle school students, young people reviewed survey results and interview transcripts to identify recurring themes, offering interpretations rooted in their lived experiences. This co-analysis led to more meaningful outcomes and influenced school reforms. Similarly, in this project, I recognised the importance of not just collecting data with care- experienced co-researchers but also analysing it collaboratively to ensure that emerging themes were relevant, resonant, and grounded in the realities of those most affected by CCE.

Our analysis process was deliberately staged to allow for depth and reflection. Initially, I analysed the life story interviews myself using reflexive thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2019; 2022). This involved systematically reading all transcripts, identifying meaningful segments aligned with our research questions, and coding these sections with interpretive labels. From there, I developed preliminary themes, refining them by examining patterns and relationships within the data. Crucially, I did not share this initial analysis with co-researchers beforehand, as I wanted to preserve the authenticity of their interpretive lens and explore whether their insights echoed or diverged from my own.

The remainder of the data analysis took place during a weekend in Wales, where the co-researchers and I applied the same reflexive thematic analysis process together to all the interviews with participants that we carried out. The co-researchers had received prior training in analysis as part of their NVQ in peer research methods, equipping them with the tools to engage meaningfully in this work. However, on the first day we revisited this training

before we focused on familiarisation, reading transcripts, taking notes, and comparing interpretations. We then collaboratively developed codes and re-read the transcripts with these codes in mind to identify recurring patterns. On the final day, we clustered codes into themes and mapped them against our research questions, quite literally placing the questions on the wall to see which themes answered which inquiries.

The images below were taken during the two days of co-analysis. More pictures of the weekend can be found in the Appendices section of the thesis.

FIGURE 1: The co-researchers reading all the transcripts to familiarise themselves with the content.

FIGURE 2: Notes that each of the co-researchers and I made about each interview transcript.
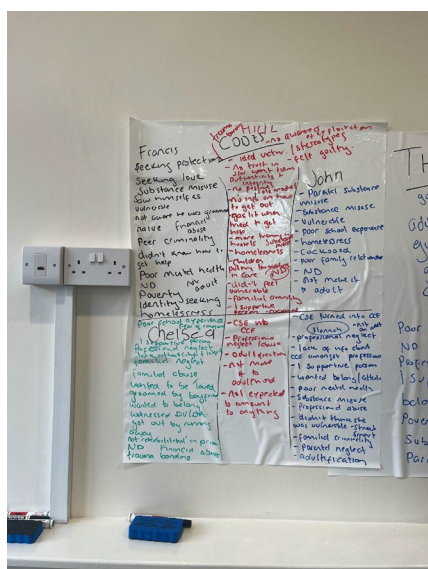
FIGURE 3: The initial codes that we came up with based on the notes that we took on the transcripts.

FIGURE 4: The themes that were generated from the codes.

This model of shared analysis echoes the process described by Dworski-Riggs and Langhout (2010), who trained young people in a youth empowerment programme to co-analyse interview data and derive themes through group discussion. Their contextual understanding was invaluable in shaping findings that resonated with youth realities, much as our co-researchers' lived experience of the care system enriched the interpretive quality of our work. Another valuable comparison comes from Bigby et al. (2014), whose inclusive research with adults with learning disabilities featured accessible group coding methods using visual aids and discussions. While our co-researchers did not require such adaptations, we similarly structured our process to accommodate diverse ways of engaging

with the data, through written notes, verbal discussion, and visual theme mapping. This helped ensure that each co-researcher's perspective was heard, and that collective meaning-making was at the heart of our analysis.

Photovoice methods, such as those developed by Wang and Burris (1997), highlight the power of participatory analysis. In their work with rural women in China, photographs served as a medium for dialogue, with participants interpreting and thematising their own images. Although our study did not use visual data in the same way, the ethos of enabling participants to lead interpretation aligned with our approach, particularly using creative tools like wall charts, sticky notes, and collaborative theme mapping. Moreover, the 'Analysis Fest' described in the Changes Project (Community Tool Box, n.d.) showcases how co-researchers with varied literacy skills developed innovative, non-traditional methods for analysing qualitative data. While language was not a barrier in our team, all the co-researchers were neurodiverse, which required us to thoughtfully adapt our processes to ensure inclusivity and accessibility. During our retreat in Wales, I sought to create a similarly flexible and empowering environment, intellectually rigorous yet responsive to different ways of thinking and engaging.

What stands out across the literature is the dual benefit of co-analysis: it improves the relevance and richness of the research findings and fosters empowerment and skill-building among participants. Jacquez et al. (2013) note that when youth analyse data about their communities, they not only deepen the research but also develop leadership, critical thinking, and civic agency. This mirrors the impact our analysis sessions had on co-researchers, who expressed pride in shaping the research narrative and understanding how their contributions could inform change. A reflexive fieldnote entry taken during the co-analysis retreat captures these processes:

Field notes entry (23/2/24):
> *'We have had the most amazing time going through every single interview transcript that we've done, everybody reading everything looking for commonality. We wrote lots of different familiarisation notes from the reading on post its and stuck them up on pieces of paper on the wall, and we then went through a process of trying to then distil those down into codes and subsequent themes. At times this was difficult because there were points where the co-researchers were saying these are really important points of my story, but they weren't seeing that represented in the commonality of the other interviewees. I think that was difficult for them, and I tried to spend some time reassuring them that in their own sections where they got to write their own case study in and through the counter storytelling methods that we will use,*

they'll get to talk about those elements that are important to them. However, we also have to kind of look at common issues and messages that are coming out of the findings and that would be about consistent things that we're seeing across all the different interviews that we did.

We just had such a fun time. I've got some really lovely photos, but we also worked really hard. One of the things that is lovely to see is how Brittany and Holly's relationship has developed, where it feels like Brit has become a kind of big sister to her. She offers her lots of advice, and they spend time together out of the project and support each other. She knows Brit's partner 'cause they spent time together outside of the project.

We all went out for dinner in the evening. Alice had booked a nice restaurant for us to go out to dinner and Holly told us she had never been to a restaurant before. Literally never been in a restaurant where somebody comes to your table and takes your order. She didn't know what to order off the menu, so I think it was quite challenging, but in a way I'm glad we were able to be there with her for that so she could have that experience with people that she knew it was safe to be vulnerable with.

Checking back

As part of our commitment to ethical representation, we incorporated a process of participant validation following the initial drafting of the findings chapter. Once the draft was complete, we sent it to all of the interview participants along with a reminder of the pseudonym they had selected and invited them to review how their stories were represented. We asked them whether they felt the representation was accurate, respectful, and aligned with the intentions behind their contributions. We also reminded them of their right to withdraw from the study even at this late stage or change anything they felt that we had misinterpreted or misrepresented. This practice, often referred to as member checking, is widely regarded in participatory research as a way of honouring participant agency and ensuring the authenticity of findings (Birt et al, 2016; Carlson, 2010). Importantly, this was not merely a quality control exercise, it was a continuation of our collaborative relationship with participants, recognising them as co-inquirers in the meaning-making process (Reason and Bradbury, 2008).

This stage also helped to address potential power imbalances in research writing, particularly the tendency for academic narratives to overwrite or selectively filter participant experiences. By returning the findings to the people who had shared their lives with us, we

actively resisted extractive research practices and reinforced a culture of mutual respect (Torre, 2009; Banks et al, 2018). This process opened up space for participants to challenge, clarify, or refine their contributions. In doing so, we aimed to reduce the risk of testimonial injustice (Fricker, 2007), whereby participants' voices are unintentionally distorted, diminished, or decontextualised in the final research outputs. It was also a moment of relational accountability, giving participants the opportunity to reclaim their stories and ensure they felt accurately seen and heard in the final product. In practice, none of the participants asked for changes, which suggested that they felt their contributions had been represented fairly and respectfully.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has outlined the innovative and multifaceted methodological approach underpinning this study, highlighting its novel contribution to the field of participatory research. It has detailed the aspirations driving the study, the core principles that guided its development, and the challenges navigated in delivering this participatory research project. This study tackles a complex and insidious topic within the structured context of doctoral research and has sought to push the boundaries of traditional research methodologies and offer a framework for future participatory studies in this area.

Chapter 5: Findings

INTRODUCTION

The structure of this findings chapter follows the chronological trajectory of a child's life, aligning with the structural approach taken in the literature review. However, prior to this, the chapter will present the stories of the co-researchers as case studies, written in their own words. This section will set the scene for the chapter and offer context for the rest of the findings and discussion chapters. Following on from this, the chapter is arranged thematically based on the findings of the study. Firstly, it will consider the impact of poverty and adultification on growing up for young people. It will then explain some of the reasons that they became known to Children's Social Care, considering the role of both parental and their own mental ill health as well as the negative impact of poor school experiences. From here the chapters presents findings on the challenges of being in care, focussing on the influence of mattering and substance misuse, professional neglect and the harm caused when leaving care in an unsupported way. The next section of the chapter contextualises and connects the findings around how the young people we spoke to were groomed and exploited by criminal gangs. This starts with a discussion exploring the different types of CCE that the young people in the study faced, before considering the role of gender in CCE and the importance of identity formation. This is followed by consideration of the burden of shame that the young people we spoke to felt before reflecting on how they escaped from their criminal exploitation. The final section examines the place of generativity in the lives of the people we spoke to and will then offer some concluding remarks on the chapter.

CASE STUDIES

As described in the previous chapter, one of the drivers for carrying out this research was a need to change how young people in care and those who find themselves in conflict with the law are viewed in a deficit way. This forms part of the conversation around the victim/offender debate within CCE, which inevitably places the young people involved as less than 'ideal victims' (Christie,1996). Having worked with children and young people in conflict with the law for many years, I had long observed that media portrayals and reports from agencies such as Ofsted and HMIP often fail to reflect the strengths and potential of these young individuals. This belief was further reinforced by the skills and resilience demonstrated by the co-researchers and participants throughout the study. To capture and highlight these strengths, I believe presenting the co-researchers' stories in their own words,

prior to the overall findings, offers a meaningful way to honour their experiences and contributions within this research.

What is presented below is Brittany, Alice, and Holly's stories in their own words. It was essential for me that somewhere within this thesis they were given the opportunity to tell their stories in an unfiltered, unedited and, importantly, unanalysed way. The parts of their stories and the information they gave me about their contact with the care system and their involvement in CCE are included in the broader findings and discussion, but here the focus is on them representing their lives in the way that felt most honest and truthful for them.

Brittany

I'm Brittany Jackson and I'm 25. The first two years of my life was spent living with my mum at my grandparents as my dad wanted nothing to do with me and my mum was only 17, it was the only time in my life I was safe. At two my mum and dad entered into a relationship, and we moved into a house with him. Two years later my first brother was born with my other brother following two years later. My dad was a very violent man, he was an alcoholic and physically, emotionally and financially abused my mum also abusing me and my eldest brother. Both my parents worked so we were often left with my uncle and cousins who suffered with substance misuse. Half the time I was the one who was looking after myself and brothers while also having to take care of whoever needed babysitting if they got themself in a tangle. We had in and out involvement with the care team, but nothing was really done at this point. My dad's brother moved in with us when I was around 5, he was only a teenager himself but found himself on the wrong path and that didn't change when he came to us. Soon he was involved with gangs and drugs, often having me around when engaging in criminal activity and sometimes teaching me the 'ways of the road'. He'd taken over a house next door but one to our house and turned it into a drug den. I spent a lot of time in that house exposed to a world of drugs and criminal activity. I really looked up to him and wanted to be just like him, he was arrested in 2007. When I was 10 my mum finally left my dad, and we moved into a house down the road. She got into a relationship with a man who was pretty horrible which put a bigger strain on my relationship with her as I already blamed her for everything. My behaviour had always been erratic, and it was on even more of a downwards spiral. Once I started secondary school, I started hanging out with people older than me smoking, drinking, getting into drugs and staying out all hours getting involved in petty crime and fighting, this is when my homelessness started. I began being sent to different family members and being placed back in the care of my abusive father who

continued to abuse me and held me hostage for four months before social care put me back with my mum at 14. Once home I rekindled with an old boyfriend and moved into his dad's house shortly after due to my home life being so chaotic and the constant fighting with my mum and her partner. My life was perfect for two years. I was happy, clean of drugs, no criminal activity and my relationship with my mum was improving and so was my mental health until I discovered I had been cheated on and had to move out at 16. I then visited family in Birmingham and decided to stay there for a while which led me to constantly partying and taking drugs again. After a few months I came home and started living part time with friends and part time at my mums. I tried to go to college which failed, I spent my school life not engaging and skipping school, so college wasn't any different. I ended up being kicked out after a month and half of being there, so I spent the next month partying before I was kicked out on Christmas 2015. In January 2016 I was given a social worker and moved into my first hostel where my drug addiction worsened, and I began being criminally exploited by a 'friend'. Selling drugs for him progressed into stashing the drugs in my accommodation which I did for several months until he was arrested. Social care closed my case pretty quickly once I entered the hostel. I began a relationship while living there and after my 6 months was up, I was moved to a bigger hostel which offered less support, my partner moved in and we began selling to the people in there, then taking on and selling someone else's drugs before I realised, I was being exploited again. I lasted seven weeks there before my partner and I were kicked out due to her behaviour and the risk of her coming back and causing trouble. This left us intentionally homeless forcing me to sign myself into care. Due to my past behaviour and not wanting to leave my partner on the streets my social worker struggled to house me so we sofa surfed and walked around the streets some nights. We did this for four months before I was given a new social worker, and they signed a tenancy for me through next steps. Unfortunately, this flat was next to my first hostel, so I ended up getting heavily involved with the people living there again, engaging in criminal activity and becoming the main supplier of drugs to the hostel/area for a gang that I thought was my friends. After a year of living there a fight broke out at a party I was throwing and my whole flat was trashed which resulted in me being kicked out and me and my partner becoming street homeless for two months before being placed into emergency accommodation in a flat full of old men and women also suffering with substance abuse. We were only 18 at the time living with people in their 40s. My partner was given a council flat after two months and I moved in with her. The abuse was getting worse, and she had begun taking over my finances, I found myself isolated from the world and in a very depressed state. One night I was beaten so badly I thought she was going to kill me, so I had to escape and I stayed with a friend for the night who took me to the council the next day. I was placed

into a hostel far away from the city centre and I started to sort myself out, becoming clean from drugs again, taking up counselling and reconnecting with old friends. After four months I was given priority from the hostel and was able to move into my own council flat. Unfortunately, I had gotten back with my ex and moved across the road from her. Things in my life got worse again and I began drinking and taking drugs. My ex had full control over my life again, I couldn't see a way out until in April 2019 I found out I was pregnant. Confused as to how it had happened being a lesbian I realised that I was so out of it all the time god knows what was happening to me. I got myself back into counselling, started on some meds and went cold turkey from drugs but being pregnant made this all so much easier as I had something to fight for and protect. I gave birth in January 2020 and applied for emergency priority due to domestic violence I was granted this after eight months and moved into a house close to my family friends and far away from my abusive ex. I started taking parenting courses and looking at ways to better my life for mine and my daughter's sake. In 2022 I started volunteering with Roundabout homeless charity and became a peer educator for them. I've been going into schools around Sheffield giving lessons on homelessness and the various ways it can affect you trying to discriminate against all the stigma around homelessness while also sharing my own personal journey. I also do a lot of fundraising for roundabout talking at charity events and just last year won a voice of the youth award with the council. In 2023 my boss at Roundabout showed me this project and pushed for me to apply. I never thought I'd get through to the interview stage, never mind get the job as all my life I have been told that I will get nowhere due to my past behaviours and having no qualifications. Being on this project has given me the confidence to feel I can achieve anything and has given me the spirit to push forward with my dreams. In the next 10 years I hope to start working in Roundabout's hostel while training to become a social worker. I would like to work with leaving care kids who have fallen through the cracks like I did to ensure no child goes through what I had to. I also dream of building and owning my own hostel later in life so I can ensure the right rules and regulations are in place and so I can hire staff I feel are really passionate about helping young homeless kids prepare for the world in a safe and healthy way.

Alice

I was born on the Isle of Wight in 1993. My Dad had a history of marijuana abuse which resulted in drug induced psychosis for a small period of time. My brother was born when I

was 19 months old. Due to my dad's ill health, he didn't work until I started school. Then he worked full time, and my Mum was a stay at home mum.

On the whole despite the issues between my mum and dad I had a happy and safe childhood. My Dad stayed clean and for most part home life was happy and safe. My Dad worked a lot and spent his free time doing various hobbies. My Mum did the vast majority of the domestic duties and childcare, although as we got older my dad would take me and my brother with him while he saw friends and did his hobbies. The cracks started to show between my mum and dad as I got older. Then my mum's mum died, and she became very depressed. My dad stopped working to look after her. Then a few months later, on the way home from a dentist appointment my dad was hit by a car and was very badly injured. He spent a week in hospital and was unconscious for five of the seven days. When he woke up he discharged himself against doctors recommendations, because he knew how poorly my mum was. However, this was a bad idea because he needed a lot of care and my mum couldn't handle it.

As things were breaking down between my parents my behaviour became an issue. I was running away from home, and I wasn't really getting on well at school. My parents split up four days before my 12th birthday, very abruptly. An argument between him and my mum ensued, and my mum physically assaulted him. He was removed from the house, and we went with him because my mum's behaviour was hostile to all of us. My dad ended up coming back because he had a legal entitlement to live in the house. The atmosphere was awful, and they would often fight. Police were being called frequently. About three months later my mum was placed in a women's refuge. That place was dire. Full of abused women some of which were drug addicts and others who were completely withdrawn, shells of themselves. I was exposed to some very unsavoury characters, and I didn't like it there. My mum's behaviour towards me was very cold and my dad just used to offload all of his emotions onto me. My behaviour became worse, I was drinking and getting into fights. I ended up in care around 10 months after my parents separated due to the fact I was being treated badly in both houses. My dad was neglecting me, I never had clothes or toiletries etc and sometimes I had to steal things to make sure I had the things I needed. I ended up physically assaulting my dad due to some argument or another and my mum had no interest in being a mother, she was more interested in her latest boyfriend when a lot of them were not very nice to me and a couple of them after they left her tried to have sex with me. I refused (EW!) However, when I was placed in foster care the foster carers were awful to me. Accused me of taking drugs, lying and one time one of them assaulted me. I hated it there, so I went back to my dad's. Where I had no parenting at all, but I had free reign.

Despite my behaviour when I went to high school I performed well and was placed in very high sets. However, when my dad's mum died, I was very depressed. I started taking drugs and drinking more often and having sex with people I shouldn't have. I never became addicted to any of it. It was all recreational. Various professionals were worried about the drug and alcohol use; however, I knew what I was doing. After my nan died, I stopped going to school. My attendance was very bad. I was meant to do 12 GCSEs and one A level however I ended up leaving with four GCSEs at a C. I knew that education was my only way out. Just after I took my GCSEs my dad had a breakdown, and I ended up living in kinship care with my paternal uncle's ex-wife for six months. This was the first time I'd ever been provided with everything I needed and more. I felt for the most part happy and safe there and I learnt a fair bit about how to look after myself there. It wasn't perfect and my aunt was having her own issues with her husband who lived there too. I started college while I was there and for the first time had help with my education. I had a helper in class to write for me because I'm dyslexic. My drug use basically stopped, I was still drinking but at the weekends, socially I was 17 at this point I wasn't getting in any trouble. I had been arrested multiple times before living with my aunt and by now I'd realised what it was like to have what I needed and felt less like I needed to act out. The placement ended at my aunts because my cousin wasn't very nice to me and was jealous of the treatment I was getting from her mum. I went back to my dad's for a little while. I carried on with my education, I met my first boyfriend, and he lived in Portsmouth, and I knew I needed to get good grades to be able to go to the college over there so I could be closer to my boyfriend. I knew I needed to get away from the island and my parents. My mum had moved 100s of miles away and my dad was due to move to Bournemouth and I did not want to be left on the island. I ended up in supported lodgings for a few weeks because my relationship with my dad had broken down again. I kept my head down and got my place at the college I wanted to go to. They had halls but I couldn't live there until I was 18 so I needed to find somewhere to live until then. I got a place at the foyer in Portsmouth. Social services tried everything they could to stop this. I did it all behind their back. I told them I wanted them to help me get a place in the foyer, but they told me they had exhausted all options, and it wouldn't be possible to move there. So, I made sure I had a place. I knew I couldn't trust them. They'd never helped me before.

Living in the foyer was horrible. Everyone was on drugs and people had weapons and they would try and sell me drugs. Luckily, I was a bit of a psycho and would be very aggressive and they would leave me alone. I kept myself well away from it all, knowing that I only had to wait 6 months and I'd be in college halls. On my 18th birthday I moved into halls and in regard to schooling and social life I had some of the best times of my life there. I was finally

in control of my own life, my own money and I never put a foot wrong. However, there was still various things going on with how my parents conducted themselves that would impact me. I'd have to look after my brother when my dad would have breakdowns. My mum stood by and watched her male friend assault me. I didn't speak to my mum for nearly two years after that. But in my second year of college things really started to go very well. I left college with good grades and went to uni Southampton. The uni wasn't very good, so I left and then ended up going to a uni in Bournemouth and lived back with my dad. It was hard because my dad has mental health issues and he would be difficult to live with, but I was working and at uni and had good friends, for the most part it was really good, and I'd been diagnosed with ADHD and Dyslexia so was getting the support I needed for that. However, the second year at uni was a joke. The lecturer was terrible, and my health started to deteriorate. I left that uni and made a complaint and got compensation.

My physical health was getting worse, and my dad couldn't look after me, so I moved to Wales to live with my mum while I tried to finally get my degree. It took me five years to finally get the degree. I ended up diagnosed with so many health conditions that even now I'm struggling with them, but I graduated uni with a 2:1 and am planning to go back and do a master's in research and then a PhD. I have a driving licence and a place of my own now and I'm due to have an operation soon that will help my mobility.

I had involvement with CAMHS throughout my teens and various bouts of therapy throughout my 20's but I've been paying for private therapy for a year now and I've never been so happy and content in my mental health. I've always survived but I've never thrived and although I'm poor at the moment because I can't work much enough because of my health, I have hope that it won't always be like this, and I have a bright future ahead of me.

Holly

I'm Holly. I was born in a three-bed terrace house in a big city in the North of England and lived there with my mum, my dad and my three siblings. By the time I was six it was just me, my mum and my dad living in the house because there was a 10-year age gap between me and my brothers and sisters. Two of my half-brothers had been taken into care before I was born, and my older sister was living with my nana. From the age of four my dad sent me down the road from my house wearing a Peppa Pig backpack. I was made to take it to two men in an alley and they would take out a package and put money in the backpack that my dad would take out when I got back home.

From a very young age I was being sexually abused by mates my father would bring to the house. I would have dog collars tied round my neck, and I was punched for no reason, I was around seven years old when my dad taught me to drive, and I was stabbed at seven because of situations driving my dad around put me in. By the time I was 12 I was running drugs down to places like the Isle of Wight and up to Newcastle, taking trains, ferries and bus rides far away from my home. At the age of 14 I went into care, but I was still around drug gangs and before I knew it I was trapped into running drugs and didn't know how to get out. I was missing from the care homes I was in a lot of the time, and I was spending time in filthy trap houses where I was raped and abused. Despite this I thought for a long time I was in charge, and I was even recruiting other young people to help move the drugs about. Not surprisingly all of this made me become ill, and I got admitted to hospital four times for my poor mental health. Each time I got out of hospital things didn't change and I ended up in a Young Offenders Institution but then when I got out, I ended up being sectioned again. When I left the hospital that time, I ended up homeless and sleeping on the streets and unsurprisingly my mental health was still really rubbish and I ended up back in hospital on a section again.

This time while I was in hospital I applied for this job and got it. I loved every moment of it. At first, I was still heavily involved in the drug gang but wanted to get out. I'm now working to come away from it and doing so well. I'm now at university and have aspirations to start my own residential care facility which will employ people with lived experience of CCE and being in care to give back to the people who need my help most.

The entries above written by Brittany, Alice and Holly provide an account of their own experiences of the Children's Social Care system and CCE. They offer an in-depth look into how they feel they were harmed by these experiences, providing some context for the next section of this chapter which explores the shared experiences that the participants across the study felt contributed to their susceptibility to being groomed into CCE, as well as the way that their involvement was sustained.

THE PARTICIPANTS

The table below builds on the one presented in the methodology chapter, detailing the type of care experience and exploitation that each one of the research participants experienced. Below the table is a brief life history of each of the participants which helps to contextualise the quotes from their interviews that are examined in the next sections of this chapter.

NAME	AGE	GENDER IDENTITY	ETHNICITY	TYPE OF CARE EXPERIENCE	TYPE OF EXPLOITATION
James	24	Man	White	Kinship care, foster care and residential care homes.	Criminally exploited to stash, carry and sell drugs.
Dolly	24	Woman	White	Foster care and semi-independent accommodation	A victim of cuckooing, she was forced to cut, bag and stash drugs for the criminal gangs who took over her flat. Dolly was also sexually exploited.
Ed	32	Man	White	Foster care and residential care homes.	Criminally exploited through being forced to distribute and sell drugs.
Andi	23	Man	White	Foster care and Young Offenders Institution	Criminally exploited into committing an act of severe violence.
Francis	26	Man	White	Foster care, semi-independent accommodation	Criminally exploited into shoplifting to order, fraud and was a victim of modern slavery.

Lilly	29	Woman	White	Kinship care, foster care, and semi-independent accommodation	Criminally exploited into shoplifting to order.
Harriet	18	Woman	White	Residential care, Secure Care, Young Offenders Institutes	Criminally exploited to move and sell drugs across the country. Harriet was also sexually exploited.
Chanel	24	Woman	White	Semi-independent accommodation	Criminally exploited through being forced to distribute and sell drugs.
John	26	Man	White	Kinship care, foster care, and semi-independent accommodation	A victim of cuckooing, she was forced to cut, bag and stash drugs for the criminal gangs who took over her flat. John was also forced to look after and take dogs to illegal dog fights.
Chelsea	29	Woman	Dual Heritage	Foster care and Secure Training Centre	Criminally exploited through being forced to distribute and sell drugs, commit

					acts of theft and burglary violence.
Hannah	33	Woman	White	Residential children's homes and secure children's home	Criminally exploited through being forced to distribute and sell drugs. Hannah was also sexually exploited by the criminal gangs she was forced to work for.

TABLE 4: Contextualising information about interview participants.

James:

James and his twin sister were abandoned by his mother at birth and as very young children spent time in many different foster care placements before returning to live with his dad at the age of four. James was neglected and severely physically and emotionally abused by his dad and consequently he was split up from his twin sister and taken into kinship care. James experienced severe bullying at school and ended up being excluded from several schools and eventually was forced to move back in with his dad due to his grandparents saying they could not cope with his behaviour. However, James's abuse at the hands of his father continued and aged 11 he confided in a teaching assistant who called social services and he was placed initially into foster care, then into several residential care homes. He eventually ended up in semi-independent accommodation where he was frequently confronted with people attempting to groom him into criminal exploitation.

Dolly:

Dolly grew up initially with her mum who lived with substance mis-use problems and mental ill-health. Consequently, Dolly and her mum had a very difficult relationship that saw Dolly taken into care in her teens. Dolly initially lived with foster parents before moving into semi-independent accommodation. Dolly herself struggled with substance misuse issues and mental ill-health and when living in a semi-independent flat she became a victim of cuckooing, and her flat was taken over by a criminal gang. Dolly was then criminally exploited into working for the criminal gang.

Ed:
Ed grew up in a small town in the North of England, initially living with his Mum and Dad before being taken into the care system initially at age three due to being abused by his dad who was involved in selling drugs. Similarly to many children in the care system, Ed then spent the next ten years being moved between foster homes, residential care homes and the family home. At the age of 16, Ed was reunited with his brother, and they were moved into semi-independent accommodation. Sadly, at this point Ed's mum passed away and Ed and his brother re-established contact with his dad who started to criminally exploit them into selling drugs for him. From the age of 16 to 21, Ed was criminally exploited by the organised criminals that his dad was involved with, spending time in and out of custody and frequently rough sleeping.

Andi:
Andi grew up in the family home despite a difficult relationship with both his parents. He had a difficult time at school and at the age of 12, Andi became involved with a local 'gang'. He was criminally exploited by this gang into committing a serious act of violence for which he received a lengthy custodial sentence and became involved with Children's Social Care and youth justice services.

Francis:
Francis has a diagnosis of Autism and ADHD and was taken into the care system at the age of 16 as his parents were unable to cope with his behaviours that they attributed to his ADHD and Autism. Prior to being taken into care, Francis was initially on a part time timetable before being excluded from school. Francis was groomed by a couple when he was living in semi-independent accommodation into shoplifting to order. This couple then moved him into their flat where he became a victim of modern slavery, being forced to commit fraudulent acts on their behalf and even having to surrender his bank card to them so they could steal his disability benefits.

Lilly:
Lilly grew up in a council house in a small coastal town, where she initially lived with both her parents and her younger brother. Lilly's Dad misused substances and lived with mental ill-health, and she witnessed her mum physically abusing her dad. From the age of 12, Lilly was frequently running away from home and started misusing alcohol and drugs, as a result of which she came to the attention of social services. Once she was taken into care, Lilly bounced around between various kinship care, foster care placements and her family home.

Harriet:

Harriet's first exposure to criminal exploitation took place at the hands of her parents, being forced to move drugs from as young as four. She was also subject to horrendous sexual and physical abuse at the hands of her parents and their acquaintances. Despite this, Harriet did not come to the attention of Children's Social Care until she was in her teens, at which point she was taken into foster care initially before moving into several children's residential homes as well as spending time in secure care and a young offenders institute. Whilst in the care system, Harriet continued to be criminally and sexually exploited, frequently being put on trains to transport drugs from one end of the country to the other and having to live in trap houses while she travelled around.

Chanel:

Chanel grew up in an overcrowded house frequently witnessing the abuse of her mum at the hands of her father. Not only did she live in the house with her three siblings, but the house was often used by extended family and friends as temporary accommodation. From an early age, Chanel was physically and emotionally abused by her dad who had substance misuse issues, and she was frequently exposed to drug taking in the family home. Chanel had input from social services from the age of 5 due to the physical abuse that she experienced at the hands of her father, despite this she remained in the family home until the age of 15 when she asked to be taken into care due to ongoing physical abuse from both her parents. Chanel had a difficult time at school and ended up in a Pupil Referral Unit at the age of 14 due to persistent non-attendance. At the same time, Chanel was sexually abused by a man 9 years older than her and started to experiment with drugs which escalated from cannabis to MDMA and cocaine by the age of 16. By this time, Chanel was living in semi-independent accommodation where she started using Spice. While she was misusing substances, she was groomed into holding and selling drugs. By the age of 18, Chanel was recruiting other young people to be criminally exploited.

John:

John was taken away from his mother at birth due to her substance misuse issues and was placed with foster carers until he was able to be returned to the care of his father and stepmother at the age of 2. John lived with his dad until the age of 13 when he was taken into kinship care to live with his Nan. From here he moved into semi-independent accommodation at the age of 16. John became addicted to drugs and alcohol, and he became a victim of cuckooing when he moved into his first semi-independent flat. After this John was forced into working for a criminal gang who had taken over his flat by stashing, cutting and bagging drugs.

Chelsea:

Chelsea was born in Argentina and moved to the South of England with her Mum at the age of 8, initially leaving her dad behind in Argentina. Unfortunately, Chelsea's mum's mental health deteriorated living in a new country and this had a severe impact on her ability to effectively care for Chelsea and her siblings, which led to her becoming known to Children's Social Care. Chelsea's education also suffered because of her mum's poor mental health. Chelsea was frequently moved to different schools which resulted in her being bullied and ostracised. At the age of 12, Chelsea started to become involved with some older young people in the community which led to her being criminally exploited into theft, burglary and violence, consequently ending up with a long list of criminal convictions which culminated in her being sent to a secure training centre (STC) at the age of 14. Prior to spending time in the STC, Chelsea, although being deemed a child in need, was still living in the family home. Only on release from the STC at the age of 15 was Chelsea taken into care and went to live with foster parents. Chelsea was still on a Youth Offending Order[9] at this time and through her engagement with the Youth Offending Team, she met a boy who was 17. Shortly after this, the young man moved away from the city and Chelsea was criminally exploited into transporting drugs from the city she lived in to another city in England. At the same time, Chelsea walked out of her foster placement and was living in a hostel where her exploitation worsened as she was still running drugs, but she was also now frequenting trap houses and carrying weapons for her exploiters.

Hannah:

Hannah entered the care system at the age of 13 due to years of parental neglect which finally came to the attention of social services when her father was sent to prison. She went on to spend time in several residential children's homes as well as a secure children's home during which time she was both sexually and criminally exploited. This involved being forced to stash, cut, bag and transport drugs across Scotland and recruiting other young people into criminal exploitation.

Having introduced the research participants and outlined the complex circumstances that shaped their early lives, the following section situates these experiences within the wider structural contexts that inform this study.

---

[9] *Youth offending orders* is an umbrella term used to describe the range of court-imposed community sentences available for children aged 10–17 in England and Wales. These include referral orders, youth rehabilitation orders (YROs), reparation orders and other court-mandated interventions overseen by Youth Offending Teams (YOTs). Such orders combine elements of supervision, restorative work, behavioural programmes, and support aimed at reducing re-offending and addressing the child's welfare needs (Ministry of Justice, 2023).

GROWING UP

The poverty trap

The findings of this study support much of the work carried out by Bywaters et al. (2020) and others (see Bywaters et al. 2016; Morris et al. 2018; Featherstone et al. 2019; Bunting et al. 2018; Davidson et al. 2017) on child welfare inequalities and the relationship between poverty and childhood neglect. These studies have repeatedly demonstrated the links between financial poverty, child abuse and neglect through a recognition that the neo-liberal welfare system does little to recognise and account for the damaging effects that growing up in poverty can have on children and young people (as well as their families). As Morris et al. (2018, p.370) assert 'poverty is the wallpaper of practice' and this study serves to reinforce the necessity of foregrounding child welfare and criminal justice responses to recognise this.

This study found that the young people we spoke to face many intersecting inequalities because of their sustained oppression, marginalisation and experiences of poverty. This often saw them enduring multiple experiences of poverty such as educational poverty, poor housing, and even relational poverty. However, participants recognised the pivotal relationship between financial poverty (not having access to sufficient money) as a core driver in underpinning both their initial experiences of being groomed and criminally exploited, as well as their sustained involvement in it.

> *'My dad and mum were quite poor. For me, when I was six, I was going through poverty.' (Chelsea)*

> *'We were really overcrowded because we shared a 1-bedroom flat with 4 kids and 1 adult'. (Chanel)*

> *'(My Dad) was a heavy drinker, so we hardly had any money, because he'd spend all our money on alcohol, so we constantly hardly ate proper food and stuff.' (Chanel)*

In the first of the quotes above we can see Chelsea articulate to us that with the benefit of hindsight she now realises that the household she was raised in would be considered to be in financial poverty. In the second quote Chanel talks about the manifestation of the financial poverty that she grew up in, not only was their home overcrowded with five people living and sleeping in a one-bedroom flat, but they frequently had no money to buy food due to her father's alcohol dependency. What is clear across these reflections is that poverty was an overt, everyday experience for these young people with material impacts on their daily lives.

In the quote below, Hannah clearly makes the connection between being in financial poverty and being susceptible to being criminally exploited as she describes the lure of criminal gangs offering material goods unavailable to a child from a poor background:

> 'I think it just makes it easier if you've got a kid that's longing for something and somebody comes along and is providing all that for you (I was getting) everything that I needed from these guys so yeah if you're in that emotional state and you've got a group of men providing this for you, you're going to gravitate towards them lot.' (Hannah)

> 'My mum was on the dole for the first six years of me being alive right. Because I'm 1 of 2, there's me and my brother you see, and my dad left her' (Francis)

As per his reflection above, Francis experienced financial poverty while still living in the family home. He talks about his mum receiving welfare benefits while she tried to bring up her two sons as a single parent. As Francis goes on to explain, it was due to being taken into the care system at the age of 16 and being sent to live in semi-independent accommodation that he fell through the many cracks in the welfare system. He was not receiving sufficient support from social services and nor was he receiving all of the benefits that he should have been entitled to and his financial desperation led him to begin committing crime.

> 'I used to go on (the) rob from the shops just to get out of there [his accommodation] because I had no money. I wasn't able to get any benefits because of my age. I literally had to try and survive.' (Francis)

Francis became a victim of financial exploitation as well as being forced to steal large goods for the criminals he was groomed by. Here, we can see one of the most direct links between poverty and criminal exploitation as Francis was targeted by criminals who knew he had the necessary skills to work for them based on what they knew about his life; that he was stealing to survive. Lilly reported similar experiences:

> 'Because I didn't have the money to get anything, so I'd be constantly robbing. I was never given any money to get the stuff that I needed.' (Lilly)

Similarly to Francis, Lilly was groomed to steal on demand. Painfully for Lilly, this exploitation took place at the hands of her father and the lack of money in the family home often meant Lilly and her family didn't have the very basic necessities. At several points later in our interview, Lilly explained that her family frequently did not have any toiletries to wash with, or the clothes she needed for school. Lilly suggests that this is one of the reasons she came to

the attention of Children's Social Care initially but also highlights that she was encouraged to steal the things she needed by her own father.

> 'But I got nothing, I got nothing. I thieved everything. He encouraged it. Like, we'd walk somewhere to go shopping. He'd be like, I've got no money by the way. He's like, so whatever you need, you're stealing.' (Lilly)

James also recalled his experiences of poverty as a child:

> 'If you call nan and say that he doesn't have the money or something we would be able to have something better for tea because all we used to have was bread, pretty much, two pieces of bread a day' (James)

For James, the financial poverty he and his family faced while he was growing up not only directly contributed to him being taken into the care system due to neglect but also shows how he was made to take responsibility for this problem. He was directly told by his father that he should be the one who calls his Nan and ask her for food, making a child take on the responsibility of ensuring that he, his dad and his sister had enough food to eat. This clearly links to notions of adultification, which is discussed next.

Adultification

Many of the young people we spoke to relayed experiences of feeling like they had to grow up too quickly. The situations that they were living in (in many cases the family home) exposed them to the many trials and tribulations of adult life at a very young age. This process of adultification was an important part of many of the young people's early lives and one that they spoke about in relation to the grooming and exploitation that they experienced later in life. This suggests that adopting adult roles and responsibilities early on in life not only made the young people we spoke to open to engaging in traditional 'adult' pursuits such as sex, alcohol, and drugs at an early age, but left them feeling like they missed out on many early childhood experiences. This, according to participants, is the gap that groomers were able to recognise and attempt to fill.

> 'I wanted to have friends as a kid. I didn't really have any because I had to look after my brothers and make sure that everybody else was okay. I never had a childhood.' (Chanel)

> 'I just thought, what's the point in all this? I've been put on this planet for what? To be abused by my parents and made to be an adult before I can.' (Chanel)

In the first of these two quotes Chanel, the eldest of three children who grew up in a house where she frequently witnessed domestic violence and drug dealing, explains that she never had any friends growing up, a fact that she attests to having to look after her two younger brothers as her mother could not care for them effectively. She recollects, like all children, wanting to have friends as a child but not being able to due to her caring responsibilities. Chanel goes on to relate this longing for friendship and to be liked as part of the reason she felt the groomers were able to criminally exploit her.

> 'Because you're a kid and you don't realise that they're not their friends, everybody that my uncle talked to I thought were his friends. I thought 'you have millions of friends', and I wanted that life.' (Chanel)

Andi relayed a similar experience to Chanel:

> 'So once [mum and dad] sorta split up I was like right. I'm the only bloke in the house, so at that point I would've been 12 going on 13.' (Andi)

Andi relates having to grow up early due to his Mum and Dad splitting up and his dad moving out of the family home. For Andi, this made him feel like he had to step up and take responsibility for being 'the man of the house'. Andi goes on to express that he felt like he was responsible for protecting his mum and sister, and for him this meant ascribing to many of the traditional masculine traits that he felt the local 'gangs' demonstrated. Through identifying and becoming part of a 'gang', Andi felt like he and his family would be looked after.

> 'Yeah hundred percent, hundred percent (I felt protected). Because I knew that like even though I never went out looking for trouble, I knew that if trouble ever come to me, I'd have people there who I could like, rely on' (Andi)

Ironically, the exact opposite was true when Andi was criminally exploited by the people, he thought would protect him. Elsewhere, Ed suggested that he felt he was being introduced to adult activities at an early age when his father taught him to shoplift:

> 'We were taught how to shoplift from a young age.' (Ed)

The experience of being introduced to criminality by his father signalled to Ed that crime was a part of adult life and something that he could carry on doing as he grew up. Ed was in no doubt that this early introduction to criminality contributed to his exposure to criminal exploitation in later life.

> *'You kind of feel like you just have to live up to that sort of thing. It's something that I weirdly just looked up to even though I knew it was wrong.' (Ed)*

For Chelsea, the process of adultification relates to domestic chores she was expected to do in the family home.

> *' We was kind of left to fend for ourself and look after ourself. If I didn't help, with the cooking and cleaning, they wouldn't let me eat.' (Chelsea)*

Here, we see Chelsea connect the neglect she experienced at home to the control and abuse she endured at the hands of her mother. Chelsea was forced to take on many household responsibilities at an early age, with connotations of modern slavery, as Chelsea explains that if she didn't carry out the household duties she was not allowed to eat. Elsewhere, Hannah presents a slightly different perspective on being forced to grow up too early, she recognises that this was a difficult aspect of her childhood that contributed to her exploitation in later life, however, she also recognises that having to fend for herself from an early age helped her to develop skills that would help her as she had to rely on herself as an adolescent and into adulthood.

> *'Yeah, it wasn't fun, but at the same time I do not regret it wholly because it made me the independent person that I am now. I had to learn from myself.' (Hannah)*

For James, the process of adultification saw him taking on the role of protector of his twin sister.

> *'Basically, from whatever I did I'd try to protect my sister because I feel like that was my sort of duty to do.' (James)*

For James, the sense of responsibility he felt to look after his sister made him feel like he had to grow up quickly. Living in an environment where his father was abusive to both him and his younger sister made James feel like he had to protect her from the familial abuse that they both experienced. Throughout his interview with us, it was clear that James took his responsibility for looking after his sister very seriously, painfully describing how they were not able to carry on living together when he was taken into care, and she was left living with their father. James attributes the juxtaposition of being made to be a protector within a system that was meant to protect and look after him and as one of the reasons why, despite the progress he has made, he still lives with mental ill-health.

'I didn't even think I was gonna make it to 16, 18 at that time. But before I went into care, I didn't even think I was going to make it 12, 13, 14, and I just think years down the line I'm suffering.' (James)

In conclusion, the concept of adultification presents a complex and multifaceted challenge that cannot be understood in isolation. Rooted in the intersection of socio-economic deprivation, family practices, and experiences of abuse and neglect, adultification demonstrates the disproportionate expectations placed on children, particularly those from marginalised backgrounds. This phenomenon often overlaps with the experiences of young carers, who are thrust into adult roles due to the caregiving responsibilities they assume at a young age. These children navigate the compounded pressures of familial expectations, emotional and physical neglect, and the absence of adequate support systems. The intersections between adultification, care responsibilities, and systemic disadvantage creates the potential for young people to be seen as 'vulnerable' and, by extension, exploitable, especially when difficult socio-economic contexts play a critical role in shaping their lives.

NAVIGATING AN UNCARING 'CARE' SYSTEM

Mattering and anti-mattering

What was clear from all the young people that we spoke to is that having people in your life that make you feel like you matter is essential. Many of them talked about how feeling like they were significant in the world was key to them exiting criminal exploitation. Often, a sense of mattering was conveyed to them by a positive, significant relationship with trusted adults. Conversely, many of the young people we spoke to connected feelings of not mattering to their experiences of being groomed and exploited initially, and they also recognised that this was key to their ongoing exploitation. Although the participants didn't use the term 'mattering', they spoke about 'love', 'belonging' and 'nurturing' to describe either what was missing from their lives or how they were made to feel significant, that they were important and that they mattered. In the quotes below, James and Andi demonstrate this by movingly recalling relationship with their teachers:

'And then I went into care and this teacher that I had was still supporting me and stuff and he basically came to my foster carers' house and made sure that I was okay and all that sort of stuff.' (James)

'There were one teacher in school who could get through to me and what's interesting about that were he were real, he were so real and when I'd rock up late to lessons instead of drawing me out in front of the rest of class and making me look small he'd take me to one side and he'd explain things in a way that I'd understand, use euphemisms and things. Again, he could have probably got sacked for some of the things he said to me.' (Andi)

For James and Andi, it is clear these relationships with their teachers made them feel like they mattered. James explained how he felt his teacher went above and beyond in their role and helped him to settle in his first foster home. James went on to explain that he and the teacher have stayed in touch over the years and that the teacher still plays a significant role in his life. He suggested that by the teacher taking the time to visit him whilst in care, this demonstrated to him that he mattered, and James equated this sense of mattering to one of the reasons why his exposure to criminal exploitation while in care was short lived and limited. For Dolly, meanwhile, mattering manifested itself via her relationship with her foster carers:

'I loved them that much that I think I stayed with them for about six months because we just had such a good relationship, and I actually was really happy there and I wasn't shop lifting or owt.' (Dolly)

Dolly explained that although she wasn't being criminally exploited at this time, she had been removed from the family home due to ongoing issues of parental neglect and substance misuse, and she was already involved in petty criminal activity to allow her to buy illegal substances. Dolly describes above how the relationship she developed with her first foster carers was one of love, and how the intensity of that feeling made her feel happy and helped her cease her involvement in criminal activity. Dolly felt like she mattered to her foster carers, and this sense of mattering acted as a protective factor to stop her from carrying out criminal acts. However, this need to matter also made young people susceptible to exploitation, as Hannah describes:

'Because I essentially just wanted a sense of belonging you know, I didn't have any family.' (Hannah)

For Hannah, needing to feel that she belonged somewhere, and was therefore important and mattered in the world, was one of the key drivers for her being groomed into criminal exploitation. Hannah explains that the lack of meaningful family connection she had both before and after being taken into care led her to feel she had a gap in her life, a gap that exploiters used to groom her into committing criminal activities. With the benefit of hindsight,

Hannah equates the sense of belonging that she felt from the criminal gang that she was involved with to how she justified the choices she made:

> 'When I was doing all this and I had all those 'friends', doing all this 'cool stuff' it's a real sense of belonging, but you know the after effect of it all now, there's a lot of guilt.' (Hannah)

Harriet echoed this experience:

> 'So I feel like my upbringing was the main reason for my criminal exploitation because I was abused and neglected by both my parents and then they would give me cash and shoes and clothes and I thought that's what love is.' (Harriet)

Harriet reflects that her upbringing in the family home made her equate material possessions with love, belonging and feeling like she mattered. Harriet explained that despite experiencing neglect, physical and sexual abuse from her parents, she was led to believe that they loved her because they gave her cash, shoes, and clothes. Harriet directly attributes the confusion she felt about this from an early age as the main driver for why she was subsequently groomed into criminal exploitation. Again, Harriet wanted to be loved and feel important and that she mattered, but she conflated this due to her early childhood experiences with material gain. When such material gains were offered to her by her exploiters, she felt important and that she mattered to them.

Reflecting on why she felt criminal gangs chose to groom her, Chanel acknowledges that it was because she just wanted to be loved, and to feel like she mattered to other people.

> 'The love, it sounds stupid. But the love that I felt from my exploiter, I didn't want to leave that. I didn't want to have nobody in life.' (Chanel)

Chanel explained that a difficult family upbringing and one where she was often left to care for her brothers and sisters and left her feeling like she wasn't loved by anyone, only there to provide support for others. Chanel suggests that this left her feeling lonely as a child, and she did not want this feeling of loneliness to dominate her adolescence and adulthood. It was precisely this need which was fulfilled by the criminal gangs who exploited her.

Similarly to both Harriet and Chanel, Chelsea articulates how the experience of growing up in a family environment where she was neglected left her feeling no-one had nurtured or cared for her.

> 'But in terms of the nurturing, the nurturing just wasn't there [in my family]. I really wanted to be loved.' (Chelsea)

Chelsea went on to describe how all she wanted was to be loved, to feel like she mattered to someone enough for them to really nurture and care for her. Once again, here we see the suggestion that criminal gangs were able to groom and exploit Chelsea by filling that gap in her life, by making her feel they cared for her and that she mattered to them.

The critical role of mental ill-health

When we spoke to young people about how they felt that their experiences growing up contributed to them coming to the attention of Children's Social Care, many of them identified a link to their mental ill-health. Some also expressed that their mental ill-health, compounded by the harms of the Children's Social Care system, contributed to them being groomed into criminal exploitation. As Dolly explains, her mental ill-health made her more susceptible to being criminally exploited:

> *'I was suffering with depression. I've suffered with it since I was around 11 years old so I've always suffered with my mental health. It* (the criminal exploitation) *just made it worse, to be honest.' (Dolly)*

> *'Because I was so depressed and I was so vulnerable because of how depressed I was, I was literally looking for anything that'd excite me, any serotonin anywhere. So obviously if something looked appealing, I'd be straight for it.' (Dolly)*

While Dolly acknowledges that her mental health was poor prior to her being taken into care, she argues that it was made much worse by the contact she had with the Children's Social Care system. Indeed, Dolly's account further suggests that her mental ill-health played directly into the hands of her groomers, that the feeling of vulnerability she had was related to her depression and her groomers sought to fill this gap by providing her with the illegal substances that were so prevalent in her own experience of being criminally exploited. Similarly to Dolly, Hannah talks about feeling depressed very early in her life, heartbreakingly describing how she tried to take her own life many times before she was even a teenager.

> *'I was (a) very depressed young person. I think I had had tried to commit suicide 8 times before I was 13. I was self-harming from a young age.' (Hannah)*

Hannah saw her mental ill-health as both a product of her early childhood experiences and one of the contributory factors for her being taken into the care system. For Ed, his mental ill-health materialised as anger:

'I was really really snapping, quick to a short fuse sort of thing. And I think that looking back now, that was definitely just that pure anger of what happened and being separate from family and all of the moves and all that kind of stuff. It was just pure anger and frustration about what happened, and I think that kind of impacted on some of my actions that I had carried out. That definitely played a part in the things that I did, in the way that I was with people.' (Ed)

Ed describes an anger that he attributed to being taken into the care system in the first place and one that was exacerbated by the multiple placements moves he experienced whilst in care. Ed was also clear that the anger and frustration he felt impacted on the criminal activities that he was a part of. He explained to us later in the interview that he felt it difficult to reconcile the fact that he was groomed into exploitation himself since he later went on to groom, recruit and exploit other young people.

'We hung out with a few other people who were looked after, and they were vulnerable. So, I guess you could say, I mean that one lad in particular, I got him into selling drugs. So, I guess you could say I was the exploiter in that situation in a sense because I kind of encouraged him to do it by trying to show him how much money you could make. Which I feel a lot of guilt for.' (Ed)

Similarly to Ed, Lilly with hindsight, understands how her mental ill-health often manifested as anger.

'Mine was bad. I've had mental health problems from 9 years old. I was not happy, was always having anger outbursts and kicking off and fighting and shit, like I wasn't good.' (Lilly)

Lilly, who was taken into care at the age of 12, can see how her mental ill-health contributed to her being taken into care in the first place but was also at pains to point out that the experiences she had whilst in care only frustrated and angered her more. With very little support to help her understand complex feelings or an outlet for expressing them, her situation worsened.

'They (CAMHS) would, like, say, oh that was wrong or whatever, but there was never any, like, delving into. They would be like, yeah, but you're 15 years old, drunk, out at night, if you weren't doing those things, that fight wouldn't have happened. And they would just, I'd leave with, like, hot tears. And then I'd come back after a week and over the week, like, it would settle in my head, and I'd be like, well you can't question that logic, right?' (Lilly)

'So, my mental health has been quite bad since being a child. I've always been involved with CAMHS and stuff.' (Chanel)

'My mum used to be like you need to go see a psychiatrist because you're mentally fucked up and things like that, but therapy wasn't for me. It made me feel like there was something wrong with me.' (Chelsea)

In the two quotes above we see Chanel and Chelsea talk about the support they received from an early age for their mental ill-health. Chanel received mental health support from the CAMHS as it was recognised early on that she was struggling with her mental health. Chanel talked later about how she felt this support was sometimes helpful but did not deal with some of the underlying issues that she was experiencing at home which were ultimately why she was taken into the care system in the first place.

'Yeah, literally for years I've been like, I'm bipolar, help me out, like you're putting me on bipolar medication, but you're not actually doing the bipolar work, how does this work? Really crazy.' (Chanel)

Chelsea similarly recognises the challenges that mental health support can present, suggesting that the services she accessed sought to locate the problems she faced at an individual level, not considering the difficult situations she faced in the home and more latterly whilst she was in care.

James and Francis both spoke to us about how they often felt suicidal because of the circumstances they faced, which adversely effected their mental health.

'Before I went into care, I didn't even think I was going to make it (to)12, 13, 14 and I just think years down the line people are suffering even though it wasn't realised then I think I was suffering with mental health.' (James)

'The mental health side got so bad it was just bringing me down, I didn't want to talk to nobody. I wouldn't sleep, wouldn't eat, so, I just kept disassociating myself because I didn't want to be around anymore, I just wanted to be off this planet as quick as I could. That's how bad it got. I've been in some dark places, and I do not want to go back, because I don't think I would be able to come back this time.' (Francis)

James describes feeling from a young age that he didn't have any sort of future, that he just could not picture himself growing up, a fact that he later attributed to the severe neglect and

abuse that he experienced at the hands of his father. For James, although going into care meant that he faced many more difficult and traumatising experiences, it at least meant that for the first time he was able to envision living into adulthood. In his quote, Francis describes the period after he was taken into the care system, when he was being criminally exploited. He describes feeling at absolute rock bottom due the exploitation he was experiencing, articulately explaining how the toll it had taken on his mental ill-health left him feeling like taking his own life was the only way out. For Harriet, who was severely abused by her parents from an early age, the link between her mental ill-health and the abuse she experienced is clear.

> 'Basically, my mental health is very bad. So, I have EUPD, which is Emotional Unstable Personality Disorder, which stems from childhood trauma. And not much else really could cause EUPD, because it's very complex. So EUPD is basically, like, when all my emotions are unstable because I've never had a stable time of my life.' (Harriet)

What emerges clearly from the interviews is that the young people we spoke to felt that their experiences of mental ill-health from an early age played a significant role in drawing the attention of Children's Social Care professionals and, ultimately, leading to their removal from their families and becoming looked after by the local authority. However, for many of these young people, their mental health deteriorated further while in care, highlighting the critical role (as well as the damaging absence) of supportive, trusted adults in fostering mental wellbeing. The concept of 'mattering' is central to understanding this dynamic. These young people often felt invisible or overlooked within the care system, which exacerbated their sense of worthlessness and isolation. If their mental health had been supported earlier, particularly through consistent therapeutic placements and mental health services, it might have helped them feel that they truly mattered — an essential foundation for positive mental health. Furthermore, the importance of early intervention is underscored by the notion that prevention, through access to effective mental health and wellbeing support from a preschool age, could have significantly mitigated the negative effects of trauma, reinforcing the need for systems that validate and support the emotional needs of young people from a young age.

Substance use challenges

For all the participants, substance use was particularly challenging. Many of them spoke about how they experienced this from a very early age, frequently being exposed to parents, family members and friends using substances in the family home. Most of the young people

felt that this contributed to why they encountered Children's Social Care initially. However, for all the participants, once again, the circumstances around their substance use challenges were exacerbated by being taken into the children's care system. Further, many of the young people we spoke to were able to draw direct links between their substance use and the way they were groomed and criminally exploited.

> *'I also developed a drink problem when I was around 16 as I just thought it was normal.' (Dolly)*

> *'I was an addict of alcohol and drugs by the age 14.' (Hannah)*

> *'I was taking drugs from 10-year-old and so, my mind wasn't really clear a lot. So, I feel like the way that I was brought up contributed quite a lot.' (Chanel)*

> *'It was just fighting and we took loads of drugs and stuff. I was already on like antidepressants and stuff at 14 and drinking too much. Just, yeah, loads like everything was shit.' (Lilly)*

All the quotes above demonstrate that for many of the young people we spoke to, substance use was a perennial problem. For Dolly, Hannah, Chanel and Lilly, the use of substances started at a very young age. Dolly refers to the substance use problems experienced by her mother and articulates that felt this was a normal part of life due to the exposure to alcohol abuse that she had witnessed growing up in her mother's care. Similarly, Hannah explains that her substance use issues were so profound and all-consuming that by the age of 14 she considered herself addicted to both alcohol and drugs.

Chanel partly attributes her own involvement in drugs and the challenges that presented her with this familial exposure. Painfully, she explains that by the age of 10 she was taking so many drugs that her mind was not clear enough for her to make competent decisions. This combined with the fact that she was still only 10 and should have had support of parents around her to help her make those decisions, partly explains how Chanel was groomed and criminally exploited from a young age. Importantly, for young people in this study, substance use was exacerbated by entering the care system:

> *'When I started in care, I started smoking weed and that lasted for about I don't know 3 months, until someone showed me coke and I had a big, massive cocaine addiction for about 3 or 4 years. Then I had a dealer who sold cocaine and he offered me crack for the first time and I thought you know what yeah - go on then. So, the first time I had it that were it, I were addicted to crack for going on 3 years and then because I had crack, I was also addicted to heroin.' (Dolly)*

145

Here, Dolly explains how the people she met whilst in care, who included the people who went on to criminally exploit her, set her on a path to escalation of drug use. She saw her cannabis habit turn into a cocaine addiction and explains this felt like an inevitable stepping stone on her way to a heroin addiction. Dolly very clearly articulated to us that she felt her criminal exploitation was mainly due to her needing to feed her addictions. Both her need to be supplied with drugs and her need for money to buy drugs left her susceptible to being groomed into criminal exploitation. John and Chanel similarly connected their substance use with their experiences of exploitation:

> *'I started drinking and everything and drugs and it just went sideways from there. I think I just tried to use dogs and alcohol and drugs as an escape for what happened.' (John)*

> *'I was drinking with the people in the hostels and using drugs and all sorts of things.' (Chanel)*

For both John and Chanel, once they were taken into the care system, specifically in both their cases housed within semi-independent accommodation, their substance use problems were heightened. John explains how he felt the highs from the alcohol and drugs were the only thing that could take him to a place where he could forget about his early childhood experiences as well as the difficulties, he faced living in a hostel. Heartbreakingly, John also explained to us how he had a soft spot for dogs, and he found great comfort in looking after them. Unfortunately, this was one area that his exploiters were able to use against him as he was forced into illegally fighting dogs. John believes that the combination of alcohol and drug dependency, with his love of dogs and his history of childhood trauma, was the main reason that he was targeted for being groomed into criminal exploitation. Elsewhere, for Andi drugs were used by his groomers to exploit him into committing a serious violence offence.

> *'I was smoking a lot of weed back then and for me, like, going out and chilling with them people, it were never a problem that. It were never a problem. I'd gone from like, putting two with me mates to get a ten bud to chilling with them and they were just passing joints with me all day long because they'd just have ounces and ounces of it there.' (Andi)*

In the quote above, Andi describes how he went from having a regular group of friends, smoking weed socially and informally, to spending time with a larger group of people who had access to many more drugs. Andi described to us how at the time he saw this as something to aim for. He saw the lifestyle that people in the criminal gangs had and he wanted to emulate it. He went on to explain to us that this desire was what he felt left him

susceptible to being groomed and criminally exploited into taking the life of another young man.

> *'So, once we found out that this bloke was dead, that's when it really sunk in. And what they've* (the groomers) *done is they tried blaming us for absolutely everything'* *(Andi)*

Ed, meanwhile, explained to us that the substance use challenges he faced continued as he progressed up the ranks of the criminal hierarchy:

> *'You just take a lot of drugs yourself and drink it up the wall and buy stuff that you don't need.' (Ed)*

Making money from other young people by exploiting them to sell drugs allowed Ed to feed his own habit, further entrenching his addiction to both alcohol and drugs. Ed also articulates how he found himself buying lots of material things that he felt he didn't need, to display both his wealth and status within the criminal gang. This echoes other findings by Harding (2020) and Marshall (2022) around potential motivations for involvement in county lines activity.

Finally, Hannah reflects that even after fighting to get herself out of the criminal and sexual exploitation she was a victim of, the long-term consequences of that lifestyle led to her developing an addiction to heroin.

> *'I ended up getting addicted to heroin, I'd gotten involved with some other people and ended up addicted to heroin.' (Hannah)*

Despite finding the internal grit to move across the country and become free from her exploiters, the trauma that she'd experienced both as a child and while she was being sexually and criminally exploited could only be eased by her addiction to heroin. This speaks to the potentially lifelong ramifications of being exploited as a child and young person.

Connecting education and exploitation

For all the participants, school had been a difficult and often unhappy experience. Many of them had been excluded from school and spent time in alternative provisions. Even for those who remained in mainstream schools, they often experienced bullying, frequently truanted, and were placed on reduced timetables and specialised behaviour programmes. All the participants felt out of place in school and that they did not matter to their teachers and peers. This echoes the work of MacDonald and Marsh (2005) which explores the lives of young people growing up in poverty in Teesside and found that poor educational experiences were one of the six significant pathways to young people feeling like they could

not find their place in mainstream society. Referring to discussions above, Dolly connects her difficult school experiences to her mental ill-health:

> *'I was in school up until year 10 and then I were on a part-time timetable because I was suffering with depression really bad and I'd self-harm. I had a couple of attempts where (I was) in hospital and so they put me on a part-time times table where I was only in three days a week but towards the end of year 11, I just stopped coming.' (Dolly)*

> *'There were times in my life where I genuinely wanted to try and do well in school, but it just wouldn't work, it just really really wouldn't work.' (Andi)*

Despite continually being told he wasn't good enough in school, Andi retained a belief achieving in school would be good for his future, so he redoubled his efforts to try and help him achieve academically. However, he never felt that his efforts were recognised and he would go back to simply muddling through and frequently getting in trouble.

> *'My life was never really settled. My mum moved me schools, so yeah, (year) 7, I went to one school and in year 8, she sent me to another school, and I didn't want to move. I didn't know anyone in that school and then I was being bullied in the school and I kept saying to my mum I'm being bullied, people say horrible things to me and my mum would just be like 'ignore them'. A lot of times we were just hanging around, we didn't go to school' (Chelsea)*

Chelsea's recollection highlights the interconnectedness of the problems she was experiencing. She directly relates moving home frequently and consequently being forced to change schools to the painful experiences she had in school. It is clear she did not spend long enough in school to make meaningful connections with other pupils and was frequently bullied for being new. Therefore, it is understandable that Chelsea eventually chose to not go to school and instead opted to spend time with the people that she met outside of school, often travelling across the city to meet up with people she knew from other areas.

Like many of the other young people we spoke to, Francis was on a reduced timetable.

> *'I spent more time out of school than in school. It got to a point where I was excluded three days a week, every week.' (Francis)*

However, this is not how it felt to Francis, the fact that he was only timetabled to be in school two days a week felt like a punishment, an exclusion which Francis attributes to the learning difficulties he faced due to his 'neurodisability'.

John sums up the experience of many children in contact with Children's Social Care of our education system:

> 'I tended to truancy a lot so I was straight in and just climbing over the fence.'
>
> (Brittany) why do you think that was, that you were doing this stuff?
>
> 'Because I was waking up to arguments every morning and then I'm going to school (and) I was getting bullied.' (John)

John would wake up in the morning to people constantly arguing, putting him on high alert before he had even left the house. He also described having to get himself ready for school and out of the door without any parental help. Once he had managed to get himself to school, he was faced with other children bullying him, compounding the difficulties that he already experienced that morning. For John (and many others), the only way they knew to escape was to run away from school, consequently being labelled as truant and further compounding the problems he faced in school (see Arthur, 2015; Cullingford, 2012; Reid, 2002; Reid 2003).

For all the young people we spoke to, navigating the education system while in care or at risk of being taken into care was an immensely difficult and alienating experience. They felt misunderstood and uncared for, reinforcing ideas of being seen as undeserving. Despite their circumstances, the young people we spoke to deserved the same support and opportunities as their peers. However, the education system often framed them as *troubled*, overlooking the complex challenges they faced and treating their behaviour as a symptom of personal failings rather than systemic neglect. In this context, their needs were not seen as worthy of genuine attention or compassion, which contributed to a sense of invisibility. At a time when they should have been forging lifelong friendships and negotiating the challenges of adolescence, these young people experienced educational settings which consistently failed to provide the support that could have been meaningful or responsive to their individual situations.

While it is undeniable that the education system faces unprecedented challenges, from resource shortages to increasing demands for oversight, this does not absolve it from recognising the multi-faceted struggles that many students face. The lack of an individualised, context-sensitive approach meant that the young people we spoke to were further alienated when they attended school, reinforcing the feeling that their challenges were either ignored or misunderstood. This systemic failure often left a gap that potential groomers could exploit, targeting young people with the attention they lacked. If the

education system were better equipped to recognise students as individuals, appreciate the complexities of their lives, and amplify their strengths, it could play a crucial role in countering the experiences faced by this study's participants. Instead, young people could be supported in a way that fosters a sense of mattering and mitigates the risks of exploitation.

CONTRADICTIONS OF CARE

Professional neglect

Within social work and social care practice there is a wide body of evidence that supports the use of relational practice (e.g. Ingram and Smith, 2018; Ruch, 2023). In 2020, the Care Review carried out in Scotland entitled *The Promise* (Duncan, 2020) focused on the premise that safe and loving relationships must form the foundation of all support for children. Similarly, other research indicates the power of relationship-based practice across the life course (Ferguson et al. 2022; Warwick et al. 2023; Frederick et al. 2023). This body of work has consistently shown that children and young people benefit from care that provides opportunities to discuss their worries, concerns and problems. For children who have been in contact with the care system, this is even more important since they often seek dependable and trustworthy relationships, in whatever form and by any means necessary, with strong, caring practitioners to help them cope with problems and lead fuller lives (Bryan et al., 2016).

Crucially, the effectiveness of such relational approaches depends not only on the relationships themselves but also on the professional intent that underpins them. Clearly, then, the role of intent is critical in social work. Social workers should have established intentions of being ethical in their practice and of remaining committed to ideas of social justice to best empower the children and young people they work with, promote their well-being, and tackle systemic barriers (Gambrill, 2012). However, the positive intent of professionals does not always align with the outcomes experienced by the young people they work with. In fact, the young people we spoke to explained that this lack of relational practice by the professionals in their lives often felt neglectful.

James described one of his first experiences with a social worker in the following way:

> 'So, then I waited for five minutes outside for this social worker and he was like I said, so what's going on and he went I'm going that way and you're going that way and that's it. And then he literally got in his car and drove off'. (James)

This incident took place after James had disclosed the abuse he had experienced at home to his teachers and social services were called by his school. He was told that he was going to be put into emergency foster care but, before the placement was finalised, James was left standing at the side of the road as the social worker who was supporting him to move into his foster home drove off. It cannot be underestimated the negative impact that this had on James. It was his first experience of Children's Social Care, and it undoubtedly went on to shape the difficult and troubled relationships he had with social care and with his school from that point. Dolly was similarly critical of her interactions with social workers.

> *'My social worker would just pick me up and take me for a Maccys and that's all well and good but I'm a kid in care. I've just been ripped from my mother who I still loved at the time. Obviously, I loved her to bits and I missed her but I couldn't go and see her so it's alright you coming and taking me shopping but what about me mental health? They just came there to earn their money; they just came there to get a pay check and like they didn't care about us' (Dolly)*

Dolly is evidently critical of what she viewed as the perfunctory, performative nature of the interaction she had with social work. Painfully, she describes the feeling of being ripped away from her mother and her reflections that the social workers involved in her life were doing nothing other than placing a sticking plaster on the gaping wound that left. She goes on to describe how she and her social workers went through the motions of going for food, nominally pretending that the social worker knew about Dolly's life and cared about her. However, very little was being done to support her with her deteriorating mental health and escalating drug misuse problems. A feeling of professional neglect, from a range of professionals and organisations, was experienced by many young people in this study:

> *'I think they knew but it was kind of just like, they've got money, they're doing alright, and I don't know, because I don't know what they were thinking, but I think there's no way that they wouldn't have known.' (Ed)*

> *'Back then I never really liked the hostel members of staff. They never really reported me missing.' (Chelsea)*

> *'No family, no connection there and nobody really pays any interest. You know the staff in the care homes never really paid any interest and it's like these guys are actually showing me some interest.' (Hannah)*

Ed, Hannah and Chelsea epitomise what we term professional neglect. Ed articulates well his bemusement about how the people who were meant to care for him in the residential

children's homes did not ask questions about why and how he had the money that he had, money that he had made from selling drugs for his exploiters. Nor did they ask questions about the material goods that he had purchased with the money he had been given. He concludes that they must have known what was going on, but they chose not to ask potentially difficult questions. Chelsea explains that while she was living in semi-independent accommodation, still under the care of the Children's Social Care system, she frequently went missing from the hostel she was living in and would not return for many days. However, never once did the hostel report her missing. Chelsea interpreted this as meaning that they did not care about her whereabouts or if she was safe and well. Hannah illustrates very clearly how the lack of connection, belonging and being made to feel like she mattered at home was compounded by her experiences with staff in care homes. She felt they were not interested in her life, and she directly relates this to her exploiters being able to groom her into criminal and sexual exploitation since they gave her the attention she craved.

Lily summarises exceptionally well not only the impact of coming from a family that you feel does not care about you, neglect you and make you feel like you don't matter has on an individual, but also the compounding effect of this when people who are paid to look after you are also neglectful of your needs.

> *'You go from having parents that are not looking after you how they should and then they put you in care and you think, 'at least I'm gonna get looked after right now', and then you don't. Like, you just don't trust anyone… I think authenticity and integrity are at the centre of it; they have to actually give a shit '(Lily)*

Lilly's reflections show the expectation gap that is created. Many of the young people we spoke to felt relief when they found out they were going to be taken into the care system, only to be let down and therefore left distrusting of everyone they met subsequently. As Lily argues, authenticity and integrity are at the heart of such experiences, and she believed that it should not be too hard to make children and young people feel like they are valued: all you need to do is 'give a shit'.

The range and diversity of professional neglect reported by participants in this study is particularly troublesome. All of the young people experienced some form of professional neglect, but this took different forms at different times. This suggests that professional neglect of children and young people who have been in care and criminally exploited is endemic across the system. It is not in one service, in one location, or one speciality. The young people we spoke to experienced it in social work, social care, education, and health services. The experience of this neglect by professionals combined with the trauma and

neglect they received at the hands of their families undoubtedly left the door open for the criminal gangs that went on to groom and exploit these young people.

Falling off the care cliff

Similarly to the professional neglect that the young people experienced whilst in care, all of them told us that neglectful practices continued once they had 'aged out' of the Children's Social Care system. The phrase 'care cliff' refers to the abrupt transition experienced by young people leaving care, typically when they turn eighteen (Palmer et al. 2022). Unlike their peers who grow up within their families, care experienced young people face a sudden transition to independence. While many young people continue to receive emotional and practical support from their families well into adulthood, those leaving care are formally categorised as 'care leavers' once they reach adulthood. For many, this change marks the loss of much of the support they previously relied on. The rapid and compressed nature of this transition, coupled with the absence of a robust safety net, often results in a range of negative outcomes (Carr and McAlister, 2016). The young people in the study frequently emphasised the profound impact of this care cliff, repeatedly linking the resulting void in their lives to the criminal exploitation they were later groomed into.

> *'It was a six-month tenancy but they gave you kind of no support whatsoever to deal with that. So, we're kind of just running riot, basically just doing what 16 - 17-year-olds do.' (Ed)*

Ed was only 16 years old at the time he was given a tenancy on his own and had no idea how to run a household. Yet he was offered no support from social services to help him do this. As he explains, the lack of support led him to 'running riot', eventually leading to greater involvement with criminal gangs and drug distribution. Francis describes a similar experience:

> *'After I got moved into the hostel, [social services] backed off right and left me to them, because they didn't feel like they could add anything at the time.' (Francis)*

As Francis explained to us, social services' decision to 'back off' once he moved into a hostel made him feel like they had done all they could for him and that he needed to find his own way. Painfully for Francis, this meant leaving him open to being treated as a modern-day slave at the hands of his exploiters.

Similarly to Ed and Francis, James found himself moving from residential childcare into a

house share with other 16-18-year-olds. He explained to us that he found this experience frightening and overwhelming, and the prevalence of drugs and violence within the accommodation made it a target for the local criminal gangs for grooming and criminal exploitation.

> 'So it's basically a house share pretty much, but with 16 to 18 year olds. There was loads of drugs and violence.' (James)

Dolly also attributes the lack of supervision and support from supported accommodation staff as a factor in her exploitation:

> 'I moved into a supported flat… so we were left on our own half the time and that's where the dealers started because they know when staff would be in, and they knew when staff would be out. And so pretty much I were living in a crack-den at that time… I didn't hear from [my social worker] for a month. I had to keep ringing the (hostel). I was like 'look, I don't know what I'm doing. I don't know how to pay me gas bill. I don't know how to pay my TV licence. Like help me'. And there was no help at all.' (Dolly)

Dolly went on to explain that the lack of supervision essentially meant that she was living in a trap house with her exploiters and groomers being able to come and go as they pleased, using her house to distribute drugs to other young people. Dolly further explains her experiences of seeking help while living in the supported flat, but the lack of support left her feeling like she had to beg for any help that she got, and that the staff were doing her a favour by offering her the support they were paid to give.

Hannah describes a feeling of becoming institutionalised having been in care since childhood. She explained that very little was done to prepare her for leaving care and that when she did have to leave, there was no support offered or available to her.

> 'I mean you know, going from 13 years old to nearly 18 and you've essentially been if you want to use the word institutionalised for all those years. You've had everything done for you then it's like oh here you go, bye do it yourself. And it's like, what the fuck do I do?' (Hannah)

Hannah's experience suggests that her feelings of institutionalisation left her not knowing how to cater for her basic needs.

We can see in all the examples above how the semi-independent accommodation that was meant to be supportive was in fact a very difficult experience for all of the participants.

Despite having poor experiences previously living in foster homes, kinship care or residential children's homes, all the young people we spoke to explained how the gap that leaving care left in their lives was filled by their exploiters. Undoubtedly, leaving care with little or no follow-up support, either practically or emotionally, left these young people feeling they had nowhere to turn for the support they desperately needed. Consequently, it is of little surprise that when their groomers and exploiters told them they could offer the support they needed, many jumped at this opportunity.

MASTERMINDS OF MANIPULATION

Diversity of CCE

Discussions concerning CCE often focus on the county lines method of drugs distribution (Stone, 2018; Robinson et al. 2019; Spicer, 2019; Harding, 2020; Olver and Cockbain, 2021). However, in this study we found that CCE is experienced much more widely than this and young people had been criminally exploited through illegal activities as wide ranging as county lines, shoplifting to order, burglary, drug cultivation, incitement to commit acts of violence - sometimes as severe as murder, dog fighting, cuckooing - but also cutting, bagging up, stashing of drugs, modern slavery and fraud. Similarly to work carried out by Dixon (2023), we argue that it is crucial that all types of CCE are considered as harmful to develop more effective responses.

The other important factor in the relaying of the experiences of being criminally exploited for the young people we spoke to, was how frequently these different methods of CCE intersected. We regularly heard about young people being groomed into running county lines as well as cutting, bagging, and stashing drugs. We also heard how some of the young people who were shoplifting to order were also victims of modern slavery and fraud. At the most extreme end, we heard about young people being exploited to commit acts of serious violence alongside distributing drugs.

It is essential, therefore, that when we consider how we best support young people who are groomed into criminal exploitation, we understand that we are in fact dealing with a complex, intersecting and often continuously moving feast. The young people we spoke to explained that the groomers and exploiters that they were the victims of adapted and responded quickly to whatever the needs of the criminal gang were at the time. It is also important to note that some of the groomers and exploiters were not what or who we might think of as traditional criminal gangs. In several cases, exploitation took place at the hands of a few individuals who saw an opportunity to exploit people that they perceived to be vulnerable for

their own purposes and gains.

The role of gender

Research and policy making concerning CCE has tended to focus on how boys are criminally exploited (Marshall, 2022). In some ways, this focus is justified given that National Referral Mechanism (NRM) data suggests far more boys are criminally exploited than girls, with 73% of potential victims being referred from January to March 2024 being boys (Home Office, 2024). However, this study found that CCE is still a significant issue for girls and is often enmeshed with experiences of CSE. Harriet describes her experiences of these multiple and simultaneous forms of abuse:

> *'I'm like at the houses that I was at and basically people would come in just to get some stuff, crackheads like that's what we call them. So, the people who use drugs used to come into the house. It was horrible because I used to get abused in there sexually.' (Harriet)*

Harriet describes how after she was sent to trap houses across the country by criminal gangs, she spent time living there and distributing drugs. She went on to explain to us that when people came to the house to buy drugs, she was frequently raped and sexually abused. Like the drugs she had moved across the country, she was treated as a commodity. The compounding effect of this trauma is something she lives with every day of her life, something that she is still dealing with a long time after her criminal and sexual exploitation ended. Hannah similarly experienced overlapping forms of abuse:

> *'We need you to take these drugs. We need you to collect the money. We then need you to pick up the money of the guys you've slept with. Then we'll come pick you up in a taxi at 3/4 in the morning give us the money we'll bung you £20. At the end of it, I wasn't having to sleep with people but if I did something wrong, I was still being raped.' (Hannah)*

Hannah describes adeptly how the criminal exploitation she experienced took place hand in hand with her sexual exploitation. Hannah also explained to us that despite her exploitation making a lot of money for her groomers, she often only received £20. She went on to tell us that at the time she was grateful for this £20 as she was so deep in her drug addiction that she was able to use this money to acquire more drugs. Hannah described to us that as she progressed up the hierarchy within the criminal gang she was exploited by, she was no longer having to run drugs across the city. However, at this time she was still being criminally exploited as she was cutting, bagging, and stashing drugs in her flat. But what she described

as sexual exploitation had stopped at this time. Nevertheless, she went on to painfully describe how when things went wrong in the criminal activity of the gang, even if it was not something directly related to her, she was frequently raped as a punishment.

Similarly, Dolly's sexual exploitation was bound up with her criminal exploitation and her substance misuse issues.

> *'I probably would have done owt for them drugs, at that point like I was selling myself a lot just to fund my drug addiction, it wasn't a nice time.' (Dolly)*

At this time, Dolly was still living in a flat that had been cuckooed. Not only was she cutting, bagging and stashing drugs in return for being given drugs to support her own habit, but she was also being sexually exploited in return for drugs.

The enmeshment of criminal and sexual exploitation creates a further complication. When we consider how to best deal with exploiters in a system that does very little to recognise and appreciate context, unpacking and understanding the traumatic and intersecting experiences of people such as Harriet, Hannah, and Dolly is incredibly challenging. This raises complex questions concerning how to legislate and provide justice for young people who have endured life changing experiences such as those described above.

The stories above undoubtedly illustrate how the combination of criminal and sexual exploitation is a real issue for girls who are groomed and exploited. Given the overrepresentation of boys in criminal exploitation, it is right that much focus on how to prevent criminal exploitation and grooming is developed through understandings of boys' experiences. However, in doing so, we cannot ignore the stories of the trauma, pain, and heartache of the girls we spoke to. We cannot allow the fact that most people who are criminally exploited are boys to detract from the fact that so often for girls who are exploited, the experience leaves long standing psychological and physical trauma.

Identity formation

Similarly to how we saw a gendered response to criminal exploitation through the involvement of sexual exploitation for girls, we also saw some indication of this with the males that we spoke too. Some of the males in the study felt that one of the drivers for them being susceptible to being criminally exploited was their identity. Specifically, this concerned notions of masculinity and feeling accepted.

> *'I didn't have an identity and I wanted to kind of be known as something or, see what I'm trying to say, I couldn't just go through the normal thing of being at school,*

because it wasn't very good at school. So, I needed to do something, to be (something).' (Ed)

Ed went on to explain that he had grown up around what he perceived to be very masculine role models due to his early exposure to familial criminality. Consequently, for Ed's involvement in criminal gangs was something that, as a young person, appeared to him to be something men did and therefore became something he aspired to do. Andi similarly identified masculinity and glamour in his criminal activities:

'I was 10 men. No one could tell me what to do. I think the other thing was that I genuinely wanted to be, not a gangster as such, but like this persona that if people feared me in the sense of get on wrong side of me and I'll do something you don't want. People'd leave me to do my own thing.' (Andi)

Andi bought into what he saw as the glamour of the criminal gang lifestyle. He explained that he was not necessarily attracted to the material wealth that he saw his groomers and exploiters have, but instead it was a sense of identity that he sought. He saw that people feared the 'elders' in the criminal gangs he associated with and therefore they commanded respect and were able to get people to do what they were told. Andi wanted this too. He wanted a reputation as someone who was feared so that people would do what he asked of them.

The burden of guilt and shame

Many of the young people we spoke to in the study told us that they felt guilty about both the criminal activities that they carried out and, in some cases, guilty that they had then gone on to groom other young people into criminal exploitation. Some, such as Hannah, described how they felt an intense shame about their experiences, suggesting that they were intrinsically ashamed of the person they had become due to the exploitation that they endured.

'It's like you kind of got a bit of responsibility as well because you've got people beneath you and that's where the guilt part comes in. You know, the girls underneath me that I got involved that's still going through all this but I'm sitting up here kind of with the big guys still being raped and battered and whatever but still getting my needs met. And it made it a little easier on me because I'm not having to go to these houses every night you know and plough my way through 6 or 7 men- it's a really crude way to put.' (Hannah)

Ed reported similar feelings of guilt:

> *'I (feel) really shameful and guilty of the things I did, and I just wish you could go back and just say to that 16-year-old just don't bother, you're gonna get yourself in a lot of bother for trying to prove a point- for no real reason… One lad in particular, I got him into selling drugs. So, I guess you could say I was the exploiter in that situation in a sense, because I kind of encouraged him to do it because. (I was) trying to show him how much money you could make, which I feel a lot of guilt for.' (Ed)*

Chanel articulates above the very complicated role agency plays in criminal exploitation.

> *'People just overlook me as the bad person and just think that I was exploited all the time when in fact in reality, a lot of the time it was actually me doing recruitment and that was bringing in other young kids to be exploited.' (Chanel)*

The importance of this observation should not be overlooked. It is easy to look at the young people who we spoke to as one thing: a victim. However, it must be remembered that they are agentic creatures who have the capacity to make decisions of their own.

Chelsea similarly reflected on her criminal past:

> *'(A) group of us, and I'm not proud when I say this because I'm like, 'this is really not me' but a group of us robbed a girl's phone. And then we beat her up really bad, really badly and then we committed burglary. And that's just like the stuff that we got caught for if that makes sense.' (Chelsea)*

Similarly to Ed, Chelsea expresses the guilt she feels over the criminal acts she was groomed into committing. Interestingly, she makes a distinction between the guilt that she feels for the things she was caught for and the things that happened that she was not caught for. This implies that when she was caught, she experienced a sense of justice had been done which helps to assuage her guilt for these crimes.

Of all the participants, Dolly was able to articulate most meaningfully the embodied shame she felt from her previous involvement with drugs.

> *'I were too scared to tell me midwife I used to be a drug addict… (I thought) they were literally going to rip my kid out of my arms the minute I gave birth.' (Dolly)*

She explained to us that after getting clean, when she was pregnant and went to her midwife appointments, she felt too ashamed to admit to the midwife that she used to misuse substances as she feared the potential repercussions of her child being taken away from her.

The way that participants highlighted the guilt and shame that they still feel today about being criminally and sexually exploited, as well as sometimes recruiting other young people into exploitation, serves to remind us of the long-lasting consequences of these experiences. Many of the young people in the study have been free of criminal and sexual exploitation for many years, but they explained to us that they still felt the hangover of guilt and shame from their experiences of exploitation.

MOVING ON AND MOVING UP

Breaking free

For all the young people in the study, seeking help to get out of the CCE they were in was very difficult. They felt they did not have anywhere to turn. Even when it got to the point in their exploitation where they felt ready, able, and wanted to get themselves out of that setting, they still did not have access to services which could effectively support them to do this. This speaks to the complexity of the problem that we face. As discussed above, CCE is multifaceted, complex, and forever changing. Set against a system that is not designed to appreciate context, where rigid structures and responses are organised around a one size fits all model, it is clear why the young people in the study could not find the support they so desperately needed. For all of these young people, this left them feeling there was nowhere to turn, and they had to use whatever resources, internal grit and skills they had in order to get themselves out of their situations in any way they could.

Undoubtedly, the feelings of helplessness that our participants discussed are intrinsically part of the model that groomers use to keep young people under their control. However, many of these young people recognised that they did not have the support around them to ask for help when they needed it or trusted that if they did ask for help that anyone would be able to offer the support they needed.

> 'Towards the end I wanted to get out and if someone could have promised me that they would move me away completely so I could start fresh then I would have in a heartbeat. I couldn't because that wasn't possible. So, I got out in my own way.' (Dolly)

Dolly elaborated on this account by explaining that her exit from criminal and sexual exploitation came when she became pregnant. The responsibility of having to look after another life was enough of an impetus for her to reduce her drug use and accept the help of services to support her child. Ed similarly reported a lack of help to exit his exploitative circumstances:

'I mean there was nobody there offering help. I think for me it was kind of just the right time to stop and once I knew I was ready to, I kind of tried my best. And I don't know what would happen if I didn't get that job; who knows?' (Ed)

Finding legitimate employment was Ed's opportunity to get out of his exploitation and his involvement with criminal gangs. Ed was lucky to find a job that provided him with a decent wage so that he no longer needed to earn money by distributing drugs. Francis similarly describes how he was desperate to get out of the exploitation he found himself in but he did not know who he should ask for help:

'I didn't know where to turn and didn't know how to get out of the CCE. To be honest, I didn't know who to turn to and what to do. If I knew sooner, I think I would have stopped it sooner. I don't think I would have put myself through about 18 months of trauma.' (Francis)

Alongside a lack of knowledge about how and where to obtain support to exit exploitation, young people also reported a profound barrier: not realising that their circumstances were in fact exploitative and hence having little impetus to seek help. Harriet describes this:

'I didn't know that I was actually in it and no I didn't want to get out because that was my life. Also, because I never really thought that anybody would take me seriously because I was always looked at as troubled or a bad kid, misbehaving for no reason, stuff like that. When it wasn't actually the case.' (Harriet)

For many young people in this study, being abused and exploited was such an ingrained part of their upbringing that they viewed the situation as normal. Therefore, they did not know they were in a situation they had to escape from. But even when young people seek to exit their exploitative circumstances, they are faced with barriers of distrust and stigma linked to behavioural issues, as Harriet explains above.

Chanel clearly recalls asking the support staff in the hostel that she was living in for help to escape her exploiters.

'I remember asking the people in the hostel to help me get out and they said all they could do was call the Police, all that would do would get me killed.' (Chanel).

For others, physically moving to new locations was key to them escaping their exploiters:

'I got myself out, and how I got myself out was I'm originally raised in West London. And I live in Southeast London. I completely cut off contact with everyone. And I

161

moved out of the area, and I started fresh and that was for meeting other people that were in care and was doing positive things. And I got inspired by them and I was like, I want to do something with my life.' (Chelsea)

'I got pulled into the lap dancing scene and during that it was like can't do this anymore and like I need to go. And I'm fortunate enough that one day I literally had all the money I had saved up, just packed a bag and abandoned my flat and my town and obviously other than going to see my gran, I don't go back,' (Hannah)

For Chelsea, exiting CCE meant moving across the country and leaving behind not only her exploiters but many of the people she had built relationships with. She knew that completely cutting off contact with everyone was the only way that she was going to be able to escape the exploitation that she had endured. She goes on to explain that when she moved, she was able to make connections with other young people who had had similar experiences to her own. She saw that they were doing positive things with their lives, and this inspired her to get her social work degree. Similarly, for Hannah, moving away to another part of the country was how she managed to escape her exploiters. She explains that she started working in the sex industry, this time on her own terms, and this gave her the financial freedom to be able to eventually escape the years of criminal and sexual exploitation she had faced.

The Importance of Generativity

For most of the participants, it was important for them to feel that their experiences, no matter how traumatising for them and heart-breaking for others to hear, were not in vain. Part of the process of them understanding their own experiences and being reflective about their past led to a feeling of wanting to support others who had been through similar experiences. Maruna (2001) building on the concept of the wounded healer, describes this as a form of generativity. For the participants, offering advice and support to those in need was often as beneficial for the person offering the support as it was for the person receiving it.

Most of the young people in the study spoke proudly about where they are now. All but one participant is currently working or volunteering in areas that they described as 'giving back'. Some of them spoke about this as being an opportunity for some good to come from their experiences, and they described helping others who had been in similar situations to themselves as important, particularly in helping them to feel like they matter. James, for instance, has been working with other care experienced young people on advisory boards

for various charities and research projects for the last few years.

> *'Basically, getting involved in the past few years really and in different charities advisory boards and things like this. So, I'm really thankful that people can sort of give a chance and sort of speak about these things.' (James)*

James believes his experiences of the care system can be used to both create policy change as well as support children and young people who are currently in care. Similarly, Ed told us that after getting out of criminal exploitation and criminal gang activity, he chose to work for a charity supporting people who had experiences like his own.

> *'I worked in Blackpool in the third sector, a charity thing working with people with multiple disadvantages, drug addiction, mental health, offending.' (Ed)*

Ed is now in higher education and using his experiences of the care system and criminal gangs to inform some of this charitable work. Hannah has similarly entered higher education:

> *'I'm doing a degree in counselling and psychology because I want to work with people in the care system, you know helping them avoid trauma or deal with the trauma they got in the care system.' (Hannah).*

Hannah specifically explains that her ambitions lie in supporting young people who have had similar experiences to her own. She's undertaking her degree in counselling to work with people who are care experienced so that they can start to process, understand and heal from the trauma that the care system and criminal exploitation has left them with.

> *'I should have started with 'I'm a trained social worker'.' (Chelsea)*

Chelsea explained to us her motivation for entering the social work profession was due to her experiences as a young person of the Children's Social Care system, and her involvement with the criminal justice system. It was important for Chelsea that she was able to develop the skills to become a fully qualified social worker, however she emphasised that it was the combination of the learned skills and the knowledge she had gained from her lived experience that makes her a good social worker:

> *'I understand everything in retrospect, all the mental health problems, the bad parenting, all the kind of like generational trauma. I think because of the doing the (social work) course, I look back and I'm like 'I fully understand this woman now'.' (Chelsea)*

Elsewhere, Francis decided to use his experience of semi-independent accommodation and

the criminal exploitation that he experienced to directly work in the hostel he had lived in.

> *'I ended up still working with (hostel) up until last year. And then I've done my NVQ Level 2 peer mentoring.' (Francis)*

Whilst working there, Francis undertook peer mentoring qualifications and was able to carry out direct support work with people who had been living in the same situation as him a few years before.

Andi was one of the handful of participants who had served a custodial sentence. When he was released from prison, he was determined to use the knowledge that he'd gained from his experiences of the care system and exploitation, as well as of the custodial youth estate to support other young people.

> *'We're talking about CCE and CSE as well and we're making young people aware of what that looks like, how to spot early signs, where to report it which is absolutely massive because if that were there when I were going through it all I'd like to think at least one person out of that would have said 'Andi did you know this is what they were talking about last week in assembly?'.'(Andi)*

Andi now works for the Youth Justice Service, running intervention groups with children and young people being supported by youth offending teams.

CONCLUSION

The findings presented in this chapter highlight that young people are significantly more susceptible to exploitation when they grow up in material poverty, face experiences of adultification, experience mental health challenges, undergo substance misuse, and endure negative school experiences. Furthermore, a pervasive sense of not mattering manifested via neglect from professionals and a lack of support upon leaving care, were identified as key factors in exacerbating and sustaining their criminal exploitation. The findings also highlight the diverse ways that CCE is experienced and the important role that gender plays in some forms of exploitation, including overlapping criminal and sexual exploitation. However, we also discovered some bright spots of good practice which centred around good, effective relational work. In these cases, individuals had pushed professional boundaries and taken the time to develop trusting, caring and lasting relationships with the children and young people that they worked with. It is perhaps not surprising that of all the young people we spoke to, the two that were least impacted by CCE were those who felt

they were able to develop significant relationships with at least one trusted adult in their life; an adult that made them feel like they mattered. Despite all the harm and trauma these young people endured, the fact that most of them spoke about their need to ensure something positive comes from their experiences by providing support and help to others speaks to the intrinsic good in human nature.

As we reflect on the findings of this research, it becomes clear that there are significant gaps in both support systems and societal understandings of the experiences of young people in care who have been groomed into criminal exploitation. The findings presented in this chapter reveal the depth and complexity of the harms experienced by care experienced young people affected by criminal exploitation. Their stories expose how intersecting factors, such as material poverty, adultification, mental ill-health, instability in care, and inadequate post-care support, combine to create environments in which exploitation can take root. Participants also highlighted the profound difference that consistent, caring, and relational practice can make in helping them feel valued and supported.

These insights point to the urgent need for change at both individual and systemic levels. Addressing the conditions that enable exploitation requires interventions that recognise the structural nature of harm while also centring the voices of those most affected. The following chapter develops these ideas further, situating the findings within the theoretical framework of this study, mattering, social harm, and poverty, to explore how the Neglect Nexus operates and how it might be disrupted through more relational and justice-oriented practice.

Chapter 6: Discussion

Introduction

Care-experienced young people who have experienced child criminal exploitation (CCE) occupy a uniquely precarious position within society, where systemic failures, social marginalisation, and individual trauma converge. Too often, these young people find themselves caught at the intersection of poverty, structural harm, and institutional neglect, with far-reaching consequences for their identity, autonomy, and well-being. Within this context, the concept of mattering, the deeply human need to feel valued and to contribute meaningfully, becomes especially salient. For care experienced individuals, who may already feel disposable due to fractured familial ties and institutionalisation, the absence of mattering is not merely emotional but existential (Flett, 2018; Levell, 2024).

This chapter draws together the interconnected frameworks of mattering, social harm, and poverty to examine how care experienced young people can become more susceptible to criminal exploitation, and how systems that are meant to protect them may, in fact, reproduce harm. Criminologists and social policy scholars have increasingly argued that traditional approaches to crime and safeguarding fail to account for the structural inequalities that underpin CCE (Billingham and Irwin-Rogers, 2022; Pemberton, 2015). The lived realities of these young people reveal that poverty, instability, and exclusion from education are not simply risk factors, but cumulative harms that strip children of their sense of worth and agency (Bywaters et al, 2020; Featherstone et al, 2018).

By framing CCE through the lens of social harm, this chapter highlights how harm is often legal, normalised, and institutionalised. The analysis explores how children seek visibility, power, and belonging in exploitative relationships precisely because these needs are unmet elsewhere. Simultaneously, it examines how trauma-aware, mattering-based interventions, can provide vital counter-narratives. In doing so, this chapter argues for a radical shift in how we understand, support, and care for exploited young people: not as problems to be managed, but as individuals whose mattering must be affirmed.

Mattering and anti-mattering: The social meaning of significance in the lives of care experienced and criminally exploited young people

One of the most consistent and powerful themes emerging from this study was the centrality of mattering in the lives of care experienced young people who had been criminally exploited. Although the term itself was rarely, if ever, used by participants, their narratives

were saturated with the emotional and existential need to feel valued, loved, and of significance in the world. Mattering, as understood through these accounts, was not an abstract psychological concept, it was a lived reality, something they yearned for in the absence of stable care relationships. In contrast, the absence of mattering, what we might call anti-mattering (Flett, 2018) functioned both as a precondition for and consequence of their exploitation. Their experiences revealed that being made to feel insignificant, unseen, and disposable was not incidental to their abuse, it was central to how they were groomed, used, and discarded.

Adopting Prilleltensky's (2020) definition of mattering, which describes it as the dual experience of feeling valued and being of value to other*s*, the concept emerges as key to understanding how children are drawn into and may eventually exit criminal exploitation. Mattering operates at multiple, interconnected levels: psychologically, relationally, institutionally, and structurally. It is what Kaschak (2013: 439) evocatively calls 'the glue of all human experience, and what Elliott et al. (2004: 39) define as 'the perception that we are a significant part of the world around us'. These definitions reflect exactly what young people in this study were describing, often without the above terminology, but with acute emotional clarity. Their testimonies made it clear that mattering is not simply a protective factor; it is also a site of profound vulnerability. When a young person feels that they matter, often through consistent, affirming relationships with trusted adults, they are more likely to feel able to resist or escape exploitative situations. Conversely, when they are repeatedly ignored, dismissed, or subjected to institutional neglect, the resulting void becomes fertile ground for grooming and continued abuse.

This pattern was illustrated vividly in the accounts of James and Dolly, both of whom described rare but meaningful experiences of being noticed and cared for by adults. James recalled a teacher who continued to support him after he entered care: *'He basically came to my foster carers' house and made sure that I was okay.'*. This small gesture, visiting him at home, was far more than a courtesy. It was, in James's words, one of the reasons his exposure to exploitation was *'short lived and limited'*. Similarly, Dolly described how the love she felt from her first foster carers created a sense of stability: *'We just had such a good relationship, and I actually was really happy there and I wasn't shop lifting or owt.'*. These rare moments of relational mattering disrupted the cycle of harm. They offered the young people a glimpse of what it meant to feel significant, and, crucially, to feel safe.

However, for many others, it was the *absence* of mattering that drew them into exploitation. Hannah, for example, spoke plainly about her craving for connection: *'Because I essentially just wanted a sense of belonging, you know, I didn't have any family.'*. Her words reflect

what Flett (2018) describes as a common misunderstanding, that belonging and mattering are interchangeable. In fact, as Flett argues, mattering goes beyond simply being included in a group. It involves being *of* value to that group. For Hannah, the gang she became involved with offered her a counterfeit sense of belonging, but what made it emotionally compelling was the feeling that she finally mattered to someone.

Harriet echoed this dynamic, describing how she was conditioned to associate love with material provision: *'They would give me cash and shoes and clothes and I thought that's what love is.'.* This confusion, born of neglect and abuse, was then exploited by those who groomed her, offering her gifts and attention that mimicked affection. The result was a dangerous substitution: material gain stood in for emotional security, and Harriet was caught in a relationship where exploitation masqueraded as care.

Chanel expressed this devastating contradiction in even starker terms: *'The love, it sounds stupid. But the love that I felt from my exploiter, I didn't want to leave that.'*. Her words remind us that exploitation is often emotionally entangled; it is not only about coercion, but about filling a vacuum left by systemic failure. Chanel didn't stay because she wanted to commit crimes, she stayed because she wanted to be loved. The affective economy of grooming, as this study reveals, trades in unmet emotional needs. When children are denied love, safety, and recognition by the systems meant to protect them, they are more susceptible to those who offer even a simulation of significance.

These stories support the work of Billingham and Irwin-Rogers (2022), who argue that a diminished sense of mattering constitutes a form of social harm. Drawing on Rosenberg's sociological framing, they highlight mattering as a fundamental human drive, a drive routinely crushed by structural marginalisation, institutional neglect, and exclusion. When this need goes unmet, young people may act out or seek connection in harmful ways, not as a sign of pathology but as a form of relational protest suggesting that violence and exploitation often follow from chronic experiences of being invisible. This thesis aligns strongly with that view. The young people in this study did not commit offences out of deviance or greed; they were seeking recognition, trying to count in a world that consistently rendered them unimportant.

It is therefore essential to distinguish between belonging and mattering. While the two concepts are related, they are not the same. Elliott et al. (2004) describe mattering as comprising three core dimensions: awareness (being noticed and remembered), importance (being cared for and invested in), and reliance (being trusted and depended upon). Belonging may encompass one or two of these elements but mattering integrates them into a relational whole. The young people in this study often described feeling they didn't matter

in any of these ways. Social workers forgot appointments; teachers ignored warning signs; foster carers failed to nurture; care staff were not attentive to calls for help. These weren't just bureaucratic oversights, they were interpreted as messages that the young person was not worth attention, care, or effort. These everyday indignities added up to what this thesis terms the Neglect Nexus: a multidimensional pattern of anti-mattering that spans the micro (individual relationships), meso (organisational culture), and macro (structural policy) levels.

Nevertheless, the study also revealed that a shift toward mattering, however momentary, could be transformative. For some, this came in the form of sustained relationships with mentors or youth workers who showed up consistently and without judgment. These relationships provided a new narrative: one in which the young person was more than their risk profile or case notes. Chelsea, for instance, described how the absence of nurturing had shaped her vulnerability: *'But in terms of the nurturing, the nurturing just wasn't there. I really wanted to be loved.'*. Her longing was not for services or sanctions, it was for care.

This need for relational anchoring connects closely to the work of Gray et al. (2023) and McNeill and Schinkel (2024), who argue that young people who have endured adverse childhood experiences require more than safeguarding. They need restorative belonging, a deep sense of being recognised, valued, and included. This is not just a matter of emotional support, but of social justice. As the study found, some participants began to reclaim their sense of mattering through helping others, becoming mentors, peer researchers, or advocates. This aligns with Prilleltensky's emphasis that mattering involves not only feeling valued but being of value. For these young people, contributing to the wellbeing of others became a source of healing, identity, and pride.

These findings have profound implications for both theory and practice. Mattering must be treated not as a peripheral concern, but as central to how we understand care, exploitation, and recovery. It should guide how we design services, train professionals, evaluate outcomes, and shape policy. Recognising anti-mattering as a form of cumulative harm forces us to see beyond individual behaviour and examine the systems that produce invisibility. It demands that we create relationally consistent services, where young people are seen, remembered, and invested in. It calls for training professionals not just to manage risk, but to develop connections. It suggests that services must measure not only outputs, but the subjective experience of mattering itself.

Critically, this also shows that youth-led and peer-based roles, where young people can be both supported and supportive, offer a model of community-based mattering that has lasting value. At the policy level, recognising the importance of mattering calls for nothing less than

a cultural shift: one that places relational wellbeing at the heart of youth work, social care, and criminal justice.

Social Harm: Understanding cumulative and structural injustice

The notion of care within children's social work is marked by a paradox. While systems are intended to support and protect, research shows they can also reproduce harm. Large-scale analyses reveal extensive and uneven intrusion into family life, concentrated in the poorest communities, raising concerns about iatrogenic and inequitable effects (Bilson and Martin, 2017; Bywaters et al. 2016). Evidence from the Edinburgh Study indicates that formal system contact can itself heighten later justice involvement, consistent with labelling effects (McAra and McVie, 2010). Within residential care, studies question whether organisational practices and environments contribute to criminalisation, suggesting potential criminogenic dynamics inside care settings (Hayden, 2010). Parallel critiques of surveillance-led practice and predictive risk modelling highlight how risk technologies can stigmatise and harm already-marginalised families (Peckover, 2013; Keddell, 2015). Taken together, this growing body of peer-reviewed work shows how systems designed to safeguard children may, under certain conditions, become active agents of harm. (Bilson and Martin, 2017; Bywaters et al. 2016; McAra and McVie, 2010; Hayden, 2010; Peckover, 2013; Keddell, 2015). This contradiction is captured starkly through the lens of social harm or zemiology, a criminological and social policy perspective that highlights the limitations of focusing on crime alone and instead directs attention to the broader harms experienced by individuals and communities (Hillyard et al. 2004; Canning and Tombs, 2021).

The testimonies of care experienced young people such as James, Dolly, Ed, Chelsea, Hannah, Lily, and Francis make clear that social workers and care professionals often failed to embody the core values of integrity, authenticity, and attentiveness. These experiences reflect a form of professional neglect, a relational breakdown where the moral and professional obligations of care are not just absent but are experienced as deeply harmful. As Bryan et al (2016) suggest, children in care seek dependable, emotionally responsive relationships, especially in times of crisis. Yet, many of these young people were met with silence, dismissal, or tokenistic gestures, leaving them further adrift.

Within social work practice, the importance of relational approaches is well documented (Ingram and Smith, 2018; Ruch, 2023). Relational practice asserts that meaningful, respectful relationships between practitioners and children are not an optional extra, they are the foundation of ethical and effective support. This sentiment was a central tenet of The Promise (Duncan, 2020), Scotland's Care Review, which argued that all children must grow

up feeling loved and safe. Yet, the gap between professional intent and lived experience remains stark. As Gambrill (2012) posits, social workers may begin with ethical commitments to social justice and empowerment, but these intentions are meaningless if they do not translate into outcomes. The experiences of James and Dolly show how this disjunction plays out in practice. James was left abandoned at the roadside by the very person charged with ensuring his safety after disclosing abuse, a formative moment that shattered his trust in the care system. Dolly, on the other hand, critiques the superficiality of her interactions with social workers, highlighting that shopping trips could never substitute emotional support or therapeutic engagement: *'What about me mental health?'*

These are not isolated accounts. Ed, Chelsea, and Hannah describe a spectrum of professional indifference. Ed remarks that staff must have known he was being exploited but chose not to intervene. Chelsea's repeated disappearances went unreported. Hannah felt invisible in her care home, eventually finding a sense of worth only through the exploiters who showed her attention. These forms of misrecognition, being seen but not truly seen, constitute a profound harm (McNeill, 2019).

This type of harm is best understood not through the narrow lens of criminal law, but through the broader framework of zemiology. As Canning and Tombs (2021) argue, social harm involves both direct and systemic violations that compromise human flourishing. The emotional, psychological, and relational neglect documented above are not accidental outcomes; they are structured into the systems and practices of care. However, it is important to acknowledge that social workers and care professionals operate within highly constrained, under-resourced environments. Heavy caseloads, administrative burdens, and chronic staff shortages can limit their capacity to build and sustain the kinds of relationships that young people need. These systemic pressures mean that harm often arises not from deliberate neglect by individuals, but from the conditions under which they are required to work. The harms experienced by these young people did not end when they left the care system. On the contrary, they intensified. The transition out of care, often referred to as the care cliff (Palmer et al, 2022), marks a moment when young people are expected to become independent adults virtually overnight, with little or no practical, emotional, or financial support.

Ed's description of being placed into a tenancy at 16 *'with no support whatsoever'* and James's account of drug-fuelled violence in shared housing highlight the systemic failures embedded in the transition to independence. Francis's recollection that his social workers *'backed off right and left me to [my exploiters]'*, shows how institutional withdrawal becomes an implicit form of abandonment. Dolly and Hannah's testimonies reinforce this: they were

left to manage bills, survive in dangerous environments, and navigate complex systems alone. Hannah aptly captured the juxtaposition of growing up in care and the complete absence of support on turning 16: *'I've been institutionalised… and then it's like, oh here you go, bye, do it yourself.'*

According to Pemberton (2015), harm is not only the result of overt actions but of systemic neglect, the withdrawal of social protections, or the failure to provide necessary resources. Tombs (2017) similarly describes how austerity measures and welfare retrenchment expose individuals to risks that are both predictable and preventable. Indeed, much of this systemic neglect can be traced to the prolonged effects of austerity policies, which have reduced funding for local authorities, social care, and youth services, thereby constraining practitioners' ability to provide consistent support (Featherstone et al. 2019; Gupta et al. 2018). The 'care cliff' is emblematic of this kind of systemic harm: a predictable policy failure rooted in austerity-driven disinvestment that endangers already vulnerable lives.

To fully grasp the cumulative harms experienced by these young people, it is useful to recall and apply Canning and Tombs' (2021) typology of harm. This categorisation allows us to see how multiple forms of harm, physical, emotional, economic, cultural, and relational, interact and compound across the life course.

Physical Harms: Many participants experienced both familial and extra-familial violence. For the girls, sexual violence was a frequent form of harm; for the boys, violence and physical assaults were common. These harms were often worsened, not alleviated, following involvement with children's services. Indeed, by placing young people in unsafe, unsupported housing, social care systems created the very conditions in which further physical harm occurred.

Emotional and Psychological Harms: Perhaps the most pervasive harms were emotional. SPACE (2024) refers to the rewiring of a young person's mindset through the grooming process, a process accelerated by care system failings. The lack of support, continuity, and genuine connection engendered profound feelings of worthlessness, abandonment, and mistrust. As Lily articulated: *'You go from having parents that are not looking after you… then you don't [get looked after] … you just don't trust anyone.'*

Financial and Economic Harms: Material poverty was both a precursor to and consequence of exploitation. The promise of financial stability from groomers became irresistible against a backdrop of unpaid bills, housing insecurity, and food scarcity. Many participants incurred debts to both housing providers and criminal actors, reinforcing cycles of dependency and

control. As Pemberton (2015) argues, poverty and economic mismanagement constitute real, yet legally invisible, harms.

Harms of Recognition (Relational Harms): The misrecognition experienced by care experienced young people echoes Fraser's (2000) concept of cultural injustice. These individuals were repeatedly made to feel that they did not matter to professionals, to society, or even to themselves. Dolly's sense of being treated like *'just a pay cheque'* and Hannah's reflections on being institutionally invisible exemplify these relational harms. According to Billingham and Irwin-Rogers (2022), such misrecognition undermines human flourishing in profound, lasting ways.

Autonomy Harms: The abrupt withdrawal of institutional support limited young people's ability to make autonomous life choices. Whether through a lack of education, training, or housing stability, participants were deprived of the conditions needed to build sustainable, independent lives. According to Dorling et al. (1995), social harm occurs whenever an institution reduces an individual's capacity for autonomy and social connection, precisely what we see in the transition from care to unsupported adulthood.

From a zemiological perspective, it is critical to move beyond individual-level explanations and instead interrogate the structural and policy decisions that produce these harms. As Wroe (2022) argues in her work *When Helping Hurts*, social work practices can unintentionally inflict harm when they are bureaucratic, under-resourced, or disconnected from the lived realities of those they are meant to support. The social care system, in its current form, has come to embody a series of contradictions: caring policies enacted through uncaring practices. Moreover, these harms cannot be divorced from wider socio-economic and political contexts. As Cooper and Whyte (2017) show, austerity has hollowed out social protections, exacerbating vulnerabilities for those already on the margins. For crossover children, those with experiences of both care and the criminal justice system (Baidawi and Sheehan, 2019), the consequences are especially severe. These young people are frequently criminalised for behaviours rooted in trauma, exploitation, and systemic neglect.

A growing number of scholars advocate for a human needs approach to social harm (Pemberton, 2016; Mason, 2020). This perspective suggests that harms should be assessed not just in terms of legality but based on whether basic human needs are being met, needs for connection, safety, recognition, and autonomy. If institutions routinely fail to meet these needs, or actively undermine them, then they must be seen as generators of harm, not protectors against it. For the young people in this study, their experiences represent a fundamental failure of the state to protect and nurture. The void left by care - emotional,

practical, relational - was all too readily filled by criminal exploiters who offered belonging, income, and purpose. That this substitution was often welcomed is less a testament to the effectiveness of grooming, and more an indictment of the hollowness of state care.

This study sits firmly at the intersection of criminology and social care. It echoes the call of Canning and Tombs (2021) to 'do zemiology' by documenting and analysing the everyday, often invisible harms inflicted by social institutions. The voices of the young people in this research are not just testimonials of individual pain, they are indictments of systemic failure. Their stories compel us to reframe how we understand harm, care, and responsibility. If we are to truly care, then we must confront the contradiction at the heart of our systems. We must move beyond performative empathy and toward structures that promote relational, practical, and long-term support.

Poverty, Child Welfare and Criminal Exploitation: A Sociological analysis of intersecting inequalities

Poverty in the UK remains one of the most pervasive and entrenched social harms, impacting not just material well-being but shaping educational, emotional, and relational outcomes for children and families. Building on longstanding research into child welfare inequalities and the relationship between poverty and neglect, this study explores how material deprivation serves as a central mechanism through which children become both visible to and ensnared within the systems of care and criminal justice. It supports and extends the work of Bywaters et al. (2020) and others (Bywaters et al, 2016; Morris et al, 2018; Featherstone et al, 2019; Bunting et al, 2018; Davidson et al, 2017), providing empirical confirmation that growing up in poverty is not only harmful, but also a key driver of criminal exploitation.

As Morris et al (2018: 370) assert, 'poverty is the wallpaper of practice', so ubiquitous that it becomes background noise in statutory interventions. The findings of this study reinforce the necessity of foregrounding child welfare and criminal justice responses with a deeper understanding of poverty's structural and intergenerational nature. These findings also expose the inadequacies of a neo-liberal welfare system that fails to provide adequate material support to families, instead often treating poverty as a personal failing rather than a systemic issue.

From a sociological perspective, poverty is not a singular condition but a constellation of disadvantages. Townsend (1979) famously described poverty as the inability to access resources necessary to participate in the norms of society. In 2023/24, over 14 million people in the UK lived in relative poverty, with child poverty reaching a record high (CPAG,

2024). A significant majority of these children (72%) live in working households, which underlines the failures of the low-wage economy and insecure employment to protect families from deprivation (House of Commons Library, 2025).

The lived experiences of the young people in this study illustrate how poverty intersects with other forms of inequality. Chanel, for instance, recalled: *'(My Dad) was a heavy drinker… we constantly hardly ate proper food'*. Similarly, Francis said, *'I used to go on the rob from the shops just to get out of there because I had no money. I wasn't able to get any benefits because of my age. I literally had to try and survive.'*. These are not isolated accounts but reflect systemic patterns. The link between poverty and criminal exploitation is evident, both in terms of familial exploitation and grooming by gangs. Stone (2018) and Badawi et al. (2020) have found that poverty was a recurring factor in familial criminal exploitation and grooming, a finding echoed in this study. Young people reported being drawn into criminal activity because they lacked basic necessities, clothes, toiletries, food, and were lured by offers of material goods.

Wacquant's (2009) thesis in Punishing the Poor is particularly salient here. He argued that neoliberal states criminalise poverty, stacking the odds against those born into deprived circumstances. Despite extensive literature linking material deprivation to crime (Rutter, 2012; Sampson and Laub, 1994; Pantazis and Gordon, 1997), the state continues to treat poverty as incidental rather than causal. Webster and Kingston (2014) provide a more nuanced view, suggesting that while a direct causal relationship may be elusive, the correlation between poverty and crime is undeniable, particularly when intersecting life experiences, such as parental addiction, unemployment, and social exclusion, compound the effects.

The narratives collected in this study demonstrate how these correlations become manifest. Hannah said, *'I think it just makes it easier if you've got a kid that's longing for something, and somebody comes along and is providing all that for you.'.* Her susceptibility to CCE stemmed from both emotional and material deprivation. Similarly, Lilly's account of being groomed by her own father - *'He encouraged it… whatever you need, you're stealing'* - paints a harrowing picture of familial exploitation rooted in financial scarcity.

In this context, the Social Model of Child Protection (Featherstone et al. 2018) offers an essential framework. It shifts the focus from intra-familial risk to structural harms, including poverty, precarious housing, and health disparities (Benach et al. 2014). The model advocates for community-based, co-produced solutions that recognise economic and cultural contexts. It critiques top-down, professionalised interventions which often overlook

the systemic nature of harm. Findings from this study strongly align with this approach, both methodologically and in substance. The involvement of co-researchers and participatory methods helped reach people often excluded from research, echoing the model's emphasis on participation and locality.

The care system itself is not immune from these inequalities. As highlighted in the supporting literature, children in care are disproportionately placed in high-crime, high-deprivation areas (Ofsted, 2019; Youth Justice Board, 2020). Over 65% of children in need have been eligible for Free School Meals (DfE, 2019), indicating entrenched poverty even prior to state intervention. These figures underscore the assertion by Bywaters et al. (2020) that there is a social gradient in child welfare; the poorer a child's family, the more likely they are to encounter child protection services.

Yet the response of professionals is often shaped by ideological distinctions between the 'deserving' and 'undeserving' poor (Whelan, 2021; Katz, 2013). Families like Ed's, *'just brought up in a normal council state'* with a criminally abusive father, are often viewed through a moralistic lens. The language of the undeserving poor remains pervasive, used to justify punitive welfare policies and minimal support (Edmiston, 2018). The consequences are dire: stigmatised families are pushed to the margins, and their children become more susceptible to grooming and criminal exploitation.

The theoretical insights from Marxism, feminism, and symbolic interactionism each shed light on these patterns. From a Marxist viewpoint, poverty is not accidental, it is structurally produced to maintain capitalist hierarchies (Marx and Engels, 1848; Alston, 2019). Feminist scholars, meanwhile, highlight how poverty disproportionately affects women and children, especially in lone-parent households (Williams, 2018; Lister, 2004). Symbolic interactionism draws attention to the internalised stigma experienced by the participants, seen in the matter-of-fact way they described extreme deprivation as 'normal'.

The impact of poverty on young people's development is cumulative. Fergusson et al. (2004) argue that economic disadvantage, when coupled with family disharmony, reduces opportunities for children. These disadvantages are not only psychological and emotional but also institutional. James' recollection, *'all we used to have was bread… two pieces a day'*, shows how basic needs go unmet, leading to care interventions and further marginalisation. Yet the response he received was to make him responsible: *'call Nan and say we don't have money.'.* This reflects a broader phenomenon of adultification, where poor children are prematurely burdened with adult responsibilities and blame.

Children growing up in poverty often live with unmet material wants that criminal exploiters can readily exploit. The hangover of poverty leaves a lasting impact: a yearning for financial freedom, a desire to escape deprivation, and a susceptibility to those who offer even a glimpse of these things. The findings of this study suggest that criminal gangs are acutely aware of this, and they fill the material and emotional gaps left by both family and the state.

In acknowledging this, Featherstone et al. (2020) emphasise the need for radical rethinking in child protection. Services must engage with children and families in their social and economic contexts, promoting co-production and peer support rather than surveillance and punishment. This study, by integrating care experienced co-researchers and employing participatory methods, embodies this shift. It affirms that meaningful safeguarding must be grounded in community relationships and a commitment to addressing poverty at its roots.

Finally, the narrative of the 'undeserving poor' continues to shape policy and practice. Wacquant (2008) critiques neoliberalism for creating 'stigmatised neighbourhoods', zones of exclusion where social services retreat and punitive institutions step in. Pitts (2008) adds that deindustrialisation, poor education, and unemployment have created a vacuum filled by crime and exploitation. These insights underscore the urgent need to challenge dominant narratives that pathologize poverty while failing to address its structural causes.

The findings of this study make a clear and compelling case for reconfiguring our understanding of child protection and criminal justice through the lens of poverty and social harm. The experiences of the young people illustrate that financial poverty was not just a backdrop but a central driver of their exploitation, whether by family members or criminal gangs. Their accounts underscore the inadequacy of current welfare provisions and the punitive tendencies of state systems, which often compound rather than alleviate harm.

This study extends existing literature by linking the intergenerational impacts of poverty to care and criminal justice outcomes. It affirms the importance of adopting the Social Model of Child Protection as a policy and practice framework and highlights the value of grassroots, participatory research. As Featherstone et al. (2018) advocate, real change requires responsive, community-rooted services and a shift in how we conceptualise vulnerability, not as personal failure, but as a product of structural inequality.

The Neglect Nexus

At the heart of many narratives from care experienced young people who have been criminally exploited lies a deep and enduring crisis—one rooted not in individual pathology but in systemic neglect. This crisis can be conceptualised as *the Neglect Nexus*: an

interdependent and self-reinforcing relationship between poverty, social harm, and anti-mattering. These are not discrete processes but mutually reinforcing dynamics that entrap young people, leaving them materially deprived, emotionally abandoned, and institutionally invisible. Within this nexus, children are not simply overlooked; they are actively failed by the systems designed to protect them.

Poverty forms the structural foundation of this nexus. For many children in care, poverty is not a backdrop to their exploitation but a condition that precedes, sustains, and amplifies it. It limits access to basic needs, destabilises family life, and creates environments in which survival itself becomes precarious. In line with Townsend's (1979) understanding of poverty as exclusion from the norms of social participation, participants in this study consistently described experiences of material deprivation, hunger, and insecure housing. Such deprivation was frequently met with institutional indifference, illustrating how poverty becomes both the context and catalyst of harm.

However, poverty alone cannot account for the full depth of harm. Social harm operates alongside and beyond economic deprivation. As theorised in zemiology (Hillyard et al., 2004; Canning and Tombs, 2021), social harm encompasses the non-criminal but profoundly damaging consequences of neglectful policy and institutional design. For many participants, harm began long before entering care and intensified once inside it. They described frequent placement moves, unsafe living environments, educational exclusion, and unmet mental health needs. These experiences were not isolated or accidental but formed part of a routine, sanctioned pattern of systemic failure. Rather than being recognised as victims of structural disadvantage, many were treated as behavioural problems to be managed, revealing a professional culture that privileges containment over connection and risk management over recognition.

The third dimension, anti-mattering, represents the gradual erosion of a young person's sense of worth. It emerges through cumulative signals, missed appointments, impersonal interactions, and unfulfilled promises, that communicate to children that they do not matter. Drawing on the work of Flett (2018) and Prilleltensky (2020), mattering refers to the human need to feel valued and to contribute meaningfully to others. Its absence, anti-mattering, constitutes a form of existential harm in which individuals come to view themselves as disposable.

For participants in this study, anti-mattering was not abstract theory but lived experience. Many described feeling unseen and undervalued by professionals. Some interpreted transactional or perfunctory care as evidence that they were unworthy of genuine affection,

while others understood material provision as a substitute for love. Such interpretations were not irrational; they reflected learned responses to systems that repeatedly failed to affirm their intrinsic worth. Anti-mattering functions both as a precondition for exploitation and a consequence of it. When children do not feel seen or valued by those charged with their care, they become vulnerable to the attention of those who exploit such needs. Participants often described gravitating toward exploiters who provided the attention and validation absent from professional relationships. In these contexts, gestures of apparent affection were misrecognised as genuine care, reinforcing the cycle of harm.

The Neglect Nexus is not a linear sequence from poverty to harm to anti-mattering but a feedback loop in which each element intensifies the others. Poverty heightens exposure to risk; unmet needs exacerbate trauma; and the system's punitive or indifferent responses reinforce feelings of disposability. Over time, this cycle crystallises into a worldview in which institutions are distrusted and exploitation becomes perceived as a viable means of achieving agency, access to resources, or relational recognition.

What makes the Neglect Nexus particularly insidious is its ability to disguise its operations. Institutional neglect is often masked by bureaucratic efficiency: forms are completed, targets met, and procedures followed. Yet beneath these procedural successes lie young people whose emotional and relational needs remain unaddressed. Participants frequently contrasted superficial compliance with moments of authentic care. Small gestures of genuine attention, a visit, a conversation, or a remembered detail, were described as profoundly protective, illustrating that relational mattering can interrupt the cycle of neglect and exploitation.

This disjuncture between the promise of care and the reality of neglect reflects what scholars such as Gambrill (2012) and Ruch (2023) identify as a moral hazard within contemporary social work: the gap between professional intent and actual impact. When care becomes reduced to administrative oversight and relational practice is displaced by proceduralism, harm is not prevented, it is reproduced.

To dismantle the Neglect Nexus, responses must be multi-layered and transformative. First, poverty must be treated as central rather than peripheral to child protection. As Featherstone et al. (2018) argue, the conditions that generate neglect, precarious housing, inadequate income, and educational exclusion, must be directly confronted. Second, we must acknowledge and address the social harms produced by the care system itself: repeated placement moves, lack of therapeutic provision, and the criminalisation of trauma responses. As Canning and Tombs (2021) note, such harms are not random but predictable

consequences of austerity, under-resourcing, and punitive policy design. Finally, services must be reoriented around mattering, ensuring that young people feel valued, heard, and consistently supported. Service success should be measured not only by procedural compliance but by whether young people feel seen and significant.

Mattering is not a soft or sentimental idea; it is a radical framework demanding a cultural shift from bureaucratic detachment to relational justice. It requires sustained, trusting relationships, not contingent or transactional ones. As Gray et al. (2023) and McNeill and Schinkel (2024) suggest, what young people need is not only safety but restorative belonging, a sense of being known, loved, and needed. For some participants in this study, initiatives such as peer mentoring and youth-led advocacy began to restore this sense of value. By contributing to others, they redefined themselves as capable and worthy, embodying Prilleltensky's notion that mattering involves both feeling valued and being of value.

Ultimately, the Neglect Nexus offers a framework for understanding the layered and intersecting harms faced by care experienced young people who have been criminally exploited. It moves beyond individualised notions of risk towards a systemic analysis of abandonment. The young people in this study were not broken, they were disregarded. Their exploitation was not inevitable; it was enabled.

Explaining the Neglect Nexus Model

The Neglect Nexus

Poverty
Material deprivation that constraints opportunity and increases susceptibility to exploitation

Social Harm
Structural and cumulative injustices often unrecognised within safeguarding practices

Young Person

Anti-Mattering
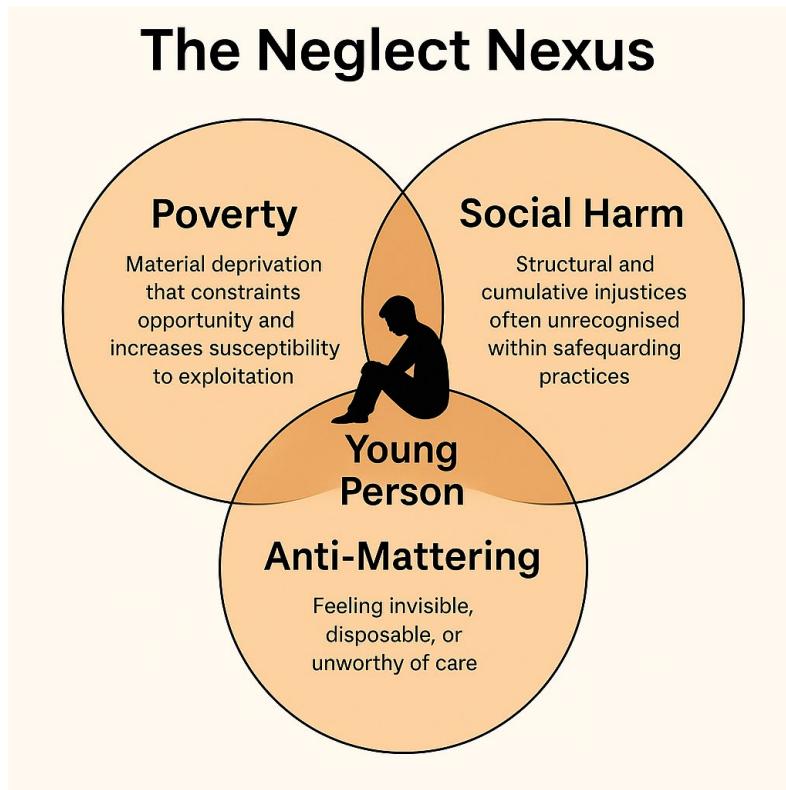Feeling invisible, disposable, or unworthy of care

FIGURE 5 - A visual representation of the Neglect Nexus framework

The Neglect Nexus is a conceptual model developed to illustrate how care experienced and criminally exploited young people often find themselves at the intersection of three mutually reinforcing forces: poverty, social harm, and anti-mattering. This diagram visually captures the overlapping nature of these systemic pressures, with a young person situated at the centre, symbolising the lived experience of entrapment, neglect, and invisibility.

- Poverty represents the material deprivation that constrains opportunity, restricts access to resources, and makes young people more susceptible to exploitation.

- Social harm refers to the structural and cumulative injustices, such as exclusion from education, racism, housing instability, and violence, that often go unrecognised within conventional safeguarding frameworks.

- Anti-mattering describes the process by which young people come to feel invisible, disposable, or unworthy of care. It reflects institutional neglect, misrecognition, and the emotional void left by fragmented systems of support.

At the centre of this model is the young person, not as the cause of the problem, but as its casualty. The young person caught in this nexus is not failing to thrive due to poor choices, but because they are ensnared in a system that repeatedly fails to see, hear, and hold them. The image is a stark reminder that criminal exploitation does not arise in a vacuum, it grows in the gaps left by inadequate care, fractured relationships, and social abandonment.

The Neglect Nexus invites a shift in focus: from blaming the young person to interrogating the conditions around them. It demands not only that we address immediate risks, but that we fundamentally reimagine the systems and relationships intended to protect them. Recognising this interconnectedness is a vital step toward ending cycles of exploitation and harm.

Conclusion

The experience of care experienced young people who have been criminally exploited represents a profound indictment of how contemporary systems fail those who need them most. At the heart of these failures lies a fundamental absence: the denial of mattering. When young people feel invisible to care professionals, disrespected by educators, or criminalised by Police, they are taught that their lives are expendable. Within this void, exploitative relationships, such as those seen in criminal gangs, offer a distorted sense of recognition, purpose, and belonging (Billingham and Irwin-Rogers, 2022; Levell, 2024). Tragically, these attempts to assert one's significance often led to further marginalisation, trauma, and legal entanglement.

Through a social harm lens, we see that CCE is not simply the result of individual pathology or poor choices, but of cumulative harms that are socially and politically produced. Poverty, educational exclusion, racism, care system instability, and community disinvestment are not merely background conditions, they are active forces that diminish life chances and entrench vulnerability (Pemberton, 2015; Tombs, 2017). Zemiology enables us to centre these systemic harms, calling attention to their preventability and their moral urgency.

Yet, the concept of mattering offers more than critique, it offers a framework for hope and transformation. If young people are to resist exploitation, they must be able to access genuine alternatives: relationships that affirm their worth, institutions that listen to them, and communities that offer them space to contribute meaningfully. Trauma-aware and co-produced interventions are one such way in which such affirmations can begin. Ultimately, protecting exploited young people means more than rescuing them from harm, it means

building systems in which they are no longer harmed. It means making their mattering non-negotiable.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

This concluding chapter brings together the core themes, findings, and contributions of this thesis on the experiences of care experienced young people who have been victims of Child Criminal Exploitation (CCE). It consolidates the study's original contributions to knowledge, methodology, and practice while placing the voices of young people at the centre of its analysis. At its heart, this research is about making visible the lives and perspectives of those too often ignored, those who have lived at the sharp edge of social care and criminal exploitation (Smith, 2020; Robinson, 2022). Their stories reflect the human cost of systemic neglect and point toward more relational, justice-oriented responses (Featherstone et al. 2018; Ruch, 2023).

The primary aim of the study was to understand how care experienced young people make sense of their criminal exploitation. Through life story narrative work and semi-structured interviews with fourteen participants, alongside working with three care experienced co-researchers, the study uncovered how systemic failures, within care, education, mental health, and criminal justice, exacerbate susceptibility to exploitation (Lloyd, Manister and Wroe, 2023). The research also surfaced how, in the face of this harm, young people construct meaning, identities, and futures. Crucially, it offered a language to describe what was often felt but not articulated: that the absence of mattering, feeling invisible, unwanted, and emotionally disposable, was a central driver of both initial grooming and sustained exploitation (Flett, 2022; Paradisi, 2024).

The Neglect Nexus: Poverty, Social Harm and anti-mattering

At the centre of this thesis is the concept of the 'Neglect Nexus'; a framework that captures the convergence of poverty, social harm, and the absence of mattering. The Neglect Nexus helps explain how exploitation becomes both possible and enduring for care experienced young people. It does not position these young people as inherently at risk, but rather recognises how structural conditions, when compounded by professional neglect, erode the sense of being seen, heard, and valued (Pemberton, 2015; Canning and Tombs, 2021). Groomers exploit this void, offering validation and connection where none existed (Beckett & Walker, 2021). This conceptual contribution, rooted in the voices of those most affected, advances our understanding of how CCE operates through both systemic and interpersonal failures (Wroe, 2022).

The findings reveal that criminal exploitation is not merely the result of individual susceptibility, nor of singular manipulations by criminal gangs. Rather, it is the outcome of

complex, often cumulative, forms of harm that occur when a child feels unwanted, unheard, and disposable. This 'anti-mattering' was a dominant theme throughout participant narratives. Whether reflecting on their early childhoods or their time in care, young people consistently articulated that they felt invisible within systems designed to protect them. When care becomes transactional, when support becomes performative, and when safeguarding becomes punitive, young people lose trust, and groomers step into that void.

Mattering as prevention and escape

This study contributes new theoretical insight by centring mattering as a lens through which we can understand CCE. Mattering, feeling important to others, being seen and valued, is not a luxury but a psychological necessity (Flett, 2018; Prilleltensky, 2020). Its absence was not just an emotional deficit, but a fundamental factor in shaping young people's trajectories into exploitation. Where young people did encounter adults who made them feel like they mattered, whether a teacher, social worker, or mentor, these relationships served as protective anchors (McLeod, 2010; Ruch, 2023). The absence of such relationships, especially during key transitions, left them vulnerable to manipulation (Featherstone et al. 2019; Ferguson et al. 2022).

Importantly, mattering also emerged as a key factor in escaping CCE. For many participants, the most significant turning points came not through systems, but through people, support workers, peers, or community members, who saw them as more than a case file. These findings align with research showing that relational practice, empathy, and recognition can function as critical protective mechanisms for marginalised youth (Gray et al. 2023; McNeill and Schinkel, 2024). These moments of being valued, listened to, and believed in were described not just as helpful, but as life-saving.

Recommendations

Policy and Practice Recommendations

The five core recommendations of this study were developed directly from these findings and in collaboration with the co-researchers. They reflect practical, achievable changes that, if implemented, could help prevent care experienced young people from being groomed into exploitation or shorten their involvement in it.

1. Help children in care develop long-term, trusting relationships that make them feel like they matter.

This recommendation responds to the fundamental absence of mattering that young people described. Many had never felt loved or consistently cared for. When relationships were present, they were often conditional, disrupted by placement moves, or overly professionalised. The two participants least affected by CCE both had stable, caring adults in their lives. As such, mattering must be embedded in the care system, not as an abstract ideal, but as a relational practice. The care system must be measured not just by procedural compliance but by its capacity to help children feel they are significant to someone.

2. Value and employ people with lived experience of care and CCE in supporting others.

Participants consistently stated they felt more comfortable with those who had 'been through it'. Many wanted to use their experience to help others but felt undervalued in peer support roles. Their experiences align with research on 'wounded healers' and 'credible messengers', suggesting that experiential knowledge is both therapeutic and transformative. However, roles must be professionalised and properly paid. Experience should be seen as an asset, not a liability.

3. Provide practical transition support for young people leaving care.

Leaving care was described as falling off a cliff. Participants felt unprepared and unsupported. Semi-independent living arrangements were often sites of further harm, with no safeguarding or meaningful guidance. Effective transition support must include life skills, access to trusted adults, and a safety net. As the Independent Care Review (2022) noted, no child should leave care without loving relationships to fall back on.

4. Train those working in semi-independent settings to recognise and respond to CCE.

Staff in these settings were often unaware of what grooming looked like or responded punitively when young people disclosed their exploitation. Training must include awareness of the emotional and psychological tactics used by groomers, the blurred lines between victim and offender, and the critical role of non-judgemental, trusting relationships.

5. Recognise and respond to all forms of CCE, not just county lines.

While county lines dominate media and policy discourse, young people in this study described a range of exploitative experiences: drug trafficking, fraud, shoplifting, illegal dog fighting, and coercive sexual exploitation. Some were exploited in multiple ways, often with

intersecting harms. The over-focus on county lines obscures these realities and limits effective intervention.

Academic Recommendations

This thesis not only offers practical implications for policy and care practice but also presents a series of academic recommendations that aim to shift the way research is conducted, understood, and theorised in relation to care experienced young people and criminal exploitation.

A key theoretical contribution of this study is the development of the Neglect Nexus, a conceptual framework that brings together the interconnected forces of poverty, social harm, and the absence of mattering. Future academic work should seek to refine and test this framework in different contexts, both within and beyond youth justice and child welfare. The Neglect Nexus offers a valuable lens through which to understand how multiple systems of marginalisation intersect and compound each other, producing not only vulnerability but sustained harm. Researchers in criminology, social work, education, and psychology may find this framework useful for interrogating the lived experiences of other marginalised groups, such as children in poverty, care leavers in higher education, or young people experiencing homelessness.

A second academic recommendation centres on the concept of mattering. While well-established in social psychology, mattering has rarely been applied in social policy or criminological research outside of that focused on prison-leavers. This thesis demonstrates that the presence or absence of mattering can be both a predictor of vulnerability to exploitation and a critical factor in recovery. Future research should explore how mattering can be operationalised not only as a theoretical construct, but as a measurable outcome in youth services, care systems, and criminal justice interventions. Understanding how and when young people feel they matter could form the basis for new relational indicators in assessments, safeguarding practices, and evaluations of care quality.

This research also calls for a reimagining of research methodology itself. Through a participatory, trauma-informed design, this study demonstrates that care experienced young people with lived experience of criminal exploitation can contribute meaningfully and rigorously to academic knowledge production. Their involvement did not just enhance access and trust; it changed the nature of what was possible in the research. Academic institutions and research funders should further recognise the value of participatory methods and support their development. This includes funding for peer researchers, training in ethical

relational practice, and institutional frameworks that allow for power-sharing throughout the research process. Participatory research must be more than a methodological add-on, it must be understood as a radical, ethical stance that challenges the traditional hierarchies of knowledge.

However, it is not enough to only change how we conduct research; we must also address who is included in it. A clear limitation of this study was its demographic profile: most participants were white girls and young women. This raises the urgent need for more inclusive and intersectional research. Future academic work must actively seek to involve boys, Black and racially minoritised young people, and LGBTQ+ youth, all of whom are overrepresented in youth justice and care systems yet frequently underrepresented in research. Without this diversity, academic knowledge risks reproducing the same exclusions found in practice.

Another vital recommendation is the need to critically examine dominant narratives in youth justice scholarship, particularly the binary framing of exploited young people as either 'victims' or 'offenders'. The young people in this study made clear that their lives do not fit neatly into these categories. Many were groomed into offending behaviours while also being deeply traumatised and disempowered. Future academic work must therefore develop more nuanced frameworks that can accommodate the complex identities and contradictions that exploited young people live with. This requires an approach that is both trauma-informed and justice-oriented, attuned to harm while also challenging punitive responses.

Finally, this thesis recommends a shift in how academic institutions train researchers. Engaging with those considered to be 'vulnerable' and members of marginalised communities requires more than ethical approval, it demands relational sensitivity, reflexivity, and emotional labour. Academic training programmes should embed relational and trauma-informed ethics into research methods curricula. This would better prepare emerging scholars to engage with participants not just as subjects of study, but as whole people whose lives are shaped by systems of exclusion and survival.

Taken together, these academic recommendations challenge us to rethink how we conduct research, who we do it with, and what impact we hope it will have. They argue for a more ethical, inclusive, and relational research culture, one that recognises that how we research matters just as much as what we find.

Contribution to Scholarship

This thesis makes a significant contribution to sociological, criminological and social work scholarship. Its originality lies in the intersectional, experiential, and participatory nature of the research. It is the first known study in the UK that was developed with care experienced individuals who themselves had lived experience of CCE. This alone sets it apart from traditional academic work in the field, which often relies on secondary sources or professional observations.

The thesis also advances theoretical knowledge by introducing the concept of the Neglect Nexus, which theorises the interrelation between poverty, social harm, and the absence of mattering. This framework can be operationalised in future academic work to explore how structural conditions lead to various forms of harm and marginalisation beyond CCE. It provides a tool for rethinking how neglect functions not only in familial settings but within institutions.

A further key contribution is the reintroduction of mattering into criminology and child welfare discourse. Long established in social psychology, mattering has rarely been used to interpret the experiences of marginalised young people. This thesis shows its centrality to both the causes of and recovery from CCE. Mattering becomes a measure not only of psychological wellbeing but of systemic success or failure.

Lastly, the study contributes to the growing literature on participatory action research in youth justice. It demonstrates how participation can be rigorous, ethical, and deeply generative. The project also challenged what academic research can look like, showing that knowledge creation is most powerful when shared and that research itself can be an act of recognition.

Methodological Contributions

This study stands as a methodological exemplar in participatory, trauma-informed research. It challenges the dominant researcher-participant hierarchy by placing co-researchers at the heart of the project. The co-researchers were trained, paid, and involved in all stages of the research cycle, from design to data collection to dissemination. This approach not only produced richer data but also enacted the very values the research sought to promote. Mattering was not just studied, it was practiced.

Furthermore, the study demonstrates the value of narrative methods in researching trauma and exploitation. The use of life stories allowed participants to shape their own accounts and

reveal complex, non-linear understandings of their lives. These methods, combined with the participatory design, created a safer and more authentic research space.

Limitations

Despite its strengths, this study, like all studies, has limitations. The participant sample was skewed toward white girls and young women due to the peer networks of the co-researchers, with few boys and no Black or minoritised participants. Given the disproportionate representation of racially minoritised groups in both the care and criminal justice systems, this limits the study's scope. Future research must address this gap. Additionally, the study did not include young people currently being criminally exploited, due to ethical constraints. While retrospective accounts offered reflection and insight, real-time perspectives could reveal emerging forms of harm and gaps in current support systems.

Another notable limitation of the study is that it did not include the perspectives of social care professionals. While the focus was intentionally centred on the lived experiences of care experienced young people, a group whose voices are often not heard, excluding professionals, means that the research does not capture how those working within the care system understood or responded to the young people's exploitation. Including practitioners could have provided valuable insight into systemic blind spots, professional rationalisations, or organisational barriers that contribute to what this study conceptualises as professional neglect. Future research that brings these perspectives into dialogue could deepen our understanding of how institutional cultures, practices, and decision-making processes either reinforce or resist the conditions that lead to child criminal exploitation.

Final Reflections

More than anything, this study has shown the power of relationships. It has evidenced that when young people are seen, heard, and made to feel that they matter, their paths can shift. It has shown that research, when developed with those with lived experience and ethically grounded, can do more than generate knowledge. It can build confidence, offer healing, and create genuine social value. The project itself unintentionally became a space of mattering. The weekly meetings, shared food, laughter, and tears formed a sense of community that many of us, researcher and co-researchers alike, had never experienced in academic spaces before. In building this community, we lived the values we were researching recognition, care, and inclusion.

The final words belong to the co-researchers, whose insights and courage made this thesis possible. Brittany reflected:

> *'We wanted a better understanding of the damage caused by the care system and CCE… From the project we learned that the biggest factor of CCE is a need to be loved or to feel a part of something.'*

Alice described the study as '*vital, challenging, and cathartic'.* And Holly concluded, powerfully, '*I might not still be here without this project.'.*

This thesis is a testament to the fact that research can do more. It can matter.

References

Adami, R. (2024). Childism, intersectionality and the rights of the child: The myth of a happy childhood. Taylor and Francis.

Alderson, P. and Morrow, V. (2020) *The ethics of research with children and young people: A practical handbook*. 3rd ed. London: SAGE Publications.

Alexander, C. (2008) '(Re)thinking "Gang"', *Youth & Society*, 40(4), pp. 418–441.

All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) (2019). No place like home: Risks facing children and young people who go missing from out of area placements: The final report on the inquiry into children and young people who go missing from out of area placements. Available at: no-place-at-home.pdf (childrenssociety.org.uk)

Alston, P. (2019) Visit to the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland: Report of the Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights. United Nations Human Rights Council.

Annan, L. G., Gaoua, N., Mileva, K., Borges, M. (2022) 'What makes young people get involved with street gangs in London? A study of the perceived risk factors', *Journal of Community Psychology*, 50(5), pp. 2198-2213. doi: 10.1002/jcop.22767.

Andell, J. Pitts, J. (2018). www.youthandpolicy.org. Available from: https://www.youthandpolicy.org/articles/the-end-of-the-line/

Andell, P. (2019). Thinking Seriously about Gangs, London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Ansell, N. (2005). Children, youth and development. London: Routledge.

Anti-Trafficking Monitoring Group (2023) Still Falling Short: The Protection of Victims of Trafficking in England and Wales. London: ATMG.

Antojado, D. and McPhee, T. (2024) Move over and make space for lived experience criminology: Why we do 'lived experience'. Journal of Criminology, p.26338076241286534.

Archer, M. S. (1998) *Realist Social Theory: The Morphogenetic Approach*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Archibald, M.M., Ambagtsheer, R.C., Casey, M.G. and Lawless, M. (2019) 'Using Zoom videoconferencing for qualitative data collection: Perceptions and experiences of researchers and participants', *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 18, pp. 1–8.

Arnett, J. J. (Ed.). (2015). The Oxford handbook of emerging adulthood. Oxford University Press.

Arnez, J. Condry, R. (2021) Criminological perspectives on school exclusion and youth offending, Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties, 26:1, 87-100, DOI: 10.1080/13632752.2021.1905233

Arthur, R. (2015) Troubling times for young people and families with troubles–responding to truancy, rioting and families struggling with adversity. Social and Legal Studies, 24(3), pp.443-464.

Atkin, H. Thomson, L. and Wood, O. (2020) Co-production in research: co-researcher perspectives on its value and challenges. British Journal of Occupational Therapy, 83(7), pp.415-417.

Atkinson, R. (2012) The life story interviews a mutually equitable relationship. The SAGE handbook of interview research: The complexity of the craft, p.115.

Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2018) Young people in child protection and under youth justice supervision 1 July 2013 to 30 June 2017. Canberra: Australian Institute of Health and Welfare

Baglivio, M. T. Wolff, K. T. Piquero, A. R. Bilchik, S. Jackowski, K. and Greenwald, M. A. (2016) Maltreatment, child welfare, and recidivism in a sample of deep-end crossover youth. Journal of Youth and Adolescence, 45(4), pp.625–654. doi. org/10.1007/s10964-015-0407-9.

Baidawi, S. Sheehan, R. (2019) 'Crossover kids': offending by child protection-involved youth. Trends and Issues in Crime and Criminal Justice, 582, pp. 1–22.

Baidawi, S. Sheehan, R. (2020) Maltreatment and Delinquency: Examining the Contexts of Offending Amongst Child Protection-Involved Children, The British Journal of Social Work, 50 (7), pp. 2191–2211. doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcz113

Banks, S., Armstrong, A., Carter, K., Graham, H., Hayward, P., Henry, A., Holland, T., Holmes, C., Lee, A., McNulty, A., Moore, N., Nayling, N., Stokoe, A. and Strachan, A. (2013)

'Everyday ethics in community-based participatory research', *Critical Social Policy*, 33(3), pp. 463–481

Banks, S. and Brydon-Miller, M. (eds) (2018) *Ethics in participatory research for health and social well-being: Cases and commentaries*. London: Routledge

Banks, S. and Brydon-Miller, M. (2019) 'Ethics', in Denzin, N.K. & Lincoln, Y.S. (eds) *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research*. 5th edn. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, pp. 127–149.

Barnardo's. (2023) *Invisible Children: Understanding the risk of the cost-of-living crisis and school holidays on child sexual and criminal exploitation*. Barnardo's.

Bassot, B. (2017) The Reflective Practice Guide. Routledge Publishing.

Bauman, Z. (2005) Work, Consumerism and the New Poor. 2nd ed. Maidenhead: Open University Press.

Beck, U. (1992) Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity. London: Sage.

Bell, D.M. and Pahl, K. (2018) *Co-producing publics: Art and the community*. Bristol: Policy Press.

Bellingham, B. Kemp, H. Boydell, K. Isobel, S. Gill, K. and River, J. (2021) Towards epistemic justice doing: Examining the experiences and shifts in knowledge of lived experience researchers over the course of a mental health research training programme. International Journal of Mental Health Nursing, 30(6), pp.1588-1598.

Benach, J. Vives, A. Amable, M. Vanroelen, C. Tarafa, G. and Muntaner, C. (2014) Precarious employment: understanding an emerging social determinant of health. Annual review of public health, 35(1), pp.229-253.

Bernard, C. and Harris, P. (2019) *Safeguarding Black Children: Good Practice in Child Protection*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Beresford, P. (2019) *Participatory Ideology: From Exclusion to Involvement*. Bristol: Policy Press.

Berger, R. (2015) 'Now I see it, now I don't: Researcher's position and reflexivity in qualitative research', *Qualitative Research*, 15(2), pp. 219–234. doi:10.1177/1468794112468475.

Berk, L. (2015) Child Development. 9th ed. Boston: Pearson.

Bigby, C., Frawley, P. and Ramcharan, P. (2014) 'A collaborative group method of inclusive research', *Journal of Applied Research in Intellectual Disabilities*, 27(1), pp. 54–64.

Birt, L., Scott, S., Cavers, D., Campbell, C. and Walter, F.M. (2016) 'Member checking: A tool to enhance trustworthiness in qualitative research', *Qualitative Health Research*, 26(13), pp. 1802–1811.

Bhaskar, R. (1975) *A Realist Theory of Science*. Leeds: Leeds Books.

Bhattacharya, K. (2016) *Rethinking Research in the Age of Decolonization: Indigenous Epistemologies, Methodologies, and Movement Building. Qualitative Inquiry*, 22(6), pp. 394–402.

Bigby, C., Frawley, P. and Ramcharan, P. (2014) 'A collaborative group method of inclusive research', *Journal of Applied Research in Intellectual Disabilities*, 27(1), pp. 54–64.

Billingham, L. and Irwin-Rogers, K. (2022) Against youth violence: A social harm perspective. Policy Press.

Bilson, A. & Martin, K.E. (2017) 'Referrals and child protection in England: One in five children referred to children's services and one in nineteen investigated before the age of five', British Journal of Social Work, 47(3), pp. 793–811. https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcw062. OUP Academic

Blades, R. Hart, D. Lea, J. Willmott, N. (2011) Care — A stepping stone to custody? The views of children in care on the links between care, offending and custody. London: Prison Reform Trust.

Boo, K. (2001) After welfare. The New Yorker, 9, 93-107.

Boukli, A. & Kotzé, J. (eds) (2018) *Zemiology: Reconnecting Crime and Social Harm*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Bourdieu, P. (1984) Distinction: A Social Critique of the judgement of Taste. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Boylan, A.-M., Locock, L. and Thomson, R. (2019) '"About sixty per cent I want to do it": Health researchers' attitudes towards public involvement in health research', *Health Expectations*, 22(4), pp. 718–725.

Brandon, M. Thoburn, J. (2008) 'Safeguarding children in the UK: a longitudinal study of services to children suffering or likely to suffer significant harm', Child and family social work, 13 (4), pp. 365–377. doi: 10.1111/j.1365-2206.2008.00561.x.

Brannen, J. (2013) Life story talk: Some reflections on narrative in qualitative interviews. Sociological Research Online, 18(2), pp.48-58.

Brannick, T. and Coghlan, D. (2007) 'In defense of being "native": The case for insider academic research', *Organizational Research Methods*, 10(1), pp. 59–74.

Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2019) Reflecting on reflexive thematic analysis. Qualitative research in sport, exercise and health, 11(4), pp.589-597.

Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2021) Can I use TA? Should I use TA? Should I not use TA? Comparing reflexive thematic analysis and other pattern-based qualitative analytic approaches. Counselling and psychotherapy research, 21(1), pp.37-47.

Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2022) Conceptual and design thinking for thematic analysis. Qualitative psychology, 9(1), p.3.

Bridges, K.M. (2016) The deserving poor, the undeserving poor, and class-based affirmative action. Emory LJ, 66, p.1049.

Bridges, K.M. (2017) The poverty of privacy rights. Stanford University Press.

Bridges, L. (2017) The Stigmatisation of Poverty. London: Child Poverty Action Group.

Bronsard, G. Lançon, C. Loundou, A. Auquier, P. Rufo, M. and Siméoni, M.C. (2011) Prevalence rate of DSM mental disorders among adolescents living in residential group homes of the French Child Welfare System. Children and Youth Services Review, 33(10), pp.1886-1890.

Brownell, M. Nickel, N. Turnbull, L. Au, W. MacWilliam, L. Ekuma, O. (2018) The overlap between the child welfare and youth justice system in Manitoba, Canada. International Journal of Population Data Science, 3(4), p. 1. doi.org/10. 23889/ijpds.v3i4.636

Bryman, A. (2012) Social Research Methods (4th Edition) Oxford: Oxford University Press

Buck, G., Rebecca, P., Harriott, P. and Tomczak, P. (2024) Co-creating prisons knowledge inspired by collective autoethnography.

Bullock, R. McSherry, D. (2009) Residential care in Great Britain and Northern Ireland. in M Courtney and D Iwaniec (eds), Residential Care of Children: Comparative Perspectives. Oxford University Press, Oxford, pp. 20-37. https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195309188.003.0002

Bullock, R. (2021) Good Social Work Practice: The United Kingdom Experience. Protecting Children: Theoretical and Practical Aspects, p.357.

Bunting, L. Davidson, G. McCartan, C. Hanratty, J. Bywaters, P. Mason, W. and Steils, N. (2018) The association between child maltreatment and adult poverty–A systematic review of longitudinal research. Child abuse and neglect, 77, pp.121-133.

Burton, L. (2007) Childhood adultification in economically disadvantaged families: A conceptual model. Family relations, 56(4), pp.329-349.

Bywaters, P., Brady, G., Sparks, T. & Bos, E. (2016) 'Inequalities in child welfare intervention rates: The intersection of deprivation and identity', Child & Family Social Work, 21(4), pp. 452–463. https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.12161. Wiley Online Library

Bywaters, P. Scourfield, J. Jones, C. Sparks, T. Elliott, M. Hooper, J. McCartan, C. Shapira, M. Bunting, L. and Daniel, B. (2020) Child welfare inequalities in the four nations of the UK. Journal of Social Work, 20(2), pp.193-215.

Cahill, H. and Dadvand, B. (2018) 'Re-conceptualising youth participation: A framework to inform action', Children and Youth Services Review, 95, pp. 243–253.

Calder, M. C. (1995) 'Child Protection: Balancing Paternalism and Partnership', British Journal of Social Work, 25(6), pp. 749–76.

Canning, V. and Tombs, S. (2021) From social harm to zemiology: A critical introduction. Routledge.

Carlen, P. (1987) Gender, Crime and Justice. Open University Press.

Carlson, J.A. (2010) 'Avoiding traps in member checking', The Qualitative Report, 15(5), pp. 1102–1113.

Carr, N. and McAlister, S. (2016) The double-bind: Looked after children, care leavers and criminal justice. Young people transitioning from out-of-home care: International research, policy and practice, pp.3-21.

Carr, N. Maycock, P. (2019) Care and Justice: children and young people in care and contact with the criminal justice system. Dublin: Irish Penal Reform Trust.

Carroll, K. (2009) Disability studies and researcher-as-ally: Benefits and challenges of an insider perspective. In: D. Goodley, ed. Disability and Social Theory: New Developments and Directions. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 38–56.

Chavez, D.M. (2008) 'Conceptualizing from the inside: Advantages, complications, and demands on insider positionality', *Qualitative Research*, 8(1), pp. 45–60

Child Law Advice (2021) *Child Protection Conferences*. Available at: https://childlawadvice.org.uk/ (Accessed: [7.10.25]).

Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG) (2024) Child poverty reaches record high. [Press Release] 21 March. Available at: https://cpag.org.uk

Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel. (2020). Annual Report 2020. Available at: Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel: annual report 2020 - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)

Children Act (1989) c. 2. Available at: Children Act 1989 (Accessed: [23.11.24]).

Children Act (2004) c. 2. Available at: The Children Act 2004 (Children's Services) Regulations 2005 (Accessed: [23.11.24).

Children's Commissioner for England (2019) *Trends in Childhood Vulnerability: Technical Report 1*. London: Children's Commissioner for England. Available at: https://assets.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/wpuploads/2019/07/cco-vulnerability-2019-tech-report-1.pdf (Accessed: 25 November 2025).

Children's Commissioner for England (2019) *The Characteristics of Gang-Associated Children and Young People*. London: Children's Commissioner for England. Available at: https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/CCO-Characteristics-of-Gang-Associated-Children-and-Young-People1.1.pdf (Accessed: 25 November 2025).

Children's Commissioner (2024) Children's Voices: Hidden Harms and Criminal Exploitation. London: Office of the Children's Commissioner.

Children's Commissioner for England (2024) *Illegal children's homes: The continuing use of unregistered children's homes in England*. London: Children's Commissioner for England.

Available at: https://assets.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/wpuploads/2024/12/cco-illegal-childrens-homes.pdf (Accessed: 12.11. 2025).

The Children's Society; Victim Support; National Police Chiefs' Council (2018) *Exploitation toolkit: Trafficking and criminal exploitation of children and young people*. London: The Children's Society. Available at: https://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/sites/default/files/2021-01/exploitation-toolkit.pdf (Accessed: 25 November 2025).

The Children's Society (2019) *Keeping kids safe: Improving safeguarding responses to gang violence and criminal exploitation*. London: The Children's Society.

The Children's Society (2020) *Counting Lives: Responding to children who are criminally exploited*. London: The Children's Society.

The Children's Society (2022) Guidance on Child Criminal Exploitation and County Lines. London: The Children's Society.

The Children's Society (2023) Disrupting Exploitation Programme: National Briefing. London: The Children's Society.

Christie, N. (1996) 'The Ideal Victim', pp. 17-30 in E.A. Fattah (ed.) From Crime Policy to Victim Policy. London: Macmillan

Clandinin, D. J. and Connelly, F. M. (2000) *Narrative Inquiry: Experience and Story in Qualitative Research*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Community Tool Box (n.d.) *Participatory Evaluation: Analyzing and Interpreting Data Together*. University of Kansas, Center for Community Health and Development. Available at: https://ctb.ku.edu/ (Accessed: [7.11.25]).

Coker, A. L. (2017) RCT testing bystander effectiveness to reduce violence. American Journal of Preventive Medicine, 52(5), 566–578. Elsevier Science.

Collins, M., Civil, D. and Thompson, A. (2022) *Side Step stakeholder research: key findings*. Birmingham: Action for Children & Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues.

Commission on Young Lives (2022) *Hidden in Plain Sight: A new plan for vulnerable teenagers to succeed and flourish*. London: Commission on Young Lives. Available at: https://thecommissiononyounglives.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/COYL-FINAL-REPORT-FINAL-VERSION.pdf (Accessed: 25 November 2025).

Coomber, R. Moyle, L. (2018) The Changing Shape of Street Level Heroin and Crack Supply. British Journal of Criminology [online]. 58, pp. 1323-1342. Available at: doi: 10.1093/bjc/azx068

Cooper, V. and Whyte, D. (eds) (2017) *The Violence of Austerity*. London: Pluto Press.

Coram Voice (2023) Working Together: Co-Production and Lived Experience in Children's Social Care. London: Coram Voice.

Coy, M. (2009) ''Moved around like bags of rubbish that nobody wants': How multiple placement moves can make young women vulnerable to sexual exploitation', Child Abuse Review, 18 (4), pp. 254-266

Creasy, R. Corby, F. (2023) Children, Family and the State: A Critical Introduction. Policy Press.

Crofts, T. (2009) Catching up with Europe: Taking the age of criminal responsibility seriously in England. European Journal of Crime, Criminal Law and Criminal Justice, 17(4), pp. 267-292.

Cullingford, C. (2012) The relationship between delinquency and non-attendance at school. In Improving school attendance, pp. 55-72. Routledge.

Cummings, C.E. Daria, P.S. (2017) Participatory action research (PAR) with children and youth: An integrative review of methodology and PAR outcomes for participants, organisations and communities. Children and Youth Services Review [online]. 81, pp. 400-412.

Daly, M. (2016) Killing the Competition. New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers.

Davidson, G. Bunting, L. Bywaters, P. Featherstone, B. and McCartan, C. (2017) Child welfare as justice: Why are we not effectively addressing inequalities?. British Journal of Social Work, 47(6), pp.1641-1651.

Davis, J. (2022) Adultification bias within child protection and safeguarding. HM Inspectorate of Probation.

Davis, J. and Marsh, N. (2020) Boys to men: The cost of 'adultification' in safeguarding responses to Black boys. Critical and Radical Social Work, 8(2), pp.255-259.

Davis, K. and Moore, W.E. (1945) 'Some Principles of Stratification', American Sociological Review, 10(2), pp. 242–249.

Densley, J. (2014) 'It's gang life, but not as we know it: the evolution of gang business'. Crime and Delinquency, 60 (4), pp. 517-546.

Denzin, N. K. and Lincoln, Y. S. (eds) (2018) *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research*. 5th edn. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.

Department for Education (DfE). (2019a) Characteristics of children in need: 2018 to 2019. London: HMSO.

Department for Education (DfE). (2019b) www.gov.uk. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-programme-to-protect-children-at-risk-of-exploitation

Department for Education. (2023a) Stable Homes, Built on Love: Implementation Strategy and Consultation. London: DfE.

Department for Education (DfE). (2023b) Working together to safeguard children. London: Crown Copyright. Available at: Working together to safeguard children - GOV.UK

Department for Education (DfE). (2023c) *Children looked after in England including adoptions: 2023*. London: Department for Education . Available at: https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/children-looked-after-in-england-including-adoptions/2023 (Accessed: [12.11.25]).

Department for Education (DfE). (2023d) Keeping Children Safe in Education: Statutory Guidance for Schools and Colleges. London: DfE.

Department for Education (DfE). (2024a) Characteristics of Children in Need, 2023–2024. London: DfE.

Department for Education (DfE). (2024b) Children looked after in England (Including adoption), year ending 31st March 2024. London: Crown Copyright. Available at: Children looked after in England including adoptions, Reporting year 2024 - Explore education statistics - GOV.UK

Department for Education (DfE). (2025) Children in need year ending 31st March 2025. London: Crown Copyright. Available at: Children in need, Reporting year 2025 - Explore education statistics - GOV.UK

Delamont, S. (2002) *Fieldwork in Educational Settings: Methods, Pitfalls, and Perspectives*. London: RoutledgeFalmer.

Dickson-Swift, V., James, E.L., Kippen, S. and Liamputtong, P. (2009) Researching sensitive topics: Qualitative research as emotion work. Qualitative Research, 9(1), pp.61–79.

Dixon, N. (2023) Understanding Child Criminal Exploitation in Scotland. Glasgow: Children and Young People's Centre for Justice.

Dodd, V. (2019) 'Children as young as seven 'being enslaved by UK drug gangs'; The Guardian [online]. Available at:https://www.theguardian.com/society/2019/jul/05/chil dren-as-young-as-seven-being-enslaved-by-uk-drug-gangs.

Dorling, D., Gordon, D., Hillyard, P., Pantazis, C., Pemberton, S. Tombs, T. (2008) *Criminal Obsessions: Why Harm Matters More Than Crime* (2nd ed.). London: Centre for Crime and Justice Studies.

Douglas, A.M. (2022) Towards a System that Heals. London: Peer Power Youth. Available at: The Empathy Report - Peer Power Youth

Drew, J. (2020) *Serious Case Review: Child C* (alias for 14-year-old Jaden Moodie). Waltham Forest Safeguarding Children Board: London. Available at: https://suffolksp.org.uk.raptureready.info/assets/2020WalthamForestChildCOverview.pdf (Accessed: 25 November 2025).

Duncan, F. (2020) The Promise, Independent Care Review, accessed 10th July 2023 https://www.carereview.scot/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/The-Promise.pdf

Dworski-Riggs, D. and Langhout, R.D. (2010) 'Elucidating the power in participatory action research: A case example from a community health project', *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 45(3–4), pp. 215–226.

Dwyer, S.C. and Buckle, J.L. (2009) 'The space between: On being an insider–outsider in qualitative research', *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 8(1), pp. 54–63.

Earle, R. (2016) Convict criminology: Inside and out. Policy Press.

Earle, R. Darley, D. Davies, B. Honeywell, D. Schreeche-Powell, E. (2023) Convict criminology without guarantees: proposing hard labour for an unfinished criminology in Libeling, A. Maruna, S. McAra, L. (eds). The Oxford Handbook of Criminology. 7th edition. Oxford. Oxford University Press, pp. 887-911

ECPAT UK (2022) Victim or Offender? Care-Experienced Young People and Exploitation. Cardiff: ECPAT UK and Welsh Government.

Edmiston, D. (2018) The poor 'sociological imagination' of the rich: Explaining attitudinal divergence towards welfare, inequality, and redistribution. Social Policy and Administration, 52(5), pp.983-997.

Ellis, C. (2007) Telling secrets, revealing lives: Relational ethics in research with intimate others. Qualitative Inquiry, 13(1), pp.3–29.

Etikan, I., Musa, S.A. and Alkassim, R.S. (2016) 'Comparison of convenience sampling and purposive sampling', *American Journal of Theoretical and Applied Statistics*, 5(1), pp. 1–4.

Etherington, K. (2007) Working with traumatic stories: From transcriber to witness. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, *10*(2), pp.85-97.

Evans, R. (2013) Children as caregivers. In: Handbook of Child Wellbeing. Springer, 1893-1916.

Fagan, A. A. Catalano, R. (2012) What works in youth violence prevention: A review of the literature. Research on Social Work Practice, 23(2), 141–156.

Featherstone, B. et al. (2014) Reimagining Child Protection: Towards Humane Social Work with Families. Bristol: Policy Press.

Featherstone, B. Firmin, C. Gupta, A. Morris, K. Wroe, L. (2020) The Social Model and Contextual Safeguarding: Key Messages for Practice. Available at: https://www.csnetwork.org.uk/assets/documents/CS-and-SM-Messages-for-practice-FINAL.pdf

Featherstone, B. Morris, K. and White, S. (2014) Re-imagining child protection: Towards humane social work with families. Policy Press.

Featherstone, B. Webb, C. Bywaters, P. Gupta, A. Bilson, A. Morris, K. and Hood, R. (2021) The case for change: a response. Available at: The Case for Change: A response - Parent, Family and Allies Network (pfan.uk)

Ferguson, H. Warwick, L. Disney, T. Leigh, J. Cooner, T.S. and Beddoe, L. (2022) Relationship-based practice and the creation of therapeutic change in long-term work: social work as a holding relationship. Social Work Education, 41(2), pp.209-227

Firmin, C, (2020) Contextual Safeguarding and Child Protection. Routledge: Oxon and New York.

Firmin, C. (2017) Contextual Safeguarding; an overview of the operational, strategic and conceptual framework. The University of Bedfordshire.

Firmin, C. (2018) Safeguarding children and young people from sexual exploitation and associated vulnerabilities: A briefing for inspectorates. Bedford: University of Bedfordshire. Available at: https://uobrep.openrepository.com/handle/10547/624985 (Accessed: [7.11.25]).

Firmin, C. Knowles, R. (2022) Has the purpose outgrown the design. Safeguarding Young People: Risk, Rights, Resilience and Relationships, 129.

Firmin, C. Owens, R. (2021) 'Holding It Together? Professional Perspectives on the Role of Relationships when Relocating Young People due to Extra-familial Harm', International journal on child maltreatment : research, policy and practice [Preprint]. doi:10.1007/s42448-021-00106-5.

Fine, M. and Torre, M.E. (2021) *Participatory Action Research (PAR) in a Time of Crisis: Rethinking Our Work*. In: Ozer, E.J., Newlin, C.R. & Douglas, L. (eds) Participatory Action Research: Theory and Methods for Engaged Inquiry. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, pp. 25–45.

Fisher, J.A. and Monahan, T.(2023) Mutual emotional labor as method: Building connections of care in qualitative research. The Qualitative Report, 28(11), pp.3192–3212.

Fitzpatrick, C. (2009) 'Looked after children and the criminal justice system' in Broadhurst, K. Grover, C. and Jamieson, J. (eds). Critical perspectives on safeguarding children. Chichester: Wiley, pp 211-225.

Fitzpatrick, C. Hunter, K. Shaw, J. and Staines, J. (2022) Disrupting the routes between care and custody for girls and women.

Fitzpatrick, C. Williams, P. Coyne, D. (2016) Supporting looked after children and care leavers in the criminal justice system: Emergent themes and strategies for change. Prison Service Journal, 226, pp.8– 13.

Flett, G.L. (2018) The Psychology of Mattering: Understanding the Human Need to be Significant. San Diego: Academic Press.

Flett, G.L. (2022) An introduction, review, and conceptual analysis of mattering as an essential construct and an essential way of life. Journal of Psychoeducational Assessment, 40(1), pp.3–36.

Flett, G.L. and Zangeneh, M. (2022) 'Mattering as a Foundation for Promoting Mental Wellness in Marginalised Youth', Journal of Community Psychology, 50(4), pp. 1458–1472.

Foley, N. Harker, R. Foster, D. Wilson, W. Powell, A. Sandford, M. Powell, T. Roberts, N. Lewis, J. and Kennedy, S. (2022) Support for care leavers [online]

Foley, T. Papoutsaki, D. and Rigby, P. (2022) 'Care leavers, transitions and the persistence of adversity', Child & Family Social Work, 27(4), pp. 889–900.

Fox Harding, L.M. (1991) The Children Act 1989 in context: Four perspectives in child care law and policy (I). The Journal of Social Welfare and Family Law, 13(3), pp.179-193.

Fox Harding, L.M. (1997) Perspectives in child care policy. Routledge.

Fraser, A. Hamilton-Smith, N. Clark, A. Atkinson, C. Graham, W. McBride, M. (2018) Community Experiences of Serious Organised Crime in Scotland [online]. Edinburgh. The Scottish Government. Available at: www.gov.scot/socialresearch

Fraser, N. (2000) *'Social Justice in the Age of Identity Politics: Redistribution, Recognition, and Participation'*, in: R. Aarhus (ed.) The Tanner Lectures on Human Values. Stanford: Stanford University Press

Freire, P. (1970) Pedagogy of the oppressed. New York: Seabury Press.

Fricker, M. (2007) *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Fromm, E. (1941) Escape from Freedom. New York: Rinehart.

Fromm, E. (1964) Our way of life makes us miserable. The Saturday Evening Post, 237(8), pp.258-710.

Fromm, E. (1956) The Art of Loving. New York: Harper and Row.

Fromm, E. (1976) To Have or To Be? New York: Harper and Row.

Furstenberg, F. F. (2015) Becoming adults: Challenges in the transition to adult roles. American Journal of Orthopsychiatry, 85(5S), S14.

Gabe, A. and Calvert, L. (2020) 'Racialised risk: The criminalisation of Black children in context of child sexual and criminal exploitation', *Children & Society*, 34(6), pp. 457–472.

Gallagher, M., Haywood, S. and Manby, M. (2014) 'Participatory research with children and young people: A moral enterprise', in M. Robson, M. Barron & C. Peake (eds) *Creative and participatory research: Theories, methods and practices*. London: Routledge, pp. 38–56.

Gambrill, E. (2012). Social work practice: A critical thinker's guide. Oxford University Press.

Gans, H.J. (1972) 'The Positive Functions of Poverty', American Journal of Sociology, 78(2), pp. 275–289.

Gilmore, A.A. Bettis, P.J. (2021) Antiblackness and the adultification of Black children in a US prison nation. In *Oxford research encyclopedia of education*.

Goffman, E. (1963) Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity. New York: Simon and Schuster.

Gomersall, H. (2015) 'Section 20: Abused, or Just Not Used?', *Family Law* (online)

Goldacre, A. Hood, R. (2022) 'Factors affecting the social gradient in children's social care', *British Journal of Social Work*, vol. 52, no. 6, pp. 3599-3617.

Gooch, D. (1996) Home and away: the residential care, education and control of children in historical and political context, Child and Family Social Work 1(1), pp. 19-32. doi: https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2206.1996.tb00004.x

Graham, A., Powell, M.A., Taylor, N., Anderson, D. and Fitzgerald, R. (2015) *Ethical Research Involving Children (ERIC) Compendium*. Lismore, NSW: Centre for Children and Young People, Southern Cross University & UNICEF Office of Research.

Gray, S., Bull, A. and Healy, C. (2023) 'Relational anchoring: a framework for ethical and equitable participatory research', *Qualitative Research*, 23(1), pp. 78–94.

Greger, H. K. (2017) 'Childhood maltreatment, psychopathology and well-being: The mediator role of global self-esteem, attachment difficulties and substance use', Child abuse and neglect, 70, pp. 122–133. doi: 10.1016/j.chiabu.2017.06.012.

Grundetjern, H. and Sandberg, S. (2012) Dealing with a gendered economy: Female drug dealers and street capital. European Journal of Criminology, 9(6), pp.621-635.

Guba, E. G. and Lincoln, Y. S. (1994) 'Competing paradigms in qualitative research', in Denzin, N. K. & Lincoln, Y. S. (eds) Handbook of Qualitative Research. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, pp. 105–117.

Guillemin, M. and Gillam, L. (2004) 'Ethics, reflexivity, and "ethically important moments" in research', *Qualitative Inquiry*, 10(2), pp. 261–280.

Gunter A. (2008) Growing up bad: Black youth, `road' culture and badness in an East London neighbourhood. Crime, Media, Culture, 4(3), pp. 349-366. doi:10.1177/1741659008096371

Hallsworth, S. and Young, T. (2004) 'Getting Real About Gangs', *Criminal Justice Matters*, 55(1), pp. 12–13.

Hammersley, M. (2002) *The Dilemma of Qualitative Method: Herbert Blumer and the Chicago Tradition*. London: Routledge.

Hammersley, M. and Atkinson, P. (2007) *Ethnography: Principles in Practice*. 3rd edn. London: Routledge.

Harding, N. A. (2020) 'Co-constructing feminist research: Ensuring meaningful participation while researching the experiences of criminalised women', Methodological Innovations. doi: 10.1177/2059799120925262.

Harding, S. (2020) County Lines. Bristol University Press: Bristol.

Hart, R.A. (1992) *Children's Participation: From Tokenism to Citizenship*. Florence: UNICEF International Child Development Centre.

Hayden, C. (2010) 'Offending behaviour in care: Is children's residential care a 'criminogenic' environment?', Child & Family Social Work, 13(4), pp. 461–472. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2206.2010.00697.x. Wiley Online Library

Hayden, C. Goddard, J. Gorin, S. and Van Der Spek, N. (1999) State Child Care Looking after Children?. Portsmouth, UK: Jessica Kingsley Publisher.

Herman, J. L. (1992) *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence—from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*. New York: Basic Books.

Hillyard, P., Pantazis, C., Tombs, S. Gordon, D. (Eds) (2004) *Beyond Criminology: Taking Harm Seriously*. London: Pluto Press.

HMICFRS (2023) Thematic Inspection of the Police Response to Serious Youth Violence. London: HMICFRS.

HMICFRS (2024) National Child Protection Inspections: 2023–24 Findings. London: HMICFRS.

Hobbs, D. (1998) Going down the glocal: the local context of organised crime. The Howard Journal of Criminal Justice, 37(4), pp.407-432.

Hobbs, D. and Antonopoulos, G. A. (2013) 'Endemic to the species': Ordering the 'other' via organised crime. Global Crime, 14 (1), pp. 27-51.

Hobson, J. Lynch, K. Payne, B. Ellis, L. (2021) Are Police-Led Social Crime Prevention Initiatives Effective? A Process and Outcome Evaluation of a UK Youth Intervention. International Criminal Justice Review, 31(3), pp.325-346. doi:10.1177/1057567718814891

Holland, J., Reynolds, T. and Weller, S. (2008) *Transitions, Risk and Young People: Youth Transitions in the UK and the Netherlands*. London: Routledge.

Home Office (2018) Serious Violence Strategy. London: HM Government.

Home Office (2018) *Protecting children from criminal exploitation, human trafficking and modern slavery: An addendum*. London: Home Office. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5bebe2ac40f0b667b363e279/Protecting_child ren_from_criminal_exploitation_human_trafficking_modern_slavery_addendum_141118.pdf (Accessed: 25 November 2025).

Home Office (2021) Characteristics of group-based child sexual exploitation in the community: Literature review. London: Home Office. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/group-based-child-sexual-exploitation-characteristics-of-offending (Accessed: [7.11.25]).

Home Office (2021) From Harm to Hope: A 10-Year Drugs Plan to Cut Crime and Save Lives. London: Home Office.

Home Office (2024) National Referral Mechanism Statistics UK, End of Year Summary 2023. London: Home Office. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/national-referral-mechanism-statistics-uk-end-of-year-summary-2023 (Accessed: [7.11.25]).

Home Office (2025) Crime and Policing Bill – Draft for Consultation. London: Home Office.

Home Office. (2018) Criminal Exploitation of children and vulnerable adults: County lines guidance. Available at: Criminal exploitation of children and vulnerable adults: county lines - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)

House of Commons Library (2024) Illegal drug use and organised crime. Research Briefing CDP-2024-0050. London: House of Commons Library. Available at: https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cdp-2024-0050 (Accessed: [insert date]).

House of Commons Library (2025) Poverty in the UK: Statistics. Research Briefing 7096. London: House of Commons.

Howard League for Penal Reform. (2016) Criminal Care: Children's homes and criminalising children. Available at: The Howard League | Criminal care

Howard League for Penal Reform. (2017) Ending the criminalisation of children in residential care: Briefing one. Available at: Ending-the-criminalisation-of-children-in-residential-care-Briefing-one.pdf (howardleague.org)

Howard League for Penal Reform. (2018) Ending the criminalisation of children in residential care: Briefing three: 'Hearts and Heads - Good practice in children's homes. Available at: Hearts-and-Heads-briefing-three.pdf (howardleague.org)

Hudek, J. (2018) County Lines Scoping Report, May 2018, JM Consulting.

Human Trafficking Foundation. (2021) 'The Voice of British Survivors of Modern Slavery'. Available at: HTF+British+Survivors+of+Modern+Slavery+Report+Latest.pdf

Hunter, K. (2019) Institutionalised criminalisation. Black and minoritised children and looked after children in the youth justice system in England and Wales. Unpublished thesis. University of Liverpool.

Hunter, K. (2022) 'Out of place': the criminalisation of black and minority ethnic and looked after children in England and Wales. Prison Service Journal, (258), pp.13-18.

Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse (IICSA) (2022) Final Report: Child Sexual Exploitation by Organised Networks. London: IICSA.

Iphofen, R. and Tolich, M. (eds) (2018) *The Sage handbook of qualitative research ethics*. London: SAGE.

Ingram, R. and Smith, M. (2018) Relationship-based practice: emergent themes in social work literature. International Journal of Criminal Justice, 6(1), pp.47-74.

Israel, B.A., Schulz, A.J., Parker, E.A. and Becker, A.B. (1998) 'Review of community-based research: Assessing partnership approaches to improve public health', *Annual Review of Public Health*, 19, pp. 173–202.

Jack, G. (1997) Discourses of child protection and child welfare. The British Journal of Social Work, 27(5), pp.659-678.

Jacquez, F., Vaughn, L.M. and Wagner, E. (2013) 'Youth as partners, participants or passive recipients: A review of youth participation in health research', *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 51(1–2), pp. 176–189.

James, A. (1998) Play in childhood: an anthropological perspective. Child Psychology and Psychiatry Review, 3(3), pp.104-109.

James, S. (2011) What works in group care?—A structured review of treatment models for group homes and residential care. Children and youth services review, 33(2), pp.308-321.

Jay, A. (2014) Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Exploitation in Rotherham (1997–2013). Rotherham: Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council.

Jenks, C. (1996) Childhood. New York: Routledge.

Jensen, T. and Tyler, I. (2015) ''Benefits Broods': The Cultural Politics of Reproduction and the UK Welfare Reform', Social Politics, 22(2), pp. 165–191.

Jones, R. (2015) 'The end game: The marketisation and privatisation of children's social work and child protection', Critical social policy, 35(4), pp. 447–469. doi: 10.1177/0261018315599333.

Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF) (2023) UK Poverty 2023. York: JRF.

Jump, D. Hodgson, J.Newby, L. Longfield, A. Green, J. and Pickard, K. (2023) 'Keeping Girls and Young Women Safe'. Available at: Keeping-Girls-And-Young-Women-Safe-MMU-and-COYL-report-.pdf

Jurkovic, G. J. (1997) Lost childhoods: The plight of the parentified child. Brunner/Mazel.

Kaschak, E. (2013) The mattering map: Integrating the complexities of knowledge, experience, and meaning. Psychology of Women Quarterly, 37(4), pp.436-443.

Katz, M. (2013) The Undeserving Poor: America's Enduring Confrontation with Poverty. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Keddell, E. (2015) 'The ethics of predictive risk modelling in the Aotearoa/New Zealand child welfare context: Child abuse prevention or neo-liberal tool?', Critical Social Policy, 35(1), pp. 69–88. https://doi.org/10.1177/0261018314543224. PMC

Keil, V. Price, J. M. (2006) 'Externalizing behavior disorders in child welfare settings: Definition, prevalence, and implications for assessment and treatment', Children and youth services review, 28(7), pp. 761–779. doi: 10.1016/j.childyouth.2005.08.006.

Kendrick, A. (2012) 'What research tells us about residential childcare', in Davies, M. (ed.) Social work with children and families. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 287-303

Kindred, K.P. (1996) 'God Bless the Child: Poor Children, Parens Patriae, and a State Obligation to Provide Assistance', *Ohio State Law Journal*, 57(2), pp. 519–542.

Kim, J. (2016) Youth involvement in participatory action research (PAR): Challenges and barriers. Critical Social Work, 17(1).

Koch, I. Williams, P. and Wroe, L. (2024) 'County lines': racism, safeguarding and statecraft in Britain. Race and Class, 65(3), pp.3-26. https://doi.org/10.1177/03063968231201325

Koutsounia. A. (2024) 'How confident are social workers in the Labour Government?'; Community Care [online]. Available at:How confident are social workers in the Labour government? - Community Care

Krumer-Nevo, M. (2016) Poverty-aware social work: A paradigm for social work practice with people in poverty. British Journal of Social Work, 46(6), pp.1793-1808.

Kumar, S. and Cavallaro, L. (2018) Researcher self-care in emotionally demanding research: A proposed framework. Qualitative Health Research, 28(4), pp.648–658.

Lacey, R. E and Minnis, H. (2020) 'Practitioner review: Twenty years of research with adverse childhood experience scores – advantages, disadvantages and applications to practice', *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 61(2), pp. 116-130. doi: 10.1111/jcpp.13135

Laming, H. (2016) In care, out of trouble: How the life chances of children in care can be transformed by protecting them from unnecessary involvement in the criminal justice system. London: Prison Reform Trust. Available at: care_review (prisonreformtrust.org.uk)

Lennie, J. (2005) 'An evaluation capacity-building process for sustainable community IT initiatives: Empowering and disempowering impacts', *Evaluation*, 11(4), pp. 390–414.

Lesko, N. (2012) Act your age!: A cultural construction of adolescence. Routledge.

Levell, J. (2024) Music Elicitation Methodology and the Theory of Sonic Mattering. In Music, Mattering, and Criminalized Young Men: Exploring Music Elicitation as a Feminist Arts-Based Research and Intervention Tool, Emerald Publishing Limited.

Liddiard, K., Runswick-Cole, K., Goodley, D., Whitney, S., Vogelmann, E. and Watts, L. (2019) '"I was excited by the idea of a project that focuses on those unheard voices": Co-producing disability research with disabled young people', *Childhood*, 26(2), pp. 207–224.

Liddiard, K., Whitney, S., Goodley, D., Runswick-Cole, K. and Vogelmann, E. (2024) *Co-production as a Method for Disability Research: Lessons from the Co-Research Collective*. Bristol: Policy Press.

Lightowler, C. (2020). Rights Respecting? Scotland's approach to children in conflict with the law.

Lillywhite, R. Skidmore, P. (2006)' Boys are not sexually exploited? A challenge to practitioners ', Child Abuse Review, 15 (5), pp. 351 – 61.

Lincoln, Y. S. and Guba, E. G. (1985) *Naturalistic Inquiry*. Newbury Park, CA: SAGE.

Lister, R. (2004) Poverty. Cambridge: Polity.

Lloyd, A. (2018) *The Harms of Work: An Ultra-Realist Account of the Service Economy*. Bristol: Policy Press.

Lobe, B., Morgan, D. and Hoffman, K.A. (2020) 'Qualitative data collection in an era of social distancing', *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 19, pp. 1–8.

Longfield, A. (2020) Children in institutional settings. The Lancet Child and Adolescent Health, 4(8), pp.563-565.

Lopez, V. and Whitehead, D. (2013) Sampling data and data collection in qualitative research. Nursing and midwifery research: Methods and appraisal for evidence-based practice, 123, p.140.

Lăzăroiu, G. (2012) Epistemic ecologies of knowledge. Contemporary Readings in Law and Social Justice, 4(2), pp.348-354.

Lundy, L. (2007) '"Voice" is not enough: Conceptualising Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child', *British Educational Research Journal*, 33(6), pp. 927–942.

MacAlister, J. (2021) The Case for Change. Available at: case-for-change.pdf (independent-review.uk)

MacAlister, J. (2022) The Independent Review of Children's Social Care: Final Report. London: Department for Education .

MacDonald, R. and Marsh, J. (2005) Disconnected Youth? Growing Up in Britain's Poor Neighbourhoods. Basingstoke: Palgrave.

MacDonald, R. and Shildrick, T. (2012) Poverty and Insecurity: Life in Low-Pay, No-Pay Britain. Bristol: Policy Press.

Madden, M. and Speed, E. (2017) 'Beware zombies and unicorns: toward critical patient and public involvement in health research', *BMJ*, 2017;358:j3867.

Marshall, H. (2022) 'Young Men's Perspectives on Child Criminal Exploitation and Their Involvement in County Lines Drug Dealing: An Intersectional Analysis'. In Contemporary Intersectional Criminology in the UK. Bristol, UK: Bristol University Press. Retrieved Nov 17, 2024, from https://doi.org/10.51952/9781529215977.ch006

Marshall, H.J. (2022) Child Criminal Exploitation, County Lines and Victim Identification: An Exploratory Study (Doctoral dissertation).

Maruna, S. (2001) Making good: How ex-convicts reform and rebuild their lives. Washington: American Psychological Association.

Marx, K. and Engels, F. (1848) The Communist Manifesto. London: Penguin (2004 ed.).

Mason, W. (2020) 'No One Learned': Interpreting a Drugs Crackdown Operation and its Consequences Through The 'Lens' of Social Harm, The British Journal of Criminology, 60 (2), pp. 382–402, doi: https://doi-org.sheffield.idm.oclc.org/10.1093/bjc/azz047

Mason, W. Williams, P. (2022) CiviAct: Negotiating 'fields of paradox' in anti-racist university community partnerships. Methodological Innovations, 15(3), pp.363-373.

Maxwell, J. (2024) Young Lives on the Line: A Qualitative Study of Youth Criminal Exploitation in Wales. Cardiff: Welsh Centre for Crime and Justice.

McAra, L. McVie, S. (2010) 'Youth crime and justice: Key messages from the Edinburgh Study of Youth Transitions and Crime', Criminology & Criminal Justice, 10(2), pp. 179–209. https://doi.org/10.1177/1748895809360971. Edinburgh Research

McFarlane, K. (2017) 'Care-criminalisation: The involvement of children in out of home care in the NSW criminal justice system'. Australian and New Zealand Journal of Criminology. 51. pp. 412-433.

McLaughlin, K.A. Greif Green, J. Gruber, M.J. Sampson, N.A. Zaslavsky, A.M. Kessler, R.C. (2012) Childhood Adversities and First Onset of Psychiatric Disorders in a National Sample of US Adolescents. Arch Gen Psychiatry, 69(11), pp. 1151–1160. doi:10.1001/archgenpsychiatry.2011.2277

McLeod, A. (2010) '"A friend and an equal": Do relationships matter for young people in care?', *International Journal of Social Welfare*, 19(4), pp. 412–420.

McLean, R. Robinson, G. Densely, J.A. (2020) County Lines: Criminal Networks and Evolving Drug Markets in Britain. Springer Briefs in Criminology, Springer: Cham: Switzerland.

McMellon, C. McCusker, P. Roesch-Marsh, A. Hall, L. Bartlett, T. and McDermott, R. (2024) Reconceptualising co production as activism together. Children and Society, 38(3), pp.804-822.

McNeill, F. (2022) Imagining Generative Justice, Howard League Paper.

McNeill, F. (2023) Introducing Generative Justice, European Society of Criminology.

McNeill, F. and Schinkel, M. (2024) Tertiary or relational desistance: contested belonging.

McCrory, E.J., Gerin, M.I. Viding, E. (2017) Annual research review: childhood maltreatment, latent vulnerability and the shift to preventative psychiatry–the contribution of functional brain imaging. *Journal of child psychology and psychiatry*, *58*(4), pp.338-357.

Mendes, P. & Rogers, J. (2020) Young People Transitioning from Out-of-Home Care: International Research, Policy and Practice. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Mertens, D.M. (2009) *Transformative Research and Evaluation*. New York: Guilford Press.

Merton, R.K. (1972) 'Insiders and outsiders: A chapter in the sociology of knowledge', *American Journal of Sociology*, 78(1), pp. 9–47.

Mills, T. (2020) 'Country kids committing their first crime after entering child protection'. The Age [online]. Available at: Country kids committing their first crime after entering child protection (theage.com.au)

Miller, T. and Boulton, M. (2007) 'Changing constructions of informed consent: qualitative research and complex social worlds', *Social Science & Medicine*, 65(11), pp. 2199–2211

Ministry of Justice (2021) *Ethnicity and the Criminal Justice System, 2020*. London: Ministry of Justice. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/ethnicity-and-the-criminal-justice-system-statistics-2020/ethnicity-and-the-criminal-justice-system-2020 (Accessed: 25 November 2025).

Missing People. (2018) 'Still in harm's way: a report by Missing People and ECPAT UK. Available at: StillinHarmsWayFinal.pdf (missingpeople.org.uk)

Moore, T. (2018) 'Sticking with us through it all: The importance of trustworthy relationships for children and young people in residential care', Children and youth services review, 84, pp. 68–75. doi: 10.1016/j.childyouth.2017.10.043.

Morris, K. Mason, W. Bywaters, P. Featherstone, B. Daniel, B. Brady, G. Bunting, L. Hooper, J. Mirza, N. Scourfield, J. and Webb, C.(2018) Social work, poverty, and child welfare interventions. Child and Family Social Work, 23(3), pp.364-372.

Morrow, V. (2009) 'The ethics of social research with children and families in Young Lives: practical experiences', *Young Lives Working Paper 53*. Oxford: University of Oxford, Department of International Development.

Moyle, L. (2019). Situating vulnerability and exploitation in street-level drug markets: Cuckooing, commuting, and the 'County Lines' drug supply model. Journal of Drug Issues, 49(4), pp.739-755.

Munro, E. (2011) The Munro review of child protection: Final report, a child-centred system (Vol. 8062). The Stationery Office.

Murray, C. (1990) The Emerging British Underclass. London: IEA.

Nacro. (2012) Reducing offending by looked after children. London: Nacro.

Narayan, K. (1993) 'How native is a "native" anthropologist?', *American Anthropologist*, 95(3), pp. 671–686.

Narey, M. (2016) Residential care in England: Report of Sir Martin Narey's independent review of children's residential care. Department for Education .

National Audit Office (2023) Reducing the harm from illegal drugs. London: National Audit Office. Available at: https://www.nao.org.uk/reports/reducing-the-harm-from-illegal-drugs (Accessed: [07.10.25]).

National Crime Agency (NCA) 2017 *County Lines: Violence, Exploitation & Drug Supply 2017*. London: NCA

National Crime Agency (2022) County Lines: National Briefing Report. London: NCA.

National Crime Agency (2023) County Lines Drug Supply, Vulnerability and Harm 2023 Assessment. London: NCA.

National Institutes of Health (NIH), Community Engagement Alliance (CEAL) (2021) *Building Trustworthiness in Research Through Community Engagement*. Bethesda, MD: National Institutes of Health.

National Youth Advocacy Service (NYAS) (2023) Criminal Exploitation: The Voice of the Child in Justice Systems. Liverpool: NYAS.

Nind, M. (2014) *What Is Inclusive Research?* London: Bloomsbury Academic.

Nieuwenhuys, O. (2013) Theorising childhood (s): Why we need postcolonial perspectives. Childhood, 20(1), 3-8.

NSPCC. (2021) Looked after children: statistics briefing. Available at: Statistics about looked after children | NSPCC Learning

NSPCC (2023) Online Grooming and Criminal Exploitation: Emerging Trends. London: NSPCC.

NSPCC. (2024) Too little, too late: A multi-agency response to identifying and tackling neglect. Available at: Too little, too late: identifying and tackling neglect | NSPCC Learning

O'Hara, M. (2015) Austerity bites: A journey to the sharp end of cuts in the UK. Policy Press.

Ofsted. (2018) The changing picture in the children's home sector. Available at: The changing picture in the children's homes sector - Ofsted: social care and early years regulation blog

Ofsted. (2019) Children's Social Care in England. Available at: Children's Social Care in England 2019 - GOV.UK

Olver, K. and Cockbain, E. (2021) Professionals' Views on Responding to County Lines-Related Criminal Exploitation in the West Midlands, UK. Child Abuse Review, 30(4), pp.347-362.

Ozer, E.J., Ritterman, M.L. and Wanis, M.G. (2010) 'Participatory Action Research (PAR) in middle school: Opportunities, constraints, and key processes', *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 46(1–2), pp. 152–166.

Palmer, A. Norris, M. and Kelleher, J. (2022) Accelerated adulthood, extended adolescence and the care cliff: Supporting care leavers' transition from care to independent living. Child and family social work, 27(4), 748-759.

Paradisi, G. (2024) *When You Feel You Don't Matter: Young People's Experiences of Relational Harm and Exploitation*. London: Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel / Department for Education.

Pantazis, C. and Gordon, D. (1997) Television licence evasion and the criminalisation of female poverty. The Howard Journal of Criminal Justice, 36(2), pp.170-186.

Parton, N. (2017) Concerns about risk as a major driver of professional practice. Beyond the risk paradigm in child protection: Current debates and new directions, p.1.

Parton, N. (2019) Child maltreatment as social harm. Re-visioning public health approaches for protecting children, pp.473-485.

Parton, N. and Berridge, D. (2011) Child protection in England. Child protection systems: International trends and orientations, pp.60-87.

Pearson, G. Hobbs, D. (2001) Middle Market Drug Distribution. Home Office Research Study 227. London: Home Office.

Peckover, S. (2013) 'From 'public health' to 'safeguarding children': British health visiting in policy, practice and research', Children & Society, 27(2), pp. 116–126. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1099-0860.2011.00370.x.

Pemberton, S. (2015) Harmful Societies: Understanding Social Harm. Bristol: Policy Press.

Pidd, H. (2022) 'English councils pay £1m per child for places in private children's homes'; The Guardian [online]. Available at: English councils pay £1m per child for places in private children's homes | Social care | The Guardian

Pierre, R. (2021) Revisiting Diary Entries from Care: An Exposition of the Challenges of Unregulated Placement Settings. Practice, 33(5), pp.375-391.

Pitts, J. (2008) Reluctant Gangsters: Youth Gangs in Waltham Forest. Cullompton: Willan Publishing.

Pollock, T.G. and Bono, J.E. (2013) Being Scheherazade: The importance of storytelling in academic writing. Academy of Management Journal, 56(3), pp.629-634.

Prilleltensky, I. (2020) Mattering at the intersection of psychology, philosophy, and politics. American journal of community psychology, 65(1-2), pp.16-34.

Pugh, A. J. (2014) The theoretical costs of ignoring childhood: Rethinking independence, insecurity, and inequality. Theory and Society, 43, 71-89.

Razzall, K. (2019) 'Action needed against 'rogue homes' for teenagers, says minister'. BBC, 18 July 2019.

Reason, P. and Bradbury, H. (eds) (2008) *The SAGE Handbook of Action Research: Participative Inquiry and Practice*. 2nd edn. London: SAGE.

Reeves, J. Soutar, E. Green, S. and Crowther, T. (2018) Children and young people's vulnerabilities to grooming. In S. Çetinkaya (Ed.), Contemporary Childhood, pp.119–133. London: InTech. doi:10.5772/intechopen.71672

Reid, K. (2002) Truancy and schools. Routledge.

Reid, K. (2003) The search for solutions to truancy and other forms of school absenteeism. Pastoral care in education, 21(1), pp.3-9.

Reuter, P. (2009) 'Systemic violence in drug markets' in Crime, Law and Social Change, 52 (3), pp. 275-284.

Reyneke, R.P. (2024) The Role of Social Services in Realising Children's Rights in and through Education. Education as Change, 28(1), pp.1-23.

Robinson, G. McLean, R. Densley, J. (2019) Working county lines: Child criminal exploitation and illicit drug dealing in Glasgow and Merseyside. International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology 63 (5), pp. 694-711. doi:10.1177/0306624X18806742

Romano, S. (2017). Moralising poverty: The 'undeserving' poor in the public gaze. Routledge.

Rosenberg, M. and McCullough, C. (1981). Mattering: Inferred significance and mental health among adolescents. Research in Community and Mental Health, 2, pp.163–182.

Rossman, G.B. and Rallis, S.F. (2010) *Everyday Ethics: Reflections on Practice.* New York: Routledge.

Ruch, G. (2023). The contemporary context of relationship-based practice. In Social Work, pp. 217-222. Routledge.

Rutter, M. (2012) Causes of offending and antisocial behaviour. In A new response to youth crime, pp. 197-225. Willan.

Sanders, R. (2020) Care experienced children and young people's mental health. Iriss .

Scottish Government (2021) *National guidance for child protection in Scotland 2021* (updated 2023). Edinburgh: Scottish Government. Available at: https://www.gov.scot/publications/national-guidance-child-protection-scotland-2021-updated-2023/ (Accessed: 25 November 2025).

Schlossberg, N.K. (1989) Marginality and mattering: Key issues in building community. New directions for student services, 48(1), pp.5-15.

Schmitz, R.M. and Tyler, K.A. (2016) Growing up before their time: The early adultification experiences of homeless young people. Children and youth services review, 64, pp.15-22.

Seale, C. (1999) *The Quality of Qualitative Research*. London: SAGE.

Silverman, D. (2013) *Doing Qualitative Research*. 4th edn. London: SAGE.

Shaw, I. (2003) 'Ethics in qualitative research and evaluation', *Journal of Social Work*, 3(1), pp. 9–29.

Shaw, J. (2014) Why do young people offend in children's homes? Research, theory, and practice. British Journal of Social Work, 44 (7), pp. 1823–1839.

Shaw, J. Frost, N. (2013) Young people and the care experience: Research, policy and practice. London: Routledge.

Shaw, J. Greenhow, S. (2021) The Criminalisation and Exploitation of Children in Care. Routledge: Oxon and New York.

Shier, H. (2001) 'Pathways to participation: Openings, opportunities and obligations', *Children & Society*, 15(2), pp. 107–117.

Shildrick, T. and Rucell, J. (2015) Sociological Perspectives on Poverty. York: JRF.

Smith, L.T. (2012). Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples. 2nd ed. London: Zed Books.

Smithson, H. and Jones, A. (2021) Co-creating youth justice practice with young people: Tackling power dynamics and enabling transformative action. Children and Society, 35(3), pp.348-362.

SPACE. (2021) The National Referral Mechanism (NRM). Available at: What We Do - www.bespaceaware.co.uk

Spicer, J. (2019) ''That's their brand, their business': how Police officers are interpreting county lines'. Policing and Society, An International Journal of Research and Policy, 29 (8), pp. 873-886.

Spicer, J. (2021) 'Between gang talk and prohibition: The transfer of blame for County Lines', The International journal of drug policy, 87, pp. 102667–102667.doi: 10.1016/j.drugpo.2020.102667

Staines, J. (2017) Looked after children and youth justice: a response to recent reviews. Safer Communities [online]. 16 (3), pp. 102-111. doi: 10.1108/SC-01-2017-0005

Stanley, E. (2017) From care to custody: trajectories of children in post-war New Zealand. Youth Justice, 17(1),pp. 57–72.

Stein, M. (2006a) 'Research Review: Young people leaving care', Child & Family Social Work, 11(3), pp. 273–279.

Stein, M. (2006b) 'Missing years of abuse in children's homes', Child and Family Social Work, 11 (1), pp. 11-21.

Stevens, A. (2011) Drugs, Crime and Public Health. Abingdon: Routledge.

Stone, N. (2018) Child criminal exploitation:'county lines', trafficking and cuckooing. Youth Justice, 18(3), pp.285-293.

Storrod, M. Densley, J. (2017) ''Going viral' and 'going country': the expressive and instrumental activities of street gangs on social media'. Journal of Youth Studies, 20 (6), pp. 677-696

Sturrock, R. Holmes, L. (2015) Running the Risks: the links between gang involvement and young people going missing [online]. London. Catch 22. Available at:https://cdn.catch-22.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/Catch22-Dawes-Unit-Running-The-Risks-full-report.pdf

Terry, G. Hayfield, N.(2020) Reflexive thematic analysis. In Handbook of qualitative research in education, pp. 430-441. Edward Elgar Publishing.

Tillmann-Healy, L. (2003) Friendship as method. Qualitative Inquiry, 9(5), pp.729–749.

Tombs, S. (2017) Social Protection After the Crisis: Regulation Without Enforcement. Bristol: Policy Press.

Torrance, H. (2012) 'Triangulation, respondent validation, and democratic participation in mixed methods research', *Journal of Mixed Methods Research*, 6(2), pp. 111–123.

Torre, M.E. (2009) 'Participatory Action Research and Critical Race Theory: Fueling spaces for nos-otras to research', *The Urban Review*, 41(1), pp. 106–120

Townsend, P. (1979) Poverty in the United Kingdom. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Tracy, S. J. (2010) 'Qualitative quality: Eight "big-tent" criteria for excellent qualitative research', *Qualitative Inquiry*, 16(10), pp. 837–851. doi:10.1177/1077800410383121.

Trainor, A. Bouchard, K. A. (2013) Exploring and developing reciprocity in research design. International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education, 26(8), pp. 986–1003. doi.org/10.1080/09518398.2012.724467

Traverse Ltd (2022) *County Lines Pathfinder: High-level evaluation of outcomes* [Evaluation report for the Youth Justice Board]. Nottingham: Youth Justice Board / Traverse Ltd. Available at: https://yjresourcehub.uk/wp-content/uploads/media/County_Lines_Pathfinder_Emerging_Practice_Overview_County_Lines_Pathfinder_May_2022.pdf (Accessed: 25 November 2025).

Treseder, P. (1997) *Empowering Children and Young People: Promoting Involvement in Decision-Making*. London: Save the Children.

Tronto, J. (1993) Moral boundaries: A political argument for an ethic of care. New York, NY: Routledge.

Tuck, E. and Yang, K.W. (2014) 'R-words: Refusing research', in Paris, D. & Winn, M.T. (eds) *Humanizing Research: Decolonizing Qualitative Inquiry with Youth and Communities*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, pp. 223–248.

von Benzon, N. and Wilkinson, C. (2019) Intersectionality and Difference in Childhood and Youth. London: Routledge.

Wacquant, L. (2008) Urban Outcasts: A Comparative Sociology of Advanced Marginality. Cambridge: Polity.

Wacquant, L. (2009) *Punishing the Poor: The Neoliberal Government of Social Insecurity*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Wang, C. and Burris, M.A. (1997) 'Photovoice: Concept, methodology, and use for participatory needs assessment', *Health Education & Behavior*, 24(3), pp. 369–387.

Warwick, L., Beddoe, L., Leigh, J., Disney, T., Ferguson, H. & Cooner, T.S. (2023) 'The power of relationship-based supervision in supporting social work retention: A case study from long-term ethnographic research in child protection', Qualitative Social Work, 22(5), pp. 879-898. doi:10.1177/14733250221113015.

Webster, C.S. and Kingston, S. (2014) Anti-poverty strategies for the UK: Poverty and crime review.

Wells, K. (2021) Childhood in a global perspective. John Wiley and Sons.

Whelan, J. (2021) Welfare, deservingness and the logic of poverty: Who deserves?. Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

Wilkins, P. (2000) Storytelling as research. Research in social care and social welfare: Issues and debates for practice, pp.144-153.

Williams, F. (2018) 'Women, Poverty and Social Exclusion', Lecture, LSE Gender Institute, London.

Wilson, S. 2008. Research is Ceremony: Indigenous Research Methods. Black Point, NS: Fernwood Publishing.

Windle, J. Briggs, D. (2015) Going Solo: the social organisation of drug dealing within a London street gang. Journal of Youth Studies [online]. 18 (9), pp. 1170-1185. doi: https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2015.1020925

Windle, J. Briggs, D. (2015) 'It's like working away for two weeks': The harms associated with young drug dealers commuting from a saturated London drug market. Crime Prevention and Community Safety. 17, pp.105–119. doi.org/10.1057/cpcs.2015.2

Wood, M. and Selwyn, J. (2017) 'Looked-after children and young people's views on what matters to their subjective well-being', Adoptive and Fostering, 40 (1), pp. 20–34.

Wroe, L.E. (2020) Principles of Contextual Safeguarding [online]

Wroe, L.E. (2021) 'Young people and 'county lines': a contextual and social account'. Journal of Children's Services, 16 (1), pp. 39-55. doi.org/10.1108/JCS-10-2020-0063

Wroe, L.E. (2022) When helping hurts: a zemiological analysis of a child protection intervention in adolescence—implications for a critical child protection studies. Social Sciences, 11(6), p.263.

Youth Justice Board (2020) Ethnic Disparities in the Youth Justice System. London: YJB.

Youth Justice Legal Centre (2023) Dare to Care: Representing Care-Experienced Young People in the Criminal Justice System. London: YJLC. Available at: https://yjlc.uk/resources/legal-guides/dare-care-representing-care experienced-young-people (Accessed: [7.11.25]).

Appendices

Life story interview transcription

File Name(s)	93665_BJ_Timeline_Interview
Total Recording Length	94 minutes
Number of Participants	2
Final Word Count	18,298
Total Number of Pages	41
Date Completed	16 January 2024

I: Start the recording. Okay, hi. So, we're going to look at your timeline. I just wanted to check you've had the consent form and the information sheet, and everything's…you understand everything, anything you need to ask…

R: Yeah, I understand everything, and I'm fine with everything.

I: Okay, and we'll sign it, we've got it all signed off, so that's good. Fab, alright then. This looks brilliant.

R: It starts off, I was born on January 27th in 1999, and I lived with my mum and my grandparents until about 18 month, until my mum got into a relationship with my dad. My dad didn't want me at first, so I didn't know him for the first 18 month, and then we moved into a house in Shirecliffe. My brother was born on 27th October 2001, with my youngest brother, Bradley, following two years later on 11th November.

I: This is so lovely and neat, look at your neat writing.

R: So…

I: Did you draw all them?

R: Yeah. These ones are stuck on, some I've drawn and some I've...

I: These are fantastic.

R: So, I came from quite a broken home. My dad was abusive towards my mum and towards me, so I suffered quite a lot of abuse when I were younger, physical abuse. Quite a lot of mental abuse as well. He was a heavy drinker, so we hardly had any money, because he'd spend all our money on alcohol, so we constantly like hardly ate proper food and stuff.

My mum worked in a bar, but her money would always, like, cover the rent and cover this and that, so we just ate basic stuff as a kid and I think that's where my awkward eating came from, because I never had, like, a variety of food. As I grew older, I was like, well, I don't want that, I just wanted plain.

I: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

R: So, kind of very awkward eating from my childhood and that, yeah.

I: From that, from necessity, because there wasn't, like, the money around for anything else.

R: My mum always had…my mum's got a really kind heart, so I always had somebody living with us who was like…my uncle lived with us, then my dad's brother, my other uncle, came and lived with us, then when he left, my mum's cousin came and lived with us, so like, I always had a

houseful of people who was like my mum, my dad, somebody living with us, and then my two little brothers, so…

I: And then what was the house…how big was the house that you were living in?

R: It were a two bedroomed house, so they were either on the settee, or my uncle [inaudible 02:19] used to share a bed with me, because I had a bunkbed, so I used to have the top bunkbed, and he used to have, like, this little settee bed underneath it. So yeah, I've had, like, quite a hectic life when I was younger. I looked after my brothers quite a lot and spent a lot of time making sure that my family weren't damaging them like they were me, because I was their…I have a lot of alcoholics and a lot of druggies in my family.

Because my mum had to work and my dad worked, I was often left in, like, very irresponsible hands. Like my uncle would drink when he got us. I remember this one time, one of my uncles were a crackhead, and he'd gone down to the shop with my other uncle, and they come back absolutely covered in blood, and I were about seven, seven at the time, absolutely covered in blood. My two little brothers were so scared.

Luckily, my auntie lived at the top of the road, so I ran them up to my auntie's, instead of my auntie saying, oh, wait here with these, I'll wait with the boys, and then I had to run back down and start cleaning my uncle up and ring my mum and say, oh, this has happened, and my mum had to come [voices overlap 03:21].

I: And what had happened, they'd just like…

R: Oh, they'd got into some argument about, oh, we're buying a drink and who had the money for it and blah, blah, blah.

I: So, they'd done it to each other.

R: Yeah, yeah, they just started fighting outside pub, like, that's what they were like, very, very irresponsible people.

I: And they were your mum's brothers, were they?

R: One were my mum's brother and one were my mum's cousin.

I: Oh, okay.

R: My dad's side of the family's from Birmingham, so when I was five, my dad's brother came down to live with us, because my mum had said that he could to my nana, because my nana had kicked him out. So yeah, I spent some of my time in Sheffield and some of my time in Birmingham, when I could.

I: Did you like being in Birmingham?

R: I loved it, I loved Birmingham, and I was like, I'll try and get there as much as I can, because it's just like a comfort…it's where I go for a break when I feel like everything's too much.

I: Yeah, yeah, and with your nan, you'd stay with your nan or…

R: No, my nan actually passed away in 2011. I go and stay with my cousins and my Great Auntie Beth sometimes, which is my nan's sister. Yeah, I spent most of my childhood, like, in fear of my father, and the only time I ever felt safe was at my nan and my grandad's, which was my mum's mum and dad, so I used to spend every weekend at my nan and grandad's, which were like…

I: Yeah, they're in Sheffield?

R: Yeah, yeah, they were in Sheffield, which were like my way of escaping my dad and my dad's home life. So yeah, I have very, very few childhood memories, but most memories I do have are bad memories, so yeah.

I: But we were talking about that before, weren't we, your brains block stuff out for you for things that are…

R: It does. I started school in 2003, [inaudible 05:03] at Busk Meadow, and then I moved up to Shirecliffe in 2005, which was year three. That was knocked down two years later and a new school was built, which was called Watercliffe Meadow, which was like three schools in the area, they'd knocked three primary schools down and just joined them all into one.

I: Wow, so it must have been massive.

R: Yeah, quite a big school, but luckily, I…most of the teacher that I'd been in Shirecliffe with moved onto Watercliffe Meadow, so I, kind of, got the comfort teacher that I already knew. I weren't the best kid in primary school due to my home life, I kind of, like, didn't care what I were doing in school, didn't care about what the teachers told me to do and like, I just saw it as a way to, kind of, release my feelings without having any consequences behind them, without being scared that I can't show my feelings because my dad's going to beat shit out of me for doing it.

I: And school never picked up on any of that stuff.

R: Yeah, I had social services in and out of my life from a kid. My mum always says to me, I don't know how you weren't took by social services, I don't know how you kids weren't took, because we had…constantly we had them in and out of life, and every time, I'd have to take a few days off school, because I'd have a big bruise on my face. My dad was [inaudible 06:24].

228

Me and my younger brother took the brunt of it. My youngest brother, he was okay, like, he's grown up to go to university, he's got no mental health problems, but me and my other brother, like we're very problematic and very broken, broken people.

I: Because of…so, what…so, were you put on that risk register and things like that or…

R: So, I was classed as a kid to…took more, like, care of them, looked at more deeply, but…

I: Yeah, a child in need, kind of thing.

R: Everything kind of…yeah, but everything, kind of, just…because my mum could look after us and she wouldn't leave my dad, it were kind of, like, well, what do you expect us to do, like…

I: Why do you think your mum wouldn't leave your dad?

R: Oh, she was scared, she were…

I: She just didn't know…

R: Oh God, she were…

I: Are you getting upset? Are you alright?

R: Twenty…no, no, I'm fine. In her twenties with three kids, all under ten year old, and she didn't know how to live on her own. My mum had a lot of mental health issues as well, obviously through the abuse that my dad had gave her.

She was very weak-minded, and she didn't think she was strong enough to do it all by herself, and the way that my dad had made her feel and talked to her about, like, the way that he spoke to her, it made her feel like she were worthless and nobody would want her and she wouldn't be able to do it. So, it took a lot of courage for my mum to get to the point of wanting to leave my dad. In 2010, I graduated from Watercliffe Meadow, and we had a year six prom, which I rode in a limo too, I absolutely loved it.

I: Did you wear a beautiful dress?

R: Yeah, this is my dress, it was brilliant, so yeah, we had fizzy apple juice in the limo, and we all felt like an adult. It were great, I absolutely loved it.

I: Did you have good friends at school, like in a little group?

R: I did. I met my best friend in Busk Meadow and we've been best friends ever since, nearly 22, 23 years now, and then when I moved up to Watercliffe Meadow, I met my other best friend Chloe, we're still really close, we've got two daughters near enough the same age, so…in 2008, my world fell apart when my grandparents split up. My grandad did the worst thing, because he rang me, it was like…I remember it like it were yesterday, he rang me up, because I was always Grandad's girl, and he was like, your nana's left me, she's been cheating on me with a man. And like, at nine year old, you don't know how to understand that, you don't know…

I: Yeah, what that means, yeah.

R: …at all, like, I just thought my nana were a horrible person and it really put a barrier in between our relationship, because I thought, I were like, why are you hating my grandad, why would you ever want to leave him, you both know you were my safe space, that I came to you to feel comfortable, and now you're leaving me, what am I meant to do.

I have a lot of resentment towards my nana about leaving my grandad, but as I got older, I realised that they weren't happy and it wasn't a happy relationship at all, and it were best for them to split up. My nana thrives now, and…

I: But you don't understand that as a child, do you.

R: No, that is…

I: And especially, like you say, that was your safe space.

R: Yeah, it dama…I felt it damaged me quite a lot when I were younger, like I didn't know how to…took a lot of years to undo that damage and to actually get comfortable with where I am. In 2009, my parents split, which I felt immediate relief, and I felt like my life was just about to start, which is like [voices overlap 09:44].

I: I was going to say, that's lovely, that's a really nice image, yeah.

R: And then in 2010, I started secondary school at Chaucer. I was just starting puberty and going through major changes, like major changes. I was a tomboy when I was younger, so I never wore anything girly, not…like, you could never get me in a dress, it were always tracksuits, I was always out on the bikes with the lads, and I was just like a lad's lad.

And then when I went up to school, I started caring more about my appearance, starting wearing make-up and girlier clothes. I cared more about what boys thought of me, and I started, like, noticing the changes in my body, just being…I was very horny when I was younger as well, I was, like, quite hormonal, so…I, kind of, just craved love and attention.

So, I got my first boyfriend when I was in year seven, and because my mum couldn't control me at this point, because I'd like…my dad had moved out, and I was just beginning to find myself and thought that I needed to step away from everyone. I, kind of, resented my mum for a long time, because I thought, you was meant to keep me safe as a child and you didn't do all that, and now that you've left him, like, and I know you can't control me, I'm going to do what I want, because you didn't give me the life I wanted. So, now I'm going to live my life, which in hindsight…

I: And I suppose you didn't have the threat of your dad there as well, that physical threat.

R: No, that physical…I mean, she always threatened me with him, but I could run away where my dad wouldn't find me, so like, he don't scare me anymore. So yeah, I started…I became sexually active in 2011 and was put in implant, which had a major effect on like my body. I became…I bled every day, and I became really, really ill, and I put loads of weight on, so I had to have the implant took out, and then they gave me Depo, which started me to have bowel problems a few years later.

But yeah, in school, I was very naughty, I used to wag it all the time. My school, actually, we used to have a cafeteria, and the windows would open like normal, but the only thing is, like, we had six cafeterias in Chaucer, because we had, like, a different sandwich one and your big one, and one of the sandwich ones, you could climb out the window and then escape off the back edge of Gunner Park. So, me and a few friends used to do that, and we was the reason why all the windows in Chaucer got taped up, so you couldn't open…

I: Oh really….open a window.

R: Couldn't open the windows to escape, so a lot of kids were absolutely fuming at us, and like, actually resented us for doing that, but…

I: I love that that's the school's approach to it, instead of, like, actually trying to fix the problem with the kids, we'll just seal the windows up.

R: We'll seal the windows.

I: Great.

R: So yeah, I did a little report card.

I: Oh yeah, what did this…

R: My home life was slowly turning to chaos again, and I was constantly arguing with my mum. I hated her boyfriend, he was absolutely vile, like he absolutely hated me, because I stood up for myself, I stood up for my mum, and if I saw something I didn't like, I'd say something, and he didn't like that. So yeah, me and my mum started fighting a lot, and she ended

up kicking me out, because we'd got into an argument, and she'd…I'd, like, gone to swing for her, and she'd thrown…picked up my…I don't know where this hulk came from, but she picked my wardrobe up and threw it on me.

So, I escaped out of her bedroom window and I ran to my boyfriend at the time, then I was out with him. Got into an altercation with a transvestite, because one of my friends was quite a disgusting person, like didn't care about other people's feelings, and there were a transvestite walking down the street, and he was adamant that they were wearing a wig, so he's gone over and pulled his hair.

I didn't agree with it, but obviously when he came up to approach me, I was about to explain why I didn't agree with it and I was sorry, but he kind of just…which, in his point, I'd understand, I was stood with the people that were doing…so like, he, kind of, just grabbed me and was like, you're coming with me. And he ended up breaking my wrist at that point, so I…

I: Oh my God.

R: Yeah, I don't think he realised how hard he had hold of my wrist, so my friend Jacob at the time was in the care home up…just up the road from you, actually, I went to his care home, and his carer had rang the Police for me, who took me to the hospital. I discovered that I'd got a broken wrist and a cracked rib.

I: Oh my God.

R: So, the cracked rib were from my mum, so the Police were like, well, we don't really want you to go home because of all this, so I was sent to…well, my mum had already kicked me out anyway, but the Police wouldn't let me go home, so I was sent to live with my grandad, which…he lives in Hillsborough, my school were in Parson's Cross, so it were a bit of a nightmare getting back.

I'd have to go back and then I'd have to do…come home from doing maths and English, to go home and do maths and English at my grandad's, as a punishment for my behaviour. I only lasted there a month before he decided that he didn't want a kid in his house, and he moved me in with my dad.

I: Oh no.

R: So…

I: And social services, what were they doing at this point? Obviously, your mum's broken your ribs, only…

R: They, kind of, just put me in with my dad and said they'd monitor, but within a few months, monitoring had stopped. My dad had, kind of, a way

of, like, making me lie to them, because I was so scared of what he'd do, I just used to lie for him anyway, so when I was living at my dad's, I was kicked out of Chaucer School due to my behaviour, so my dad took it upon hisself that I was going to write lines, so for about four and a half month, I had A4 sheets of paper, and every day when I come back from school, well, I say school, it were like a shed in a bus station.

I: Was it, like, a pupil referral unit you were in, like…yeah.

R: Kind of, yeah. I'd come back and I'd write lines saying, I will not disobey teachers and I will learn to be good. I did this for four and a half month. He stopped me from seeing my mum in this time, and my mum eventually rang the social services and was like, look, he's keeping my daughter hostage.

They decided that I was going to move back in with my mum, which I were happy about, because at the time, I was living…I lived on my dad's settee, because his girlfriend's daughter didn't want to share…she didn't want to share a room, so I was made to live on the settee for a good, like, six, seven months. I was living out of bags on the settee, so I was just, like, glad to be back home with my mum. But it didn't last long, because my behaviour was still all over the place, and I hated my mum's boyfriend still.

I: He was the same…

R: The same, same fella, yeah.

I: Was your dad abusive to you when you were in the…you were saying before, he'd been, like, physically abusive when you were younger.

R: Oh yeah, yeah, I had three week off school because he'd punched me. I managed to get into Firth Park in October, and a few week later, I'd got into a massive argument with my stepsister, can't remember what had happened, but we had a massive argument. And I didn't mean to, but as I've turned around, I had, like, this massive chain on, like, finger, and as I've turned around to storm away from her, it's ripped, and whipped her leg.

But I didn't purposely whip her, I just turned round and it whipped her leg. And she even said that to my dad, but my dad took it upon himself to, like, proper give me the biggest black eye, so I had three week off school for that. They just said that I'd got men…no, I think he said I had pneumonia or something like that, so yeah, I had…

I: And was this before you'd even started or you'd started?

R: I'd started, I'd been there about three week, and then, as I said, I had about three week off, but yeah, I started Firth Park in October 2012, spent most of my time in inclusion centre, because my behaviour just were erratic still, so they decided that instead of having me in the inclusion

233

centre, they were going to send me to Sheaf Training, which is…it's, like a…now it's a college, but before, it were like a place for kids that don't do well in mainstream schools. In Sheaf, I absolutely loved it.

I: Did you?

R: Yeah, the project that I'd been given was to prepare and execute a basketball tournament for primary kids, so me and a few other people from my school spent a year perfecting this basketball tournament, and then we finally went ahead and did it, and oh, it was so great.

I: What was great about it, what did you love about it?

R: Oh, I just loved the fact that, like, I'd prepared something and I'd executed it, and it went well, and like…

I: A sense of accomplishment you felt.

R: Yeah, I felt so proud of myself, I thought to myself, yeah, I may be a naughty kid, but, like, give me something that I want to do, and I will do it, I just need a bit of attention. So yeah, my mum made the biggest mistake when I moved back home, and she turned the dining room into my bedroom, so my brothers could have their own bedroom.

We had a three bedroomed house and I've got two younger brothers, and they just fought like mad, so my mum tried to separate them by giving one of them my bedroom and putting me downstairs. I started climbing out my bedroom window.

I: I was going to say, that just means it's easier for you to go missing.

R: Literally climbing out my bedroom window every night, I'd be gone for hours on end, and at 14, I started a relationship with a 23 year old man, who would come and pick me up, would drive me around at night and then he'd drop me off in the morning, and often he'd pick me up and drop me off at Upperthorpe to meet another group of boys that I'd been friends with since I were younger, because my cousin lived in Upperthorpe, I spent a lot of time with her when I could.

And then he'd come and pick me up and he'd take me home, and I'd just…to be fair, I used him a lot, like luckily, I was quite smart and street smart as a kid, because I'd grown up, so I knew what grooming were, and I knew how to avoid sexual intercourse with him and how to avoid the things that he wanted. So, luckily, I was quite safe with it.

I: And how did you do that? How did you avoid that stuff?

R: Honestly, every time he tried, I just like…I'd pretend to sneeze and I'd like…sort of, like, oh, well, I'm just not sure. Shall we roll a spliff, shall we do this…

I: Yeah, just distract him.

R: Any time I mentioned the word spliff, he's like…his mind just completely went and he focused on weed, so any time I thought…oh, here's a spliff, [inaudible 20:12] yeah [inaudible 20:14]. So, [inaudible 20:16] I got into a fight after school, and I was kicked out in 2013.

I: What, permanently, like the school were like…

R: Permanently kicked out, so this is my second school now that I was kicked out of. Pathways, which I was going to part time, which is another, like, part time school you go to from there, they took me on full time and Pat worked on saving my life, like, that woman, the woman that owns it, she's called Pat, and she is just the most angelic woman I've ever met in my life. She just doesn't judge you, she understands that kids are going through what kids are going through, and you've just got to allow them to go through it and guide them without shaming them.

Don't get me wrong, she had got my mum to take my bedroom door off, I was…like, my behaviour started to get better, and then I got to a point where I got really, really bad again, and Pat had a meeting with my mum and Kian Cooper's mum, which is one of my schoolfriends, and she told them to give us no privacy by taking our door off. So, my mum did that, and oh, let me tell you, I was starting to be good after a few weeks, I wanted my door back.

I: Really? I've heard a few people say that that's happened to them.

R: Yeah, I wanted my privacy back [inaudible 21:30] I was sick of going into bathroom to get changed and everything, so yeah, she worked on saving me. She managed to get me into Hinde House in September of '13.

I: Oh, I've heard about Hinde House.

R: Oh, it's the best school, out of all the schools that I've gone to, I would recommend that school.

I: Mainstream school, is it?

R: Mainstream, yeah, so I decided that I was determined to turn my life around and better myself, and just try and make something of my life before I completely ruined it.

I: How old were you at this point then?

R: Fifteen…no, 14, because I'm always a year older than the year.

I: Oh yeah.

R: Yeah, so I were 14 when I started going, I left there at 15, so yeah, I rekindled with my old partner, so remember when I was there, when I first got kicked out, this is the person that I was with. I probably loved him with all my heart, and it broke…it killed me to split up with him when [inaudible 22:28] it just weren't possible to have a relationship other than with my dad. So, I rekindled with him, and…

I: What happened to the 23 year old guy at this point, how had you, kind of, broken away from that?

R: I went to Birmingham for a month. I was meant to go for a week and ended up staying a month, and while I was in Birmingham, he was talk…because I already knew that he was talking to other girls, so it was just a matter of time before somebody found out, and a girl's parents – was 13 as well – had found out that they were talking, and they called the Police. And he wasn't actually charged at first, he was just…I think he got…not a slap on the wrist, but practically a slap on the wrist, and put on the sex offenders' register.

And then a few months later, I seen on Facebook that he'd been sent to prison, because he'd breached his conditions, and he, kind of, met her in Meadowhall, so…and the parents had found out, so he got sent to prison, and then I came back, I was like, yeah, I'll come back now.

I: Okay, so you'd removed yourself.

R: Yeah [voices overlap 23:33].

I: That's quite a sensible decision to make.

R: Yeah, as I said, like, I grew up watching the streets, as people call it, and living in the streets, so I was already quite clued up and smart on ways to take myself away from bad situations, like, I used to see my uncle going on the road all the time and then coming back a few months later when things were safe, so I kind of…and my uncle was like…took it upon theirself to try and teach me this route which is absolutely disgusting to do to a child. I should have been learning about all these other things, I mean, my uncle used to sell crack cocaine.

He used to take me out with him when he was selling it and stuff, so I were next to him, I've been around drugs all my life. So yeah, I were quite clever in the way that I could still look out…even though I wasn't ever fully safe, because you never are as a child, I always tried to make precautions and to try and keep myself safe out there.

I: Yeah, yeah, street smart.

R: But yeah, I got back with my ex and I moved in part time with him. Well, I say part time, I were practically there, I just kept my stuff at my mum's, because…

I: Did he live with his family?

R: He lived with his dad, yeah, his dad and his little brother. It were just easier for me not to live with my mum and my stepdad, because my relationship were always better with my mum if I weren't living under her roof.

I: Yeah, yeah, I get that.

R: And we weren't in physical fights. So, yeah, we used it for two years, I had, like, a really good life, and I was…

I: Were you going to school and stuff and…

R: Yeah, I was going to school, and I was going on holidays all the time. We had a caravan in Skeggy that we were in every weekend, and my home life were much better, and I felt like my life were finally perfect, and I was, like, happy for the first time, if 14 to 15 years that I'd never felt happiness, and I finally felt it. And in this time, in year…end of year ten, so end of being 15, I got really bad bowel problems, and I ended up spending three month in hospital trying to sort my bowels out.

I had three colonoscopies, they removed so many litres of poo from my bowels, because [inaudible 25:43] weren't working, and I'd found out that I got IBS, severe IBS. I don't know what the actual medical term for it is, but it's called a bent bumhole, so apparently when you poo, when you, like, push, your bumhole straightens, but mine bends. So yeah, I started off with quite bad bowel problems, and in year 11, I was hardly in school, because I was so poorly, but I managed to graduate with Ds, which I think is amazing.

I: That's amazing, yeah.

R: To say I was predicted Fs, and I never really did school from the start, I managed to come out with Ds, but…

I: That shows how bright you actually are.

R: Yeah, that just showed me, like, I can do whatever I put my mind to, because I should have failed, and I didn't, so…

I: Yeah, yeah.

R: And then I had my year 11 prom, which…

I: And it was good?

R: Oh, it was amazing. My boyfriend had hired, like, this really expensive sports car for me to go in, and everyone came in limos, and I came in this big sports car, and everyone was like, ah, I wish I was in that. I felt on top of the world, I'm like, yes, me, and do you know what, I was the only person to turn up to prom with a short prom dress. I can't wear long dresses, because they irritate me past my knees, so I was the only one to come in a short prom dress. In all the pictures, I, kind of, just stand out.

I: Yeah, yeah, aw.

R: In the end of August 2015, I found out that my partner was cheating on me when I went to Birmingham. I got a phone call from one of my friends, you do know that John was, like, on the skate park getting off with the girls. I was like, what do you mean? I'd been with this guy for two years, devoted my life to him and he's doing this to me. So, I stayed in Birmingham for a little bit more longer, I should have started college in September, but I didn't, I actually started at the beginning of November, because I just decided to stay in Birmingham and sort myself out, and try and get my head around things. But I didn't, I started drinking more and taking drugs again.

I: What, were you taking just weed at that point or everything?

R: I was sniffing, I started sniffing actually at 13. Stopped when I got my [inaudible 27:54] at 14, and then started again at 16. And then I moved on to taking MDMA with my cousin. My cousin were my first person that give me MDMA, which is from a broken home, so we were, kind of, both just trying to heal each other in the only ways that we knew how, which was on drugs.

I: Yeah, I think that's common, isn't it? You find somebody who you feel like you can connect with, and that might be because of rubbish reasons as well as good reasons, yeah.

R: So, I was arguing with my mum a lot and I didn't really care about what I was doing with my life, and on Christmas 2015, I ran up a 200 pound taxi fare and had to borrow it off my younger brother, due to losing my purse, which I actually think was robbed. So, my mum had had enough and she just sounded like…

I: How did you run up a 200 pound taxi fare?

R: Because I started off in Parson's Cross and I got a taxi to Jordanthorpe, then from Jordanthorpe, I got it to Manchester, then from Manchester, I got it back to my mum's.

I: Why did this taxi driver think you could afford to pay that though, like…

R: I could have…I would have afforded it if I didn't lose my purse…I always…I started getting PIP really young, so I always had money to pay my own way, plus it were Christmas, I'd just got Christmas money.

I: Do you think that financial independence helped you a little bit, like…

R: No.

I: No.

R: Not at all, like, no, because it gave me the opportunity to buy as many drugs as I want. It gave me the opportunity to go wherever I want, just…

I: Without having the understanding of, like…yeah, how to manage money. You were just given this money.

R: I was just given money and I just did whatever. At first it started off, it were alright, because I was 12 when I first got it, and like, I'd just use it for swimming and stuff, and then obviously as my behaviour progressed worse, the things that I spent my money on, like got progressively worse. So, on January 5th of 2016, I moved into the Roundabout Hostel, my substance use got extremely worse, and I became addicted to spice. I was actually raped in the hostel, which led me to…

I: While you were on spice.

R: No, that's what led me to smoking spice, getting onto spice. I was on cocaine and MDMA and everything before that, just living the party life, but wasn't really doing it to heal myself. I was doing it because I was 16 in a hostel and it were fun, and then after being raped, it started to be used as a healing device, and I started smoking the spice. And while I was smoking it, I was asked by a friend to keep some…well, I say a friend, he was my dealer, but I saw him as a friend.

I was asked to keep some in, just in case somebody wanted it in the hostel, and I became [inaudible 30:54] and it got to the point where there were obviously so much spice in the house and so many other drugs, I'm like, right, I'm actually in a position that I think I'm about to be groomed into a gang, and I didn't know what to do. And I asked for the hostel for help, and their only option were, we can ring the Police, but if you're not willing to talk to the Police, then we can't really help you, because you're not helping yourself.

And I'm like, how is that helpful? Do you want me killed? Do you want me to be killed by a gang, because that's what's going to happen, and they just didn't really seem to care.

I: I mean, that's not an easy thing for you to go and ask for help for, isn't it?

R: Not at all.

I: And then to get…

R: I've never, ever in my life, I've never [voices overlap 31:31].

I: Yeah, and then to get that response.

R: To get that response, I was just like, do you know what, I'm not fucking asking for your help anymore, you can fuck off. You want me to go to college and study, no, you won't help me, so I'm not going to college, I won't do what you ask me to do, I'm just going to fuck my life up. And I'll blame it on you, which I did, I was quite irresponsible, like I put all my mistakes on everyone else, because I just felt, I've had this hard nut life, and I can do what I want, and it's everybody else's fault, and everybody else can take the repercussions of my actions. I were just a very, very damaged girl, so…

I: And this was how it was playing out, isn't it? All of that trauma and crap that had happened to you had to come out somehow, and this is how it's coming out.

R: It's coming out, so…

I: But then when you finally pluck up the courage, I suppose, to say to somebody you want help, that's thrown back in your face.

R: I think I realised that my guys had a guy, and his guy were bigger than his guy, and it weren't just my guy, and these were dangerous people, and it's like, well, even if my guy leaves me alone, he's not going to leave me alone, and it's like…I got to the point where I'm thinking, I'm going to be…I honestly in my head, I were thinking to myself, I'm going to become one of them girls that are so drugged up, that they just get took one day and they're put into a trap yard and I'm never allowed to leave, and I'll get killed before I'm allowed to leave. And I were really, really scared about my life and how I was going to end up.

I: And what do you think made that realisation happen for you? What do you think it was? Because it sounds like it was just something that was like…started off as a little bit and it got bigger and bigger and bigger.

R: I think at first, I didn't realise how I was being groomed. I made a friend on the spice.

I: Was he giving you spice for free or…

R: No.

I: You were still paying for it as well.

R: So, at first, I were going to buy it off him, and then we, kind of, started talking, and I liked him, I liked him as a guy. I think he was also groomed.

I: In a similar situation, yeah.

R: He was older than me, but I would say he'd been going…he'd been doing this a long time now, a few years, and I think he was stuck in a cycle he didn't know how to get out of.

I: And he lived in the hostel too, did he?

R: No, he lived up in Heeley, not far away. The thing is with a hostel is like, most of the people that you meet aren't from the hostel, but because they know where the hostel is and they know it's a money trap, they friend you and they get in with you. It just becomes this whole downward spiral of, well, you start off as friends, and now I owe you, like…

I: How did it work with the care thing at this point then? I think you'd said before you'd signed your…what happened with that?

R: So, I had a social worker at this point, but it was only the short term social worker, so when you first go into, obviously housing at 16, you get given a social worker, so that was the social worker. She was so rubbish, she hadn't came and seen me. When she did see me, we had a massive argument, because I told her that she weren't giving me enough care, and she said that I wasn't behaving like I should be, so we just had a massive…like, we didn't get on.

My mum actually asked for a new social worker, because she would argue with my mum all the time about the way that I should be looked after, but my mum…I wasn't in my mum's care, I was in her care, so it was just…it was stupid. While living in Roundabout, I got clean, but I got into…in a relationship, and it were great at first. Roundabout decided that they was going to move me to Foyer, because my six month was up, I wasn't responsible enough to get my own, like, supported accommodation.

I: And were you 16 by this point?

R: I was 17 at this point.

I: Seventeen by this point, okay.

R: So, they moved me into Foyer, and I managed to get my partner in there too. We carried on selling drugs in that hostel, to try and keep my money open, just…at that point, it got like…I weren't selling them for this guy, I were…just needed the money, and I was like, right, I'm just going to go and do, like, how I'm going to do it. But while I was doing that, a boy clocked on from a few, like, floors down, to what I was doing, and then I

somehow ended up moving his stuff as well as mine. So, it was like, I was taking all the danger for him.

I: Yeah, yeah, yeah, and he was just getting the money for it.

R: Yeah, but because he was chucking me, like, 50 quid a week, I were like, oh yeah, do you know what, he's doing me a favour, I'm getting money for it. I really weren't, I was just a pawn, just a pawn.

I: When did that realisation kick in at that point, that you were just this…because you'd, sort of, said you'd thought about that before when you were in Roundabout.

R: Yeah, I think because I, kind of, saw it with different eyes, because this guy was living with me, he was in the same position, he was the same age as me, so I, kind of, saw it as, oh, like yeah, I'll help you out, I'll do you a favour, like, yeah, I know how hard it can be living in a hostel. It was his first hostel, you see, from what I knew, and it was his first hostel, but what he failed to say is that he'd been doing this most of his life and that he weren't actually scared and timid and shy as what he made out he was.

And I think that's what…I am really empathetic towards people, and I always try and think of the best in people and, like, be the positive person, so I, kind of, just, like, looked past all the red flags to try and help him. And then when I seen the way he was interacting with other people and stuff, I thought to myself, this guy's not innocent.

I: He's not what he seems.

R: Not at all, because with me, he'd acted innocent and really timid and, like, he didn't know anything, and he was so scared of this life that he'd been thrown into, and then, kind of…I started coming out of my bedroom more and venturing into other people's bedrooms and chilling with people in their rooms, instead of just like sitting in my room with my girlfriend and not socialising.

And that's, kind of, when I saw the way he was with other people, like he'd be vile to them, he'd, like, try and boss them around and like, you're not like that with me and stuff. Clearly, you're trying to play me into a way, so that I thought you're vulnerable, so I'd do the work for you.

I: Interesting. There's something about…and I get it, because I'm the same, that wanting to be loved and wanting to be…makes you maybe not see that stuff, because you think, there's that chance for me to get some affection, or something that I've missed out all my whole life, like…

R: Yeah, I'm a sucker for a sob story as well, like you could throw me a sob story, and I believe with my heart that they've been through that, which is why…the foolish thing that I did with this guy, that I believed

everything he was saying, which was lies. So, like, he gave me a sob story, I'm a sucker, I know [voices overlap 38:25].

I: And for him to be able to understand that about you, and use that to manipulate you and groom you to do the things that he wanted you to do, that's scarily like…

R: It is.

I: To be able to have known about you and get in there, that feels like, troublesome.

R: It is, but I think the thing is with, like, living the life that we'd lived is, you kind of get…you get to know how to know people really quick, like I'm so good at judging people and stuff, because of the life that I've lived and, like…

I: That street stuff that you were saying.

R: Yeah, and as I've got older, I've tapped into it more and I understand it a lot more, but obviously at 17, I were kind of like, on drugs, turning a blind eye to everything, trying to see the good in everyone, and I make a load of friends. See, after two month of living in that hostel, my partner had done so much stuff that the hostel had asked us both to leave, because they said if I was still there, she would come down every day and kick off, and it just wouldn't be fair to the other people.

Even though I'd not done anything wrong, I was asked to leave too, which I thought was unfair, like, you can't just ask me to leave because my partner's kicking off. And that is when I actually signed myself into care, so that was August of 2016 that I signed myself into care.

I: And that was because you were like…I'm out of options, I've like literally nothing else for me.

R: We went to the housing, and the housing said that we were both intentionally homeless and there's nothing they could do.

I: And you were both the same age.

R: She was a year older than me, but yeah, practically the same age. That we were intentionally homeless, there's nothing they can do, and to come back in a few days after some referrals had been done. We'd done referrals, nobody wanted us because of Nicole's past record and the way that she was with other places, she'd been kicked out of a few places.

On my record it says about drugs and my behaviour being erratic and my mental health being bad, so nowhere would take us, no organisations, nothing, and the social workers found it hard, because I wouldn't leave my partner on her own on the streets, it was hard to place us both in

somewhere. Like, they could find places for me, but not for her, but I refused, because I'm like, I'm not letting you leave another vulnerable girl on the streets on her own, I'm not doing it. So…

I: Where did they want to put you, in, like, sort of semi-independent accommodation type thing or…

R: No, at first, they wanted to move me out to…God, somewhere that's not in Sheffield…Derbyshire.

I: Derbyshire, yes.

R: They wanted to move me all the way out there, to try and get me away from Nicole, because our relationship had become abusive, she was hitting me and stuff. But I didn't want to move out there on my own, because I've got an addictive personality, and when I'm in a really low point, I'm easily persuaded. And I didn't want to do the whole routine of finding friends that actually aren't friends, that have just groomed me…

I: The same sort of things over and over again.

R: Yeah, so I refused and we spent a lot of the time sofa surfing and going…not sleeping rough, but just like walking the streets all night and stuff like that. So yeah, after being kicked out of Foyer, I sofa surfed friends, Nicole become physically and mentally abusive towards me, and like, we both started to become very, very unhealthy.

But in November 2016, so after a few month of sofa surfing and stuff, my social worker managed to assign me a flat with Next Steps, so Next Steps is an association that works with the social care team, to provide flats for kids in care that can't live in hostels or in big places with other people. So, they signed for that on my behalf, but I'd moved in and got myself in with the wrong crowd, and my behaviour started to become, like, more and more erratic.

For my 18th birthday, I flew to Amsterdam, loved it, best birthday ever, but when I got back, upstairs…the upstairs flat to mine had had a leak, and all my bedroom had been ruined, all my clothes.

I: Oh God, so stressful.

R: I was a clothes snob, so all my clothes were designer, like at 17, 18, I, like, literally thought, if I don't dress well, people are going to look at me and see a tramp, so I had all designer clothes, all of it got ruined, all of it. I never got a penny back from it, I never got any clothes bought, I was literally just left. They moved me into a flat down the road.

I: With the same organisation?

R: Same organisation, which is stupid, because I asked, can you move me away from the hostel, [inaudible 43:20] not that far, and they put me in the flat again down the road from the hostel, so it were like, what were point.

I: So, you were still associating with all the people that were in the hostel, yeah.

R: I was…yeah, so…while I was living there, I was, sort of, taking MDMA pills a lot again, partying my life away, and I got into another gang who distributed spice around Sheffield, and I saw firsthand how things worked. I wasn't actually distributing it myself at this point, I was just in with them as it was my…my partner's friend's partner.

I: Were you still with Nicole at that point?

R: Yeah, it was her friend, her partner had…he was like the main guy for Sheffield town and the hostels that sorted spice, so I'd be chilling with him. There were a flat on…just off Division Street, lovely guy called John, we used to use his house as a trap yard and just have spice [inaudible 44:16] in there and sell [inaudible 44:17].

I: And how…who was John, how was he like…so, you were cuckoo'ing him, like, have you heard that term?

R: No.

I: So, cuckoo'ing is when gangs take over the house of a vulnerable person.

R: Yeah, I think that's what they did, so John was an old man that smoked spice.

I: Okay, and he had his own house.

R: Got to be 50, sixties, he had his own flat, but like the flat that he was in is where the Sheffield council put all the spice heads and all the…

I: Weren't wanted anywhere else.

R: Yeah, put them all in there so it's like one big trap house, basically, it's disgusting, so yeah, he used to let us use his flat, and I don't know how much spice he used to get from that, but the guy that used to do it, Polo, he used to sort his spice out, like just give it him for his flat. So yeah, my flat was only round the corner from the hostel, and I was very heavily involved with the people living in the hostel, and they would frequently come round to my house and we'd have parties and do this and that.

And one time, things got out of hand, and a fight broke out in my flat. Everything got smashed, everything, all my stuff, all the people whose flat

it was, like whoever owned the flat that it had been signed for, all their stuff. The front door of the flats had been put through, it was a mesh window, so the guy that had put it through were just bleeding out, like bled out all over my flat.

I: Oh my God.

R: And I was kicked out of there.

I: God, that's so traumatic having to witness that in your own…I mean, it was never a safe space for you, but what is meant to be your safe space.

R: I think as a child, I had a lot of trauma…like a lot of things traumatised me, but I think I hit ten, and then I got, like, this steel armour, where nothing traumatises me, like even my abusive relationship, obviously it's going to have affected my brain in ways that with relationships and stuff, that when it comes to actually traumatised and like, it don't actually feel like it did that.

I: It's almost like…I'm just thinking about that picture that Alice had done, like where she had, like, that fire, but there's like armour on the outside of her.

R: Yeah. So yeah, I was in a really, really bad way, I was constantly…I was, like, robbing people as well because…

I: You needed more money.

R: No, just because the people that I was with was doing it and I was like with them and I was like, well, what am I going to do, just stand around on my own, I may as well run along with them.

I: And why do you think that you felt like you wanted to do that? Well, not wanted to do it, but why did you…what was it that…if you didn't need the money, just to be accepted by them or…

R: Probably, but I think part of me would be like…sorry.

I: Are you alright?

R: Yeah, I've got a big boggey in my nose.

I: Do you want a tissue?

R: Yes, [inaudible 47:32].

I: That'll be nice for me to transcribe. [inaudible 47:38]

R: Yeah, I thought…so, part of it was wanting to be accepted. The other part of it was just not caring about what I was doing in life, and the pain I

was going to cause to other people, because of the pain that I'd been inflicting…

I: You were like, well, the fuckers have done this to me, so I'm going to fuck you, yeah.

R: Yeah, [voices overlap 47:54] like, which wasn't at all responsible, so yeah, I was lost in my life, and I just couldn't find my way back, and I was sofa surfing again once I'd been kicked out.

I: So, they kicked you out, after all that stuff in the house, Next Steps kicked you out.

R: Yeah, I'd been kicked out, so I was kicked out in…God, when we did get that…when did she…so yeah, we were sofa surfing. At this time, I was 18, going on 19, and I was just like a shell of myself. I couldn't…I didn't know who I was, didn't know where I was going, what I was doing. I was so off my face half the time; I couldn't even think straight. We slept rough most of the time, which I think is why.

This time around, we found it so hard to get, like, sofas to sleep on, because everyone had had enough of us coming every few month, and my mum was like, I've had enough of Nicole beating you in front of me, you can't stay here, Nicole. Mum was like, you can't stay here, like, I can't have you on my settee anymore, you're taking [inaudible 49:17]. A lot of my friends were in hostels, so…

I: Didn't have anywhere [voices overlap 49:22].

R: Didn't have anywhere for us to stay, so yeah, we just took drugs all the time and spent most of our time off our face, then the council finally gave us a temporary accommodation in…at the bottom of this road, actually. Do you know them big high rise flats at the bottom of this road?

I: Oh, yeah, yeah.

R: So, we was placed in there. Oh my God, I remember walking in and thinking, what are you doing to there, like…the kitchen sides were like two inches thick in grease. There were used needles still in the bathroom, so the place had been…they'd not cleaned it up properly, so like, I was like, oh my God.

I: Where's your social worker? Like, how's that relation…

R: She still couldn't find me anywhere to live at this point, so I…she was called Amanda Vickerage, my social worker, at this point, and I think she was doing it to spite me, if I'm honest, because we always used to get in the same argument of, well, I went through this when I were a teenager, and I had to do this and I had to do that, and I had to get away, and you

need to get away, and I'm not going to help you unless you do this and that and that. She was very…it was very like…

I: So, not meeting you where you're at, at all, like no…

R: No, I needed to do what she said, or she [inaudible 50:34].

I: She just wanted to responsible-ise you for everything. This is you, you fix it, yeah.

R: Yeah, and that's just not what…

I: You should be doing.

R: …a girl at 18 year old…

I: Who's had that life experience.

R: That's in an abusive relation…not even that, that's in such an abusive relationship that I'm scared that I'm going to die, like I don't need to be told that I'm doing…I'm wrong and…

I: You never thought about going to the Police about that.

R: No, never.

I: You just thought, I can't tell them.

R: The thing is, like, I knew Nicole's life, I'd sat and spoke to her about her life, I'd sat and spoke to her mum about the life that Nicole had, and she was just as damaged as me, like, she was…so, I didn't see it fit…like don't get me wrong, there's been a few times I've called the Police, Police have turned up, calmed the situation, nowt's come of it.

I would never actually press charges, because I just thought to myself, like this girl needs somebody to stick by her, show her that they're not leaving, they're not going to fuck her life up or turn on her, so I became that punching bag, I became that person. I became that person for her, her safe space she could lash out at and stuff like that, which made me who I am today. I would never, ever…like a lot of people ask me, would you go back and change your relationship, would you still get with her?

I always say, a thousand per cent yeah, because I am who I am today because of the girl that I was with. And she is who she is today because of me. She's a manager in…with a house, she's been with her partner for about a year and a half, never hit her in her life, got such a good relationship. We're really close still, I'm still really close with her mum, because her mum took me in when I had nobody else, so we still do family dinners and stuff.

Her girlfriend don't see it as weird, because there's no way…like, we both see it as like, we needed each other back then, but we would never be in a relationship again, so she's comfortable with that. But yeah, I just believe that I needed to stick by her, so she could come out the other side and if that meant me taking a few punches and having a bit of mental breakdowns, so be it.

I: Oh, bloody hell.

R: I know, I know.

I: It's so hard.

R: It is, but she came out the better side and I became a stronger person, and I knew what I was never going to take from a relationship again. I feel like I needed that relationship to show me like what I'm not going to accept, because I'd watched my mum accept it for so long, kind of, I was like, I feel like obviously, there's that saying that you become who your parents are and like, if your parents have bad relationships, you're going to have bad relationships.

And I believe that to be true, even though I was the bad one in relationships, I would…I was the problem causer at first, when I was with boys. I came out when…Nicole was the first girlfriend that I'd ever had, so yeah, and I, kind of, understood why my relationship with boys was so bad. I only ever loved one boy, and that were Joe Hill, and then when we split up I were like, just jumping from male to male until I met Nicole, just trying to find love. And then when I finally met Nicole, I understood why I weren't falling in love or didn't care, it's because I didn't love them, because I weren't attracted to them, they were like…

I: It was just what you thought you should be doing, yeah.

R: I thought, I was like, you get brought up as…ashamed not to be gay, like…when I were younger, I knew I liked girls, like in the sense of when a female teacher used to teach me, I used to get butterflies, when males, I didn't get butterflies, and I always found girls really, really pretty, different to all my friends did. But like, I, kind of, was scared, because it was wrong to be gay, so yeah, that was a funny story actually, when I came out, I didn't even come out.

My mum rang me, she said, Nicole, you've been with, I said yeah, she's like, is that your girlfriend? Bearing in mind, my phone's connected to the speaker in the car, I'm with my girlfriend, her friend and his friend, and she's like, how do you know you're a lesbian, have you licked her pussy yet then, in the whole car.

I: Oh my God.

R: I'm like, oh my God, Mum, you're embarrassing me, will you shut up or…

I: Disconnect, disconnect. Oh my God.

R: Yeah, quite literally [voices overlap 54:41] well, have you licked her pussy yet, and I'm like, well, shut up, man.

I: Yeah, parents are terrible, yeah, stop embarrassing me. Oh my God. Yeah, that's interesting, isn't it?

R: Yeah, it is, so yeah, after we was placed in that emergency accommodation, Nicole was given priority just a few weeks before Chris…well, she'd got…been bidding, and a few weeks before Christmas, she was given a council property in Woodhouse, so we both moved in there. It started calm, our life started to calm, we weren't going and selling drugs, we weren't partying and getting ourselves into trouble all the time, but the violence didn't calm down, the violence was still present. And in January 2018, she was cheating on me, and I decided I were going to leave, I was like, look…

I: I've had enough.

R: I've had enough, yeah, I'm not being your doormat if you're going to cheat on me.

I: Sounds like this cheating on you thing's like a big thing for you, because that's…when it's happened, that's what's stopped things with other relationships as well, isn't it, I'm not tolerating that.

R: I'm not tolerating it. I've seen…even though I've seen my mum get abused, and I still allowed myself to be abused, I seen my mum get cheated on, and I seen firsthand the effect that had on her image, her mental health, how she saw herself, how she had relationships in the future, how she walked in the street. Her walk changed, she went from this…never brave and stood up woman, because she never had been, but like, kind of, from like, right, I can at least hold my head up a little bit to, oh…

I: Being stooped over.

R: Yeah, nobody loves me and nobody wants me, and I would never put myself through that, no.

I: Yeah, yeah.

R: I split up with her and stayed with a friend who became my baby dad. Before, I'd been placed into Cherrytree, he were actually the one that got me in Cherrytree, I was staying at his mum's house.

I: What's Cherrytree then?

R: Cherrytree is another hostel for 16 to 25 year olds, yeah, 25 year olds, and it's on the outskirts of Sheffield up in Dore. Whilst I was living there, I actually started to feel like I could try and find me, focus on me and who I was and what I wanted to do.

I: What was it about being in Cherrytree that…was it…that made you feel that, or do you think it was just a whole…

R: I think it were because I'd been under the…like, I'd been trying to find love from everybody else and never worked out that I, kind of, just thought, well, I need to love myself now, like somebody said to me, they're saying, oh, you can't love somebody if you don't love yourself. And I never understood that, because I thought, I always love people and I don't love myself, but it's not, it's, like, nobody can love you perhaps if you can't love yourself. I finally understood that.

I: That external validation was more important than what was coming from inside you, yes.

R: Yeah, it was, and I, kind of, just snapped and like, thought, no, I need to love myself and sort myself out.

I: Do you think geographical distance helped, like being physically not in the city, like being out in Dore was like…

R: Yeah, I mean, I had my friend Sophie that used to get…bless her heart, get the bus, which took two hours, to come and see me, so like, I still, like, had my closest friend, and Sophie is my longest friend, she is really…she's always been a really good girl, she's always had a really good life, and she is the one that talks sense to me when I can't…

I: So, you had, like, a sensible voice then.

R: Yeah, I've got, like…she's the angel on my shoulder that just tells me my conscience has been bad and I need to do better, so we're, kind of, like…she help…

I: Is she the girl that you met at primary school?

R: Yeah, at my first school, Busk Meadow, yeah. So, she helped me get off drugs while I was there. I mean, don't get me wrong, I slid back, I was still taking drugs, but it were more of like, if there were a party going on in the hostel, I'd have a bit of sniff, but I weren't sniffing every day to make myself feel better.

I: Yeah, yeah, yeah, it was more a…yeah.

R: And I just…I enjoyed living on my own at that point, I really enjoyed it. I'd not been on my own ever. I mean, I lived with friends and I lived with family, and then I moved into the hostel, I always had a boyfriend, so always had a boyfriend with me, and when I obviously left Nicole and I went into Cherrytree on my own as my own person, I just liked being myself and just being on my own, I enjoyed it. But she managed to worm her way back in.

I: Oh no.

R: Yeah, and I didn't tell anyone that I was talking to her, nobody knew, the hostel didn't know, my social worker didn't know, and the hostel decided three month later, after my 19th birthday, that I was grown up enough to get parity, because I'd actually changed my life around, I've had…started to…I'd come off the drugs and I'd started to be a lot more empathetic, and I wanted to help people, and I was going the budgeting stuff that they've always wanted me to do and all that.

I: Yeah, yeah. Fill this form in, and then you'll know how to budget.

R: Yeah, which is absolute bullshit, no, you don't.

I: Yeah, no, exactly.

R: So yeah, I got my flat and I got it round the corner from my partner.

I: Oh God.

R: We was in and out of relationships for another year or so, after me moving in my flat, but she was also seeing the girl she was cheating on me with, so it was a bit like…we were never in the fuller relationship. We weren't having sexual intercourse at this point, but I was still earning the money, I was still…she would sit in the house every night, I was still the one getting up for work, I was still the one that were dealing with all her emotional outbursts and like…just being a bloody doormat, that's all [voices overlap 1:01:13].

I: Yeah, yeah.

R: And then…yeah, so I was still being abused by her, and I moved in part time with a friend and helped her with her grandparents, so by this time, I was 19, about to be 20, and I had just started talking to one of my old schoolfriends from Hinde House, who had just moved in with her nan and her grandad to help out with her nan and her grandad and her younger cousin. So, I moved in there part time to get small breaks away from Nicole, because if I had an excuse to be away from my flat, she couldn't say anything about it.

I: Yeah, if you're like, I'm helping out this…yeah.

R: Yeah, I'm helping out, like, there were no way for her to try and…no way to keeping me at home away from everyone, so like, that's how I started to slowly break away from Nicole, when it comes to, like, the abusive and the controlling ways that she had across on there. And in April 2019 at 20, I got caught pregnant to a close friend, so when I moved in Cherrytree, my baby dad had got me in there.

He…I got my flat before him, and he was very depressed living in the hostel, so I made an agreement with the hostel that I was to have him at my house three days a week, and he was to stay at the hostel the other four. And after three month, they'd give him priority, once he'd paid all his bills off, so that were our agreement. Why I was doing agreements with the hostel at 19 year old and why they was allowing me to do agreements with them, I don't know. I really do have the gift of the gab, I feel like I can just get anything I want, because they shouldn't have done that, but I managed to talk them into it.

I: Yeah, and it's for his benefit, not for your benefit as well, like, yeah.

R: Yeah, what is going on? So yeah, I got pregnant to him, and…

I: Now, how did that happen? At this point, you're aware that…I mean, I know that's a stupid question, and you don't have to answer it if you don't want, but like…

R: No, I really…I thought [inaudible 1:03:24], so…

I: By this point, you'd, like, accepted that you're gay and that you like girls and…

R: Yeah, and I, like, never in my life thought I'd dream of sleeping with a boy, so honestly, I was like, still breaking away from Nicole at this point, because even though I was still living at…like I was part time living at my friend's, when I did come home, she were ratty. She could see…from her bedroom window, you could see straight into my bedroom, so she saw, the minute I came home, she could see that I'd come home, she'd come round, so, kind of like had a mental breakdown.

And I was like, you want her, but you just want to control me, and I'm sick of it, and I don't want to do this anymore. I'm just going to go and get fucked up. So, I went on a five day bender, and in this five day bender, apparently I came home and I jumped on Tom like a tiger, and like started ripping his clothes off. So, I must have been very, very, very drunk [inaudible 1:04:20] he says, like I tried not to, but you practically, like, borderline raped me, apparently. I'm like, fair enough, okay.

I: Oh no.

R: So yeah. Four weeks later…

I: You're like, where's my period?

R: Yeah, not even…four week later, I know that date I got conceived, it were the 6th Jan…no, 6th April, I've worked it all out, but yeah, I went to the first of the Nineties Fest, loved it, absolutely awesome. Only thing were, I don't remember the night, but my mum remembers the night, because I told the security guard my mum was dead, and they wouldn't let my mum take me, even though I was throwing up everywhere, like practically fitting on the floor.

They was like, no, you're not, her mum's dead, you can't take her. So, my mum had to go home, get proof, come back to get me, and the next day she was like, I think you're pregnant. I was, how the fuck am I meant to be pregnant, that's a stupid thing to say, but I was so poorly, I was throwing up, and the one thing about me is, I can drink and drink and drink and I never throw up, because I've got such good [inaudible 1:05:22] so she was like, you're pregnant.

So, I took a pregnancy test, and lo and behold, I was pregnant, so I went back to my flat, and I were crying and Tommy came back, he's like, what are you crying for, and I told him I were pregnant, and he was just really excited. I were like, well, why are you excited? Well, I'm the dad. So, me went from thinking, I'm the Virgin Mary, because I'm confused, how am I having this baby, no, honestly, I found it so…it's hilarious.

My mum were laughing, she's like, you can't be the Virgin Mary. I was adamant that hand on my heart, swearing to my mum [inaudible 1:05:50] how did this happen. I don't believe in God, but he must be real, because I'm pregnant.

I: You're like, I'm going to be on Christmas cards.

R: Yeah, very, very mad time. I moved in practically with my mum when I was pregnant, because I was a very, very emotional pregnant person, and I just cried and ate a lot, and then had a lot of complications with my daughter. She hardly ever moved, and I was quite poorly from being pregnant.

I: Were you using while you were pregnant?

R: No, I'd become fully clean at this point. I decided that even if I'm not pregnant, I was like, right, sort yourself out, get off drugs, which was the hardest thing to do, because I went from not taking drugs, but smoking weed constantly, for the first five month of my pregnancy, I constantly had a spliff in my hand to stop me from going and taking drugs, which was good, because at least I stuck to it, and I didn't take drugs. But yeah, the amount of weed that I smoked caused a lot of pregnancy complications, because I got a lot of calcium deposits in my…

I: Umbilical, yeah.

R: Yeah, in the umbilical cord, which were not getting enough oxygen to Alaya. So, yeah, I came into hospital on the 4th January and the baby was due on the 5th. I went in because she wasn't moving and they were concerned about her. Spent four days in hospital and I had two inductions that didn't work.

On the fifth day, my waters finally broke and I went into labour. I did 12 hours of labour without no pain relief, I just kept getting in and out of bath, but I wouldn't, I could only get to four centimetres dilated, so I was rushed down to theatre, because every time I had a contraction, Alaya's heartbeat would go from 150 down to 26, so they was like, we need her out. I went down, all was fine until they pulled her out, and then I, kind of, looked at her, and then I could feel [inaudible 1:08:02] like this, and I was like, what's going on.

Throw up, and I vomited, ripped my stitches as they were trying to stitch me back up, and then they actually put me to sleep. I came around at 12:54, I'd lost a lot of blood, they counted, like, five pints of blood. I was on the NRC ward myself, not for Alaya, for five days. I don't know how I looked after my child in them five days, because I were on Fentanyl, couldn't even…I can't even…I remember my grandad and that coming round to see the baby, and I was trying to talk to them and focus on them, but, like, my mouth just went...[inaudible 1:08:44] yes, I don't know how I actually managed to look after her.

We spent two weeks in hospital because she was diagnosed with meningitis at birth, which is why they think that she couldn't push herself out, and then COVID hit in March.

I: Oh, of course.

R: So, I became a new single mum…

I: Oh my God.

R: …that had just come off the drugs, just learning how to cope with her own life, just learning about what emotions were, and now I had empathy thrown in there. So, I spent the next six months bonding at home.

I: With your mum, you were still…

R: No, I moved immediately back home after having Alaya. I couldn't think of anything worse than living at my mum's with a baby. I went back to my flat, yeah, just had a C section, two flights of stairs for the pram, absolute…

I: Fucking hell. And what about social work support at this point?

R: I had a live in care worker, but didn't really do much. They don't really do much once you leave care.

I: And what about Alaya? Did they ever show any concern…yeah, I should imagine they did.

R: Yeah, so when I was in the hospital and had been moved up…I think she was about a week old, and I'd been…she'd been crying for a good half an hour, and I'd been waiting for a bottle and I'd kept going out and asking, going out and asking, and I was exhausted, my stitches were hurting, Alaya's crying. Obviously, with my autism and ADHD, get sensory overloads, which is one of the big things that I worried about when I were pregnant, so in 2018, I went on holiday with my friend.

Worst holiday…with my mum and my friend, worst holiday, I battered her the whole holiday, I threw a suitcase off the balcony, I battered my mum, and I came home and I was put on antipsychotics. Stopped taking them when I was pregnant, because I did a lot of research, and I didn't want Alaya born addicted to them, so I wasn't on my antipsychotics, so my mental health was all over the place.

I didn't scream at the child, what I did is a nurse came in after a good 45 minutes, and I was sat over the cot, and I was just saying, go to sleep, please, I'm so tired, I can't…cry to sleep, please, like not shouting at her, but crying over her. The nurse had come and said, like, look, I'll take her for this while, you have half an hour's sleep. She did, and she obviously explained to the head nurse what had happened.

The head nurse phoned the social services. Head nurse phoned my mum, told my mum that I was unfit to look after the baby, and she had to come up to the hospital right now to come and get her.

I: What new mother hasn't done that? I did that in the hospital, like…

R: Social services come in later on that day saying that I'd been shouting at my daughter and that I was a risk, and this and that, which made me very upset, and I was all over the place, and then I didn't trust anyone in the hospital. I thought that this nurse had took away my child to feed her, like spun me the story she were feeding her, but really, she weren't.

And that nurse actually came back…when she came back on her shift, she came and spoke to me and like told…explained what had happened, which I was so grateful for, because that give me the opportunity to feedback her, just reflect on how I'd judged the situation at first, because I just blamed her. Yeah, you took her away and then you phoned them, and it weren't, it were the head nurse, so like, yeah, and then a few month later, again I was at the doctor's when I was home in my own flat, Alaya was about five month old, no, three month old, and I was outside the doctor's.

She'd been up all night, so I picked her up out of her pram, and I'm holding her in front of me, and I'm saying to her, look, you're crying, I'm crying, why are we crying, what is all this crying for? You've been met, rah, rah, rah, and because I'm holding her in front of my face like this, apparently you can't do that to a child, because it's child abuse, according to the receptionist at the doctor's. She's not old enough to understand you, blah, blah, blah.

Well, I'm sorry, but my autism makes me forget that, and I talk to her like she's an adult, even now, I still talk to her like she's an adult. I'm sorry, I can understand if I was screaming at her and shaking her, but I weren't. I [inaudible 1:13:12] so her eyes were in my eyes, like she liked eye contact, so she rang social service who then had an assessment, said that everything were fine, and I was given a master worker, so it lasted well for a few month, which were fine, I complied with him and everything. Yeah, after months of isolating, the government decided we could socialise again.

I: Yay.

R: So, I started going to the local pub up my mum's end, because on a weekend, I'm fortunate as a mother, that my nan would have her or my mum would have her, so I got my weekends to myself, so I chose that, I chose to do that by going to the pub, because town was unsafe, a lot of fights in town, I needed to come home to my daughter, and I know how violent I could get on alcohol, if I've had alcohol, so did the best thing and went to the pub instead.

There I met somebody, and I started a relationship, and this made my ex very jealous. And when Alaya was seven month old, I had to move in with my partner and her family, due to Nicole getting violent when Alaya was there.

I: Oh God.

R: Out of anger. I mean, I didn't have her in my arms or anything, but that's still not the point, so I moved in with her, and I was giving priority, her being Beth, my partner at the time, I was giving priority to moving closer to my family, and in October of 2020, I finally got the keys to my new house.

My partner moved in with me, but began drinking a lot and taking substances, which resulted in us arguing all the time and me having to kick her out, because you can't get a substance from a child, like I'm not having it. And we ended up splitting up again later in June 2021, which left me becoming a single mum of a one and a half year old again. I'd just gotten used to the help, and that was ripped away from me again.

I: Yeah, yeah, absolutely.

R: So, after becoming a single girl again, I worked on bettering myself as a person and a mum, and I vowed to only focus my energy onto my child and my work, and my friends and my family, and like, people that actually supported me. I just weren't even going to think about a relationship, I weren't going to look for a relationship. I'm still not looking or thinking about relationships, I'm very, very happy on my own.

I started a mum group, which they said weren't a mum group, but it were a mum group, which basically, it's really actually…it's really good, it's called…it's the circle, the circle of security, they call it. And it basically shows you the needs of what your kid [inaudible 1:16:00] when they're going out, their needs when they're coming back in, like the signs to look for and stuff.

I: Or how to keep them safe and secure.

R: No, no, it was about emotions still, like we've got the hands here, and that is their safe space, and then they'd have a little tree here, and it just shows you, like, how you can get them out playing happily without trying to push them into stuff that they don't want to do. And then it shows you the cues of when they're like…might be miscuing you, so, like, kicking off and tantruming because they didn't get their own way, but that really meaning, I need a hug, I'm tired and blah, blah, blah. So, just showing me what kind of emotions, like, and how to look for them and stuff.

I: That's so good.

R: And I was approached by Roundabout and asked if I wanted to do a level two peer educating course, which I then completed in 2022, and in…I think it was April of 2022, I was…I became a volunteer for Roundabout, and I dedicated my work to going into schools and teaching kids about homelessness and the stigma around it, and just sharing my life story and giving kids a bit of information, and just a bit of a scary…I'm going to be honest, like my world is like…all the stories that…I go in with my story, like, a lot of my colleagues' stories are very diluted, and like, make it seem like a breeze.

Like, it almost sounds inviting you, like it's inviting you to the hostel, and that's not what I want to do, I don't want to promote it, like I want to promote that if you are unsafe and you need somewhere to go, we've got you, we'll help you, but I don't want to promote people to think, oh, do you know what, that sounds like a breeze.

I: That's a good place to go, yeah.

R: Yeah, let me start playing up because I want to be kicked out and living here, I don't want to promote that stuff. I'm roaring my story and I do try and scare the kids of what I've been through and that I did work for it, I come out this, and the shocked face that you see on the young 'uns, it's…

I: What age kids are you speaking to?

R: I speak to year eights and year tens. So year eights, we're trying to get that prevention in, so we're on about [inaudible 1:18:32] talk it out, which is a mediator to sit with your family, you and your parents, and try and resolve the issues before they turn into blunt blows. So, we try and do that for year eight, so that they know they've got someone to talk to, and then we come back in year ten, just when they're about to leave school or they're like…some of them aren't really changed their behaviour ways.

And they are looking to be moved in a hostel, just so that they've got that bit more information there. So yeah, I started doing that, volunteering for there, and a few month later, well, it was still a few month, about a year later, I was approached by my previous housing support tenancy worker for Roundabout, who told me about the job at the university going. In all honesty, I can't lie to you, I didn't think I were going to get this far. I'm not going to lie, I thought, right, I'll probably do this, I'll probably, like, not even get an interview, so to get the interview, I was so proud of myself.

I said to my workers, I don't even care if I don't get the job. To get an interview, that's enough for me, like, that was just more than enough, because that just proves to me that I never thought I was smart enough to go to university, never mind, like, working in one. So, it was just, like, such a big step in my life, and just, like, I feel like, bigger achievement than giving birth to my daughter, like, I feel like this is the biggest achievement I've done in my life.

I: I think it's amazing, yeah, that's…yeah, fant…and what's next, what do you want to do after this?

R: So, my plan, so for the next two years, I plan on just small little projects like this, but also still volunteering.

I: Do you want a tissue? I don't think I've got any.

R: I think it's at the back of my mouth. While I also plan to still volunteer with Roundabout. When Alaya goes into nursery full time, I want to try and get part time work at the hostel, Roundabout Hostel at St Barnabas Road, because I feel like some of the workers that were there when I lived there weren't there for the job, they were there for the money, or because it were just a job to them, and I don't want to be there for it to be a job, I want to be there to care for them and guide them, and show them proper way of life.

I: Yeah, supporting them.

R: Yeah, and just be able to look out for the kids that are being groomed and teach other people…like, a lot of the people that work in the hostels haven't lived the life, haven't…it's all textbook [voices overlap 1:21:14]. I feel like we need more people that have lived the life in there, so that we

can see the signs, and we can teach people how to maybe deal with things that they wouldn't necessarily know how to deal with. Like, I know how to deal with somebody that's in a gang, when I was in the hostel, nobody knew how to deal with it.

I: Well, that's it, you're not going to get…if someone came to you in that situation, they're not going to get the response that you got when you went to that hostel [inaudible 1:21:41] yeah.

R: Not at all. I would sit down, we'd have a proper plan, we'd do a proper six month plan, and like…

I: Work it all out.

R: Work it out, like…I just think hostels need…

I: I think you need to just not be working in a hostel, I think you need to be managing one at least.

R: Well, that comes onto my next plan, so, I'm going to try and save as much as I can, and by the time I am 45, because any earlier than that just sounds unrealistic, but by the time I'm 45, I want to have built a hostel of my own and own my own hostel and employ people, I think will really benefit the hostel, and not just be there for a bit of money or just a job. People actually need the work because they want to just make people's lives better.

I: Yeah, yeah, and because they've been in themselves.

R: They've been there, yeah. I wouldn't discriminate and say, oh, you can't come in here because you've not been in life, you can't work here, but if they've been in it, all the much better.

I: Yeah, I agree.

R: And then at 50, I want to do a bit of travelling myself. I feel like 50 would be a good age to travel. My daughter will get old enough that I can leave her on her own.

I: Be like, I'm off, enjoy your life, I'm off.

R: Yeah, or come with me, come with me.

I: Yeah, that would be amazing.

R: I'm hoping that my daughter is like my best friend. Me and my mum are best friends now, and I, kind of, want that, the relationship I have with my mum now, to be the base of my relationship with my daughter, like me and my mum are so strong together. The thing is with my mum, when I

got pregnant, we sat down, we both had a talk, and I told her how shit she made my life.

My mum knows how shit she made it anyway, that she blames herself for my upbringing. To be fair, not to sound rude or horrible, but it is her fault, and I will always blame her for that, not that I haven't forgiven her, because I have, but I will always put that blame on her.

I: That's the reality though.

R: Yeah, it'll always be at the back of my mind, like I am the way I am, because you put me in bad positions. So yeah, and I just want to make sure that she always feels safe talking to me about things. I've had this discussion with my mum and that, my mum says that I shouldn't tell my daughter about the life that I lived, but I will, because I feel like for her not to live that life, she needs to know what I went through.

I: And you're going into schools and telling other people's kids about it, your own daughter should [voices overlap 1:24:05].

R: So, why not tell my own daughter. The younger, like…the younger they know things, the best.

I: Well, listen, anything I can do to help you set up that hostel, I am absolutely up for doing with you.

R: I will, I will…yeah…

I: We could have lots of good…

R: Yeah. Me and my mum, like, sat down and had this conversation, we were like, I just told her about how she made me feel, and she then explained to me, because before my mum got with this partner, she had another partner called Craig. Absolutely loved him, he was my favourite person in the whole world. The only problem is, my dad would come down every week, batter the ten bells out of her in front of all of us, like to show that he was the big man, and my mum were never going to get away from him, so that's why my mum got with her new partner that she was with, because she wanted to protect us, because she knew that he'd fight my dad off, which he did.

And the only reason she stayed with him so long is because my autistic younger brother, he was so good with him, and he made his behaviour so much better, and he engaged with people, and he started to have a relationship with people, which he never did before. So, like, my mum, kind of, sacrificed me for my brother, which I understand, because I always had friends to go to, I always had places to be.

My brother didn't, he didn't socialise, so he never had any friends, like my mum would go off with the only people for him. So, I understand…or like,

we sat down and I spoke to her, like, I understand your sacrification, and I understand that, like, you knew that I would find a way, but Brandon wouldn't. I also don't forgive you for it, because you should have thought about us all equally, not just trying to figure out which is best for which, just because I'm strong and I'm able.

She's like…she always said to me, like, from a kid, you've always been so strong, and I just thought you could take anything on in life, and I'm like, yeah, I know, but I shouldn't have to. That's the difference. Just because I can doesn't mean that I should have to.

I: You were the adult in that situation, I was the child.

R: I was the child.

I: You were my protector and…

R: I was like…I was being the bloody adult, I was looking after my brothers while my mum was away and all this other stuff, and I had a really, really [inaudible 1:26:08] that's an important line, if I was to sit and talk to you about my whole life, I'd be here for days, I would.

I: How does your autism and your ADHD and then your…did you say you had BPD?

R: I haven't diagnosed with borderline personality disorder, but they're actually re-looking at it, because they think it's bipolar, which I've been saying for years.

I: I think there've been a whole load of misdiagnosis around BPD, from what I've spoken to other people…when I worked in the children's homes, I feel like they were forever labelling our kids as B…well, because they wouldn't diagnose them, but they would say, oh, we think when she's older she'll be BPD.

R: Oh no, I got like literal diagnosis, and this is what fucked me up, because I'm like, well, I weren't even old enough to have it, so how have I got this diagnosis, and that's…every time I went in to talk about mental health, it was just like, oh, you've got this, you've got [inaudible 1:27:00]. I'm like, just because you've been told that don't mean I am, listen to my score, I'm not BPD, none of this is full trauma-based fucking actions, none of it is because…my behaviour's not because of my trauma, like, it's because I've always been like this from a kid. I've always been this way and I've always been that way, and, oh, it just done my head in.

Because like, I think the thing is with people that have had traumatic lives, nobody looks past the trauma. It's just like, oh, it's easy to pin it all on the trauma, so that's it, that's what it is, it's the trauma, but if you look past the trauma and look at what was there before the trauma, you actually see

that, do you know what, it's not changed, it just got worse. Like, it was still there. I'm very paranoid, like, I'm quite a paranoid person.

I don't believe in, like, spirits or anything, but I believe that I've got a spirit attached to me. It makes so sense, it's so confusing to talk about, but yeah, I'm so scared of, like, the dark, and feel like I've got spirits attached to me. And like, I always go in with this paranoia and I'm like, constantly feel like I'm being watched and this and that, and they're like…they always put you down to BPD, and I'm like, how can that be BPD, it's not.

I had this as a child, my mum's got a journal from when I were younger, I was always talking about ghosts and I could see things, and like, I'd keep a journal. And there were a little girl that I used to talk to, and she'd play football with my little brothers, like when my brothers were asleep, she'd play football by the bed. Honestly, I read this journal, thought, this is messed up for a five year old to be writing.

So, I know it's not just through that, but because obviously they look at my trauma and they're like, yeah, we're just going to blame it all on that, which is annoying really, because do you need to dissect my life in order to…

I: Yeah, it's not…yeah.

R: …understand it. I still don't understand my life, I still don't understand my own mental health issues. I'm great at sorting everybody else's issues out and thinking about everybody else's mental health, but when it comes to my own, it's so complex that I just can't understand it.

I: Yeah, so it's overwhelming just, sort of, thinking about trying to unpack that stuff, because I think the trauma probably has compounded stuff that maybe was already there, and when did you get…like your autism and your ADHD, when did you start to, kind of, think that those might be issues for you? Or not necessarily issues, but things that were present.

R: Really, really young, to be fair. I was about seven or eight when I started noticing my behaviour, like the concentration, when I became self-aware, my mum had seen it before, but when I became self-aware, that I noticed it, I was different to everyone else. I couldn't wear pants, I couldn't wear socks. My mum used to literally take my pants and socks to my head teacher at Busk Meadow, my head teacher used to have to put them on there, because I was scared of my head teacher, I used to do it.

I: God, so that was a sensory thing then, you didn't like…

R: Yeah, sensory, so I noticed, like, smells overwhelming me, and I'd get headaches if there was too much noise going on, and I can hear every single noise that's going on, like every noise. If I play…if there was a CD with five songs playing at the same time, I can hear clearly all five songs, because my brain is wired to hear every little noise that's going on.

So, I find it really hard to, like, concentrate if I'm in a busy room or, like, if I go shopping. I hate shopping, it takes me hours, because I have to keep going round the shops and going round, going round, because I'll go in, and I call it blind shopping, because even though I'm shopping, my head's focusing on all that noise and all them conversations, that I'm not actually looking at what I'm looking at. It's just the motions, so it takes me hours to shop, hours.

Yeah, definitely when I went into secondary school, it started becoming more of an issue, my concentration, and school picking up on my ADHD traits and stuff, and they was the one that said, like, we're going to refer you to Ryegate, so I was 12 when I got my Ryegate diagnosis of ADHD, autism.

I: Wow.

R: And then two years later, I was diagnosed with depression and BPD at 14. I know, that's a joke, and then I went to CAMHS at 17 for the re-diagnosis of BPD and I was like, right. And I went to Northlands where I'm at now, and…

I: They're like, eh…

R: That's…yeah, that's been like, a bit of a…all over the place. My doctor that prescribed me my tablets just doesn't seem to listen, he's like, yeah, you're BPD. Ah, from what it sounds like, you're BPD. He sees me once every six month, has a little conversation with me, you know nothing about it. So, the person that I'm working with now, she's called a care coordinator, because she's got BPD, which I apparently have, and she's like, you have not got BPD, you are bipolar and autistic, there's no doubt about it, so that's why I'm going for a re-diagnosis.

I: That's interesting.

R: Because somebody's finally said, yeah, no, that's not BPD, she's bipolar.

I: And you've been, like, champing at that the whole time, so…

R: Yeah, literally for years I've been like, I'm bipolar, help me out, like you're putting me on bipolar medication, but you're not actually doing the bipolar work, how does this work. Really crazy.

I: I'm very conscious that Alice is going to be like, where are you, because we need to…

R: What time is it?

I: It's 12:33, we've been talking for, like, an hour and a half. I just want to ask one thing about the Alice in Wonderland theme that's going through this. What's that about? Because it's beautiful, really beautiful.

R: I feel like my life has been that mad that I fit perfectly in the Alice in Wonderland life, like if Alice was an alcoholic and a druggie, she'd be me.

I: I'm so going to use that quote, that's amazing.

R: See what I mean, because like, the…I loved the film, because like, it's just crazy, and that's what my life has been, it's been crazy, like I got the bottles, drink me, and that's how I'll drink, entice me, drink me, and then you've got, like, the mad space kicks that make you grow and shrink and all that. I just love it, I just feel like it portrays my life so well, that it just fits.

I: Yeah, I get it. Thank you so much, that's been like…I feel like I know you so much better now, and I think that's…like, one of the reasons I wanted to do it, obviously there's amazing stuff in there that we can use to help change things, but I feel like I really…I know you better, so that's…thank you for being so honest and lovely.

R: That's alright. I'll be honest, I've enjoyed doing it.

I: Have you?

R: I've been trying to do a project like this for a while myself now, but do you know when you've just like…you've got no reason to do it other than wanting to, you, kind of, like, half-heartedly, like, buy the stuff and never get it done, so I bought this for that. I'm like, use it now, it's for a purpose.

I: Well, finish it off.

R: I am definitely going to finish this.

I: Because what would be wonderful is if, when you finish it, bring it in, and if you wouldn't mind me letting you take photographs of it, that would be great.

R: Yeah, no, of course you can.

I: I'm going to turn this off.

End of transcript

Participant interview transcription

Brittany/Dolly/Dani Research Interview (2023-12-07 13:31 GMT) – Transcript

Attendees:

Brittany L Jackson, Danica JM Darley, Dolly

Danica JM Darley: And so I'll just run through. I know Dolly that you've signed the consent form and we sent you the video and you had a chance to watch the video. Yeah, it was anything in it that you wanted to ask or…

Dolly: no it was all very informative

Danica JM Darley: Yeah, did you like hearing but it's little voice over bits.

Dolly: yeah I went to my husband it's Brittany.

Danica JM Darley: Yeah, that's funny and have you got the questions Brittany in front of yeah,…

Brittany L Jackson: yeah i've got them

Danica JM Darley: I know we've sent you the questions beforehand. So let me just to say that and everything that you say is completely confidential to us and the recording will obviously record that is your name and everything like that in it, but when we go through and transcribe it will take and it out

Brittany L Jackson: Do you want to use your name somebody else

Danica JM Darley: That's what I was going to say that one of the things that we've been asking people is if they want to choose like a nickname for themselves.

Dolly: I don't mind. I really dont you can use my name if you want, but I don't mind either way.

Brittany L Jackson: That's fine.

Danica JM Darley: I don't think they'll let me use your name in the actual. I think it's okay for Brittany Alice and Holly are going to be able to use their name because we went through the ethics process to use their names but I don't think they'll let me use your actual name and…

Dolly: that's fine, I don't mind make a name up just let me know what it is

Brittany L Jackson: shall i just put you down as dolly

Dolly: oh yeah dolly Yeah do dolly

Danica JM Darley: That's nice.

Dolly: is my friends name

Danica JM Darley: oh is it? One of the things that's really nice about knowing the name that you've chosen for yourself as well. What we're going to do is before we kind of submit anything. We're going to come back to the people that we've spoken to and just make sure that what you said to us is fairly represented. We had Brittany and I had quite a lot of conversations at the beginning about how things she'd done in the past and then she didn't recognize that in the kind of research. So we just wanted to kind of spend some time making sure that happens so if you know that you're Dolly then that's suitable for and the stuff that we come back for and is that all right. Anything you want to add Brittany before we start?

Brittany L Jackson: No, no nothing at all

Danica JM Darley: Alright so the first thing that we've been asking people to do we've all done this ourself is just to give us a little timeline of things so when you were born and the main bits of your life just to give us an idea of things is that alright

Dolly: yeah that's fine, so I was born in 1994 in devon

Danica JM Darley: God that's the year I turned 18 that makes me feel very old.

Dolly: And the next big event would be I don't know I moved to cornwall when I were about seven year old and then we moved to bradford when I were about 10/11/12 something like that And then I didn't really have any big events up until our 15 when I went into care. And so…

Danica JM Darley: Okay.

Dolly: what year would that be 2020? I'm rubbish at maths.

Danica JM Darley: no, I wouldn't be able to work that either. Don't worry.

Dolly: I was 15 when I went into care, that was the next big event and then I had a lot of events after that.

Danica JM Darley: After that,…

Danica JM Darley: and we're going to talk about all that as we go through.

Dolly: Yeah. Yeah,…

Dolly: but that's it during my early life though There wasn't really many big things like my mum and dad were together so I didn't go through a parent divorce or anything like that and there were nothing really like that it was just pretty straight my mum had some mental health difficulties, but I thought that was normal, So there were nothing big that triggered that I mean

Danica JM Darley: And have you got brothers and sisters like siblings?

Dolly: No i'm an only child

Danica: Okay, how's that being?

Dolly: I mean, I always wanted brothers and sisters, but I've never known any different

Danica JM Darley: Yeah, yeah.

Dolly: But I'm glad because I've got two little girls and I've got another on the way, So I'm glad I'm able to give my kids siblings.

Danica JM Darley: Yeah, yeah. No, that's Lovely Britt Do you want to start with the questions then that we've got?

Brittany L Jackson: Yeah, so the first question is how do you feel the way you entered care impacted how you were criminal exploited?

Dolly: I entered Care extremely quickly. It went from an argument with my mom in the morning to been at a foster home in the evening under the care of the local Authority. I think the massive change that happened so quickly had a big impact on that. Also how young I

was too I was only 15 and that was a big time for me. I was extremely vulnerable and was suffering with bad mental health also.

Danica JM Darley: That sounds tough. Do you mind telling me a little bit about how that escalated what brought all that? What was the kind of social work stuff happening before that or

Dolly: so Me and my mom never had a good relationship we always argued it got violent. it was never good and also she suffered with bipolar. So she were very very up and down a lot of the time and this argument to this day I cannot remember what it was about and I don't even think it was that big of an argument but she just chucked me out and that were it she wouldn't let me back in was begging screaming and that were it because of her bipolar because she was so set on I wasn't getting back in I had to ring Police and basically said look, what do I do? And benton house i was sat with the Police all day in benton house and obviously that's very traumatic for me

Brittany L Jackson: Did you feel supported by the Police or did you feel like they were just there because they had to

Dolly: because they too, they were having to go at me saying why are you so nasty to your mom? And I meant to be in college that day so they had to go if not being in college, but I had nowhere to live

Danica JM Darley: Yeah.

Dolly: you know what i mean and Yeah, that was just really traumatic and my mum died in 2021 and I never got closure from that. So I'm still dealing with that to this day you know what i mean

Danica JM Darley: Yeah.

Dolly: I mean So yeah, it's been pretty tough

Danica JM Darley: and what about sort of schooling and education and stuff up until that point where you kind of in out of school. What was this situation?

Dolly: i was in school up until year 10 and then I were on a part-time timetable because I was suffering with depression really bad at i'd self harm. I had a couple of attempts where we're in hospital and so they put me on a part-time times table where i was only in three days a week but towards the end year 11 i just stopped coming. I just stopped turning up and so i wan't really in school but i came out with good grades. I mean I came out with A's and B's so

Danica JM Darley: Yeah, yeah, that's great.

Dolly: school was kind of my escape in a way I loved it up until when my mental health took over like when I was a teenager my mental health was the worst it's ever been

Danica JM Darley: right

Brittany L Jackson: did you feel like they give you a lot of support around your mental health and how yours and your mom's relationship was.

Dolly: Yeah so like that was my safe space. But obviously when I came home it was something totally different because I never knew what mood my mum would be in, I didn't know whether she'd be happy or angry or have I done something in the morning before school that's gonna make her angry. You know what I mean, so I was just treading on eggshells all the time.

Danica JM Darley: and then in terms of your mental health and how do you feel that that affected your Going into care and then in terms of the criminal exploitation that happened. Do you feel that that played a significant role in that?

Dolly: Yeah, I've wrote this somewhere but we'll get to that I think…

Danica: oh yeah sorry:

Dolly: because I was so depressed and I was so vulnerable because of how depressed i was, I was literally looking for anything that'd excite me any serotonin anywhere So obviously if something looked appealing I'd be straight for it. So as soon as I hit 15, I went down a lot of like criminal Roads i started shoplifting just for a bit of serotonin. That's when i started smoking weed as well and it just kind of went downhill, but I also think with my mum's mental health that massively affected my mental health as well because I didn't know any different and I didn't see any different either so the outbursts that my mom had I also had so that's why we clashed so much.

Danica JM Darley: yeah, yeah.

Brittany L Jackson: Have you ever been diagnosed with any kind of neurodiversion disabilities?

Doly: I'm going under ADHD assessment at minute. Because I've tried every single medication going for depression and anxiety and nothing works nothing so I think there's something a lot more deeper and especially with what my mom went through (babe Amazon's here. Sorry)

Brittany L Jackson: I can tell you from living with you I know you have a lot traits of ADHA so I'm glad that your actually going forward to try and get the support that you need, Moving onto question two.

Dolly: yeah.

Brittany L Jackson: How did you feel your emotional well-being and mental health was affected by being Criminal exploited.

Dolly: I already suffered with my mental health at this time so it only made it worse. I'm still repairing the trauma now and also with the kind of criminal exploitation that I went through, I was basically held in my own house by drug dealers and yeah like I said before I wanted any type of serotonin anything that could make me happy and drugs did that for me at that time and these drug dealers that were in my house I was getting free drugs for this so Obviously it just went down hill from there and they were in my house for about a year and half.

Danica JM Darley: Talk me through how that happened? What was the kind of Build up to that and how did that pan out?

Dolly: So when I started in care I started smoking weed and that lasted for about well I still smoke weed but like the start of smoking weed and that lasted for about I don't know three months until someone showed me coke (cocaine) And I had a big massive cocaine addiction for about three or four years. and then

Danica JM Darley: And you were in foster care at this point. Sorry.

Dolly: yeah i was in foster care at this point and then when I turned 17 or was i 16, 16 or 17. I went to this kind of a halfway house. I don't know there was other kids living there and there were staff members and that's when I met, so I had to dealer who sold Cocaine and he offered me crack for the first time and I thought you know what Yeah go on then So the first time i had that were it, I were addicted to crack for going on three years and then because I had crack I will also addicted to Herrion. So I was keeping that on the down-low while I was living at this House, and then where did I move after that? I moved into a supported flat. I can't remember where it was. I can't remember at all but stuff worked there all the time so they used to come and go kind of thing. So we were left on our own half the time and that's where the dealers started because they know when staff would be in and they knew when staff would be out and So pretty much i were living in a Crack-den at that time But that's how it started from the weed, then I got to the Coke and then coke wasn't enough for me anymore. So I moved on to crack.

Danica JM Darley: and then how did they like, Was it a process of grooming that happened? do you feel like that they groomed you to be able to come into the house that you were in?

Dolly: It basically started off as though let me just bag up in your house and I'll let you have a couple of pipes and I was like yeah, that's fine. And that would happen for I don't know maybe a month or so, I'd be like, yeah I'm getting something free crack It's fine and then it turned into oh im just gonna stay the day is that all right and I'll give you a couple of bags and I was like yeah that's fine and eventually it would just be every day without me even knowing they'd just turn up and that was it like I didn't know any better I was such a bad addict at that time that I'd literally do anything for the drugs. So for me at the time, we're a good thing obviously looking back now it definitely wasn't and I was in a serious probably life threatning anything could have happened to me at that time.

Danica JM Darley: Yeah, bloody hell, right.

Brittany L Jackson: how did you feel when you were first criminally exploited? Did you feel like you was being criminal exploited or did you feel quite happy to be in that situation

Dolly: This is what I put i put to be honest I had no idea I was being exploited as I was a massive drug addict at the time this happened and it was funding my addiction. So if anything I saw it as a good thing obviously looking back I realised it was something completely different.

Danica JM Darley: Yeah Yeah

Brittany L Jackson: And how do you feel that your upbringing contributed to you being criminal exploited?

Dolly: My mother was a drunk and also had massive mental health issues and I didn't know any different. I also developed a drink problem when I was around 16 to as I just thought it was normal. I think it had a massive impact if I was brought up better before I went into care with better role models and Shown different options then I don't think I would have gone down the road I did.

Danica JM Darley: mmm

Brittany L Jackson: And I'm gonna shift it a little bit to when we was living together in cherry tree so you was in the supported flat side.

Dolly: Yeah.

.Brittany L Jackson: Whereas I was in the hostel side and there was no support in that side from my point of view. I didn't think they were and…

Dolly: No, nothing my and liam was literally taking coke all time but it was literally just laid out on table

Brittany L Jackson: I mean we had parties all time, how do you feel the staff members could have behaved in, what do you feel the staff members could have done differently to stop us from gathering in that one room and having these parties.

Dolly: There should have been rules in place such as so many like certain people, There's only a certain amount of people allowed in at certain time. I'd say cameras as well because in a place like that a lot of things can happen.There's a lot of vulnerable young adults and I don't mean cameras in bedrooms or bathrooms or anything like that, I mean communal area living areas like living room just so they understanding also get them to go up and check because there was the intercom and they could ringer us but half the time we'd lie anyway, so you know what I mean and the staff there it was like skeleton staff all the time, There was hardly any staff at all. So I just think if they were enough members of staff to go up a lot not even hourly two hours just to check just to say look are you alright do you need owt you know what I mean, I think that would of made such a massive difference because they just left you because you didn't get any help unless you went down to the office and asked and even then it were crap.

Danica JM Darley: do you feel like you had any kind of relationship with those staff that were supporting you or do you feel like it was just like Someone to come and be like they didn't do it to help you.

Dolly:They just came there to earn there money they just came there to get a paycheck and like they didn't care about us. I am definitely sure one of the staff members was a massive drug addict a hundred percent. Yeah kyles just said it, so I just feel like to be any sort of worker in that sort of environment you need to be a like a different type of person and a lot of them wasn't they just wanted there pay check and they just came to get paid. They wouldn't help you when you did ask for help you'd be waiting hours. If not days, for something that you asked for

Danica JM Darley: And then what about so thinking about that support stuff then what was your contact with social work like when you were put into foster care and stuff in the support that you got from them?

Dolly: oh I can't remember exactly but I probably saw my social worker once a month when I first put into foster care and then I had a support worker as well and I saw her for like once or probably around once a month and there were all right, I guess but it were more like they just take you out for meals like thats all I got really my social worker would just pick me up and take me for a maccys and that's all well and good but I'm a kid in care I've just been Ripped from my mother who I still loved at the time. Obviously I loved her to bits and I missed her but I couldn't go and see her so it's alright you coming and taking me shopping but what about me mental health? And why not take me to I don't know what about some therapy or something. You know what i mean or I wish they'd talk to us more a lot of them were very detached. I feel like and my support worker I remember so when I first got my first flat we were giving a grant of like I don't know about two grand or something and I was so

Brittany L Jackson: two and half grand it is

Dolly: I was so nervous, I was literally crying I did not know what to do Never been in my first flat or nowt and all she did which fair enough is what she's paid to do but she just took me to BandM to buy all my stuff for my house took me to my flat and just left me like she just went and I feel like I'm a 18 vulnerable lass who's moved to somewhere where I have no idea. You've just bought me all this stuff and left me and I didn't hear from her for a month I had to keep ringing star house, I was like look, I don't know what I'm doing. I don't how to pay me gas bill. I don't know how to pay my TV license. Like help me and there was no help at all and even with being involved in Social Services with my own children. It's the same there. I dont feel like there's no support or you waiting and waiting and waiting for time for ages just for anything to get done.

Danica JM Darley: Yeah, that sucks a lot. And like you say no sense of building a relationship with social there's…

Dolly: No.

Danica JM Darley: Who you can go to and things are really crappy and you need that support from yeah.

Dolly: because I feel like that's what young people need as well they need someone who they can go to because a lot of these kids they don't have no one been ripped from there family and they don't have no one And I just feel like they need to start seeing the kids more and they need to start just talking to the kids more instead of come on. Let's go shopping. Let's cheer you up because that's all right for an hour, but when you get all I mean

Brittany L Jackson: Prevention rather than solution its like we'll take you for a meal hope your happy for 2 days and next time we can do it again instead of getting to route of problem

Dolly: exactly. Yeah.

Danica JM Darley: And what was your Foster Carerer? did you get past around from different Foster carers or were you in the same placement or

Dolly: i actually only had two Foster carers and I can't fault them they were both absolutely amazing. I did have a really good experience with my foster parents, the first two were remand foster parents. So they could only took on emergencies but I loved them that much that I think I stayed with them for about six months because we just had such a good relationship and I actually was really happy there and I wasn't shop lifting or owt like that you know what I mean and the second foster parent were a lot harder but I did like her she would just been she was firm but fair but i was a teenager you know so

Danica JM Darley: Well you never had those boundaries put in place for you and suddenly

Dolly: exactly so I did act out with her but thinking about it now she was a great foster parent and I'm still in touch with both actually still.

Danica JM Darley: that's nice. Yeah..

Brittany L Jackson: That's good so how do you feel your emotional state was before your criminal exploitation?

Dolly: Let me look where yeah. I was suffering with depression. I've suffered with it since I was around 11 years old so I've always suffered with my mental health. It just made it worse to be honest.

Danica JM Darley: Yeah.

Brittany L Jackson: How do you feel your mental health contributed to being criminally exploited? What do you think they saw in you That they could exploit?

Danica JM Darley: mmm

Dolly: Because I was so depressed and I was so anxious If someone told me to like at that time, if someone told me to walk into the road, I probably would have done it because i was like oh what you gonna do if I don't you know what I mean so like I said earlier I would say I were taking happiness from anything and anyone at that time and these dealers so when it

got past a certain point if these dealers told me to jump off a cliff I probably would have done.

Brittany L Jackson: Do you think you're in fear of these people and fear of what they were going to do and…

Dolly:Yes, definitely…

Brittany L Jackson: how they control you?

Dolly: because at first they were all nice and happy and oh yeah yeah, we'll do this. We'll do that and then it just got nasty. There were knives on the table you know what I mean as well as crack and heroin so I wasn't saying nothing.

Brittany L Jackson: Yeah. Yeah.

Danica JM Darley: Yeah, because you knew that underlying threat and the consequences of you Not and did they get you to do other than them coming in using your house? Did they try and persuade you to sort of sell drugs or run drugs or

Dolly: I mean I dropped off a few bags to people but I didn't do it every day it was just like But obviously that is still dealing but like erm so yeah, I would drop it off bags to people and they were chopping in my house and at one point they told me to live in my bedroom I was living in my bedroom. they wouldn't let me out. So I had to stay there until they said it was okay to come out.

Danica JM Darley: that's Awful, and I'm probably jumping on the questions britt but I'm just trying to think as we kind of go through and you sort of said you were doing shoplifting and stuff like that as well. I mean and feel free not to tell us it's entirely up to you, but I'm just interested in you're running with the Police and how those interactions worked and if you had contact with the court or youth justice system or

Dolly: I've never been caught for shoplifting and I've never been done for drugs but I've been done oh no, I have got a shoplifting one. Yeah, I've just remembered but it's more assaults. I did a lot of common assaults I assaulted a Police officer at one time and that put me on probation for a year but I've never been to prison. But yeah, I've been to court a few times and…

Danica JM Darley: Yeah.

Brittany L Jackson: why did you assault the Police officer

Dolly: because i was cracked up

Brittany L Jackson: Did you feel unsafe with them? Were they using some sort of force, or was they just trying to do their job?

Dolly: I think they were just trying to do their job to be honest. Me and my boyfriend had had an argument and I bit him, So he's got a right to call the Police you know what I mean and I Pushed this officer I pushed him away and then I glassed him so yeah was very high on crack yeah I wasn't allowed out for about 36h because of how high i was I they obviously have to let me come down.

Brittany L Jackson: Could they tell that you was in that kind of drugged up state? and Do you feel like they treated you fairly or do you feel like they just treated you like any other person?

Dolly: Oh I feel like they just treat me like any other person because drug addicts or not they still need help and I mean i we're going crazy in that cell. I was coming down (on a come down) I felt like I had bugs all over me and there's things they can do to help you, like they don't have to just leave you which is what they did I hate the stigma around drug addiction because drug addicts they don't choose to be there you know what I mean and so yeah, I think Police really they need a bit more like training on drugs. But yeah, they didn't treat me very nice. I remember getting out of the riot van, the big van that they put you in and they wouldn't help me off the step and they'd put handcuffs behind my back so I've had to try and like huddle down a big step cracked up and I've gone bang straight on floor.

Danica JM Darley: then did they know that you still a child, was you still in Care at that point where you still under your care order or were you off of it by that point?

Dolly: Yeah, I think I was about 17 at that point. Just before my 18th birthday.

Danica JM Darley: so did they know that you were a child in care and was there any kind of

Dolly: I had to have one of them adults that they have there .

Danica JM Darley: An appropriate adult. Yeah.

Dolly: Yeah

Brittany L Jackson: so when your in care or you're a care leaver on the Police thing the phones that they've got it tells you that your care lever and it tells you If you're high rate or if you're a risk or if you're a drug abuser, so they already have this information on their phones. They just don't use it and they just ignore it.

Dolly: What awful I can't believe they can get away with it.

Brittany L Jackson: And yeah, they were at the hostel every other week bloody ragging us around to be fair.

Brittany L Jackson: Would you have described yourself as vulnerable before you was criminally exploited and if so, how was your vulnerability used to exploit you?

Dolly: And I had depression and probably had anxiety too. I was a drug addict and my addiction needed funding so oh yeah like i said earlier I would have jumped off a cliff if them dealers asked me to at the time literally I probably would have done owt for them drugs at that point like I was selling myself and lot Just a fund my drug addiction it wasn't a nice time.

Brittany L Jackson: So they saw that you were a drug addict and thought right this is our way in now. This is…

dolly: Yeah. Yeah,…

Brittany L Jackson: how we open the crack that's already there.

Dolly: literally and then it just got worse that were it really there were no really escaping from it.

Danica JM Darley: did you?

Brittany L Jackson: what were the reason that you felt like you couldn't escape for it?

Dolly: because I'd either get killed like I thought I'd either get killed or if I left we're am i gonna get me drugs from I didn't know anyone else.

Danica JM Darley: mmm Yeah,…

Brittany L Jackson: Yeah.

Danica JM Darley: had your had there being kind of with your mom like you were saying, talking about her mental health that she had issues around addictions or that you were, alcohol you were saying.

Dolly: An alcoholic. I don't think she did anything else not as far as I'm aware.

Danica JM Darley: Yeah, yeah.

Dolly: I don't think so it was just alcohol. But before she died. She was drinking up to five bottles of wine a day.

Danica JM Darley: Wow.

Brittany L Jackson: Do you think that helps with your addiction seeing your mum as an addict?

Dolly: No, obviously not no because I've developed a lot, She would give me glasses of wine when I was 13, I mean it's just not normal

Brittany L Jackson: maybe that she contributed to your addictions.

Dolly: Yeah, definitely, I think I don't know once you're a mum you do things like soon as I got pregnant with my eldest. My addiction was over. I did not use crack again and I don't understand how as much as I love her to bits I just don't understand why she couldn't do that for her kid because obviously I'm still dealing with it now she passed away so she's all right now,…

Brittany L Jackson: Yeah.

Danica JM Darley: Yeah. Yeah.

Dolly: but I'm stuck with it down further down the line.

Brittany L Jackson: And how do you think you are dealing with that? Do you think that your doing it that you're dealing quite well with it or do you feel like you're still in quite a rut with the situation?

dolly: I think I'm all right, to be honest. I mean a lot of time. I just don't really think about it so I just don't think about it I think that's why I'm alright, but obviously I'm going through my ADHD assessment at minute. So I think that'll bring up a lot of trauma that needs to be talked about and that means because I can't just leave it alone.

Brittany L Jackson: Do you feel like there should be mandatory therapy for kids that have entered care.

Dolly: Yeah, definitely. I think that's the first thing that they should do because ripping a child away from there family like even if the experiences are horrific that child is still getting ripped apart from their family and they don't know any difference and a lot of these times I've seen videos on Facebook where it's like you've got eight Police officers dragging a child from the home and It's disgusting that kids just gonna suffer

Danica JM Darley: yeah, absolutely.

Brittany L Jackson: What information do you think should be given to professionals working with children to help support children experiencing criminal child exploitation. It's a right mouthful.

Dolly: they need to learn about different ways they can be exploited and how to see the signs. A lot of these kids you wouldn't have a clue that they're being exploited until it's too late. But if the signs and make sure that they can get out in a safe way too without false promises, I reckon this could help the thing is with these kids if they're deep into it then a lot of them are going to need to move districts all together, so budget is needed also to try and maybe re house these kids or making them move into a further District just so it's safe for them. Also educating foster parents, probation workers, social workers Etc.

Danica JM Darley: And then when you say the signs. What do you…

Dolly: Yeah.

Danica JM Darley: for you what were those signs if somebody had sort of spotted them earlier down the line?

Dolly: money i was asking for money from every single person. I were going down my Facebook list. Yeah and asking people for money who I've not seen in years and I've asked me dad for money every single day and yet I don't think he had a clue either, not eating I lost so much weight and obviously distancing yourself from your family and friends is a big one. Looking at who there hanging around with or if they're not hanging around with the people that they used to. I just used to stay, like There's a lot of different signs, but I feel like people just look past them all the time.

Brittany L Jackson: Yeah. Just kind of look at you as a naughty kid.

Dolly: Yeah, yeah.

Danica JM Darley: And I wonder if that's something to do with the fact that it is so different for every so between I'm thinking about all of the people that we've spoken to there's similar bits to their stories, but there's so much that's different about their experiences and like you say, then there's going to be different signs that correspond with different things. So that can feel quite hard to then Produce a booklet that tells a hostel worker about things to look out for at work doesn't it?

Brittany L Jackson: I think the first thing that just needs to be done is talk more and…

Dolly: Yeah, talk about it.

Brittany L Jackson: have a bit more empathy

Dolly: Stop the stigma as well. There's so much stigma and taboo around all these things and I just think look people spoke about it more then it's not going to be so stigmatized is it?

Danica JM Darley: Yeah, yeah completely.

Brittany L Jackson: Yeah, people kind of see it when they hear about it it's a shock to them and nobody wants to talk about shocking things.

Dolly: No.

Danica JM Darley: Yeah.

Brittany L Jackson: How do you feel you would have responded to an appropriate intervention? and did you want to get out so if somebody came to you and said right I'm gonna have an intervention with you every week. We're gonna sit down talk about things bladdy blah blah do you think that would of helped or do you think you'd of just pushed them away.

Dolly: At the time I reckon I would have pushed it away. But if they waited until I was ready. That's a big thing with drug addictions. They need to be ready to get out in their own time. Because if you're trying force a drug addict to get out, they're just gonna tell you to fuck of you know what i mean? But i put, towards the end I wanted to get out and if someone could have promised me that they would move me away completely so I could start fresh then I would have in a heartbeat I couldn't because that wasn't possible. So I got out in my own way. Although almost 13 years later. I'm still looking over my shoulder. I wish I could have moved city's and I'm still looking into that now due to the anxiety I have around sheffield

Brittany L Jackson: How did you get yourself out of that situation?

Dolly: i did a runner, I literally did a runner. I packed a bag and I moved to my dad's house. They didn't know my dad no one knew where my dad lived. I didn't tell no one where I was I literally packed a bag and moved there and that were it and I did not do anything else. Obviously i told my social worker, but that was it and I

Brittany L Jackson: And How long after that was it that you got pregnant?

Dolly: Probably about a year because I was still using at my dad's house. but Yeah as soon as I got pregnant that were it I just thought I cannot do this anymore. I need to stay clean and I just stopped that day.

Brittany L Jackson: Did you feel you got a supported quite well through your pregnancy to help you get off these drugs and help with your drug addiction and your mental health or did you do it all yourself?

Dolly: all myself didn't tell them. I was to scared to tell them.

Brittany L Jackson: You didn't.

Danica JM Darley: You were too scared to tell them you're pregnant because you were worried about the implications.

Dolly: No, I were too scared to tell me Midwife. I used to be a drug addict.

Danica JM Darley: Okay.

Dolly: They know i was pregnant, but i was too scared to tell about but obviously they knew anyway in the found out but i didn't tell them myself because i was too scared

Danica JM Darley: Yeah, yeah.

Brittany L Jackson: What was it that you actually scared of?

Dolly: That they were literally just gonna rip my kid out of my arm's the minute that I gave birth but they didn't as soon as they knew they were so supportive and…

Danica JM Darley: Were they?

Dolly: Yeah, they were brilliant. They were amazing and my kids have never been removed, and I'm not with Social Services anymore. So

Danica JM Darley: Thats amazing to break that cycle. That's fantastic. And for…

Dollyy: Yeah, thank you.

Danica JM Darley: you britt you've done exactly the same thing. I just like and I need to say there's a piece of work going on at the University of Sheffield at the moment. it's about to start about people who have done exactly that have broken that cycle of and Being in care themself and then having their own kids and having had positive experiences around that and I think they're almost looking for co- researcher type people Britt to do it. So maybe you and Dolly might be interested in doing something around that and but I think that it's not starting until next year I'll let you know about it because I think it would be really interesting for you to be involved in that I think.

Brittany L Jackson: Yeah. Dolly I remember talking to and you started working with drugs counselling.

Dolly: Oh yeah I worked and then I got pregnant with River so I had to stop.

Brittany L Jackson: Yeah, can you just talk us through a bit about that?

Dolly: Yeah, that was so good. So before I got pregnant with my youngest and so two years ago. I started doing some work experience at Apple Street, the drug and alcohol service and there the people who I was with during my pregnancy to …

Danica JM Darley: All right.

Dolly: so they supported me and I started doing work experience there where I were doing group therapy. I were and I was actually on my way to being a recovery worker but then I got pregnant so I had to quit but that were amazing that were such a great experience. I had to go through the interview process and everything like they interviewed me like a proper member of staff because I had personal experience. That's what they liked more…

Danica JM Darley: And yeah.

Dolly: because I had my own experience and I could talk the clients about it and stuff like that. So it got to a point where I had me own little clients. like I think I had two clients to my name, so yeah

Danica JM Darley: Nice

Brittany L Jackson: And how did that make you feel knowing that you've done that by yourself? And these people saw you for who you were and not just a bit what you wear on a paper.

Dolly: It was amazing.

Brittany L Jackson: How did that make you feel the achievement?

Dolly: It's such a rewarding feeling going to work because people they have jobs that they don't like they're going to work and they come home but it was just nice to be able to go to work and feel like well iv'e done something today iv'e helped someone today like I've given advice and they've took it today, So it will really nice.

Danica JM Darley: Yeah.

Dolly: I remember a guy coming and he was like ah dolly I've not had a smoke all morning and I was like yes well done.

Danica JM Darley: Yeah.

Dolly: so it's just rewarding

Brittany L Jackson: And do you think that's enabled you to, do something that's boosted your confidence to enable you to look for other jobs like that in the future…

Dolly: Yeah, I definitely…

Brittany L Jackson:because coming from myself because before I had this job i didn't think i was worthy of any job because of the life that I've done. So I just want to know that how it's made you feel about your future prospects and what you want to do in the future.

Dolly: I'll definitely want to do something to do with drugs like working with fellow drug addicts. I just think that's what I'm meant to do you know I'm so happy with sharing my story.

Brittany L Jackson: Yeah.

Dolly: I haven't got no, I'm not embarrassed. I'm not. so I'm open and I think that's what they need. They need someone like me and it's such a rewarding job too. And unfortunately, there's always going to be drug addicts and they're always going to need help. So if I can do all that then

Danica JM Darley: Yeah, and bring a different angle to it bring an angle to it because you've had that experience yourself. So there's a level of genuine empathy involved in that I think you do often get and that in these kind of said one of the things I always think is amazing. Is that everybody that we've spoken to through this study have been I feel like my experiences are worthwhile if I can then give back in some way and I think that that is amazing.

Dollly: definitely it's totally different when you hear support from someone who's been through exactly what you're all going through to someone who's read it in a textbook, you know what I mean

Brittany L Jackson: Yeah, definitely.

Danica JM Darley: definitely, where are we with questions britt

Brittany L Jackson: We finished all the questions. unless there's anything else that you want to add or is that's it we've done.

Dolly: No, think were all good if you've got everything.

Brittany L Jackson: I think to be fair we've got a lot of information from you a lot info we can work well with and yeah thankyou so much for doing it

Danica JM Darley: Yeah.

Dolly: yeah no worries anytime

Informed consent video

Children in Care and Child Criminal Exploitation (CCE) peer research project information video. (youtube.com)

Interview schedule

1. How do you feel the way you entered care impacted how you were criminally exploited (CE)?
2. How did you feel your emotional wellbeing/mental health was affected by being CE?
3. How did you feel when you were first CE?
4. How do you feel your upbringing contributed to being CE and why?

5. What was your emotional state before CE?
6. How do you feel this contributed to your CE?
7. Do you feel like you were groomed into CE?
8. Would you have described yourself as 'vulnerable' before you were CE?
9. If so, how was your 'vulnerability' used to exploit you?

10. What is your understanding of CCE?
11. Was any information given to you as a child about what CCE was and how you can seek help if you become criminally exploited?

12. If so, what information was that?

13. What type of support did you try to seek (if any) while being criminally exploited and how helpful was the support?

14. In your opinion do you think professionals have enough training and information on how to deal with CCE safely?

15. What information do you think should be given to professionals working with children to help prevent or support children out of CCE?

16. How do you feel you would have responded to appropriate intervention? Did you want to 'get out'?

17. What could a professional do to make you trust them and how would that have helped you with your CCE experience?

18. What stopped you from seeking help to get out of CCE?
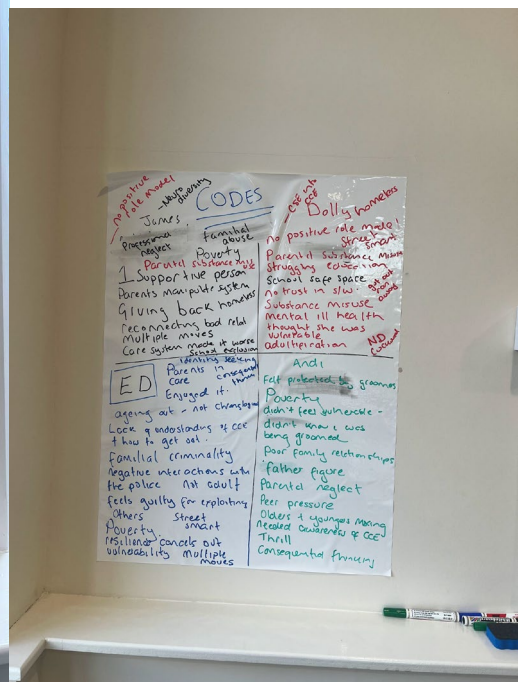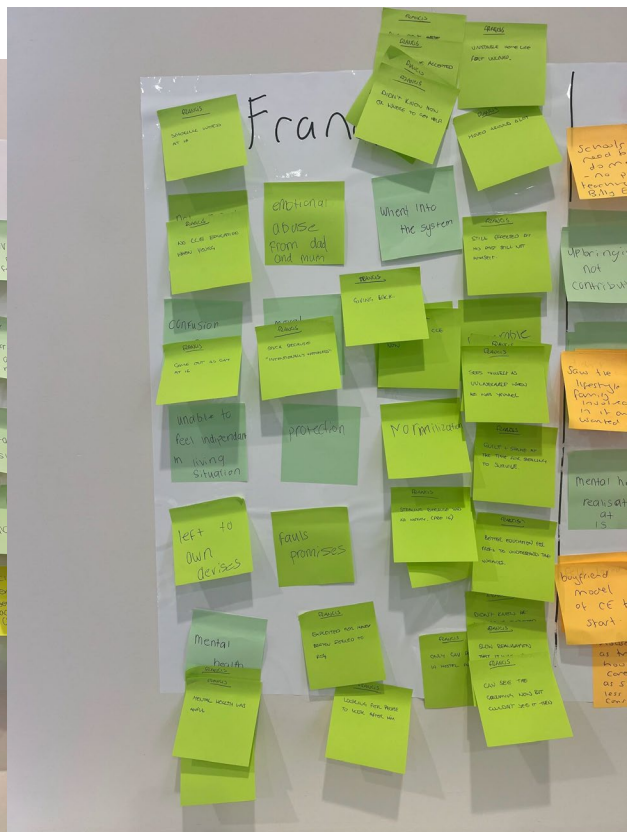
Photos of co-analysis process

John

Fran

Chelsea

CODES
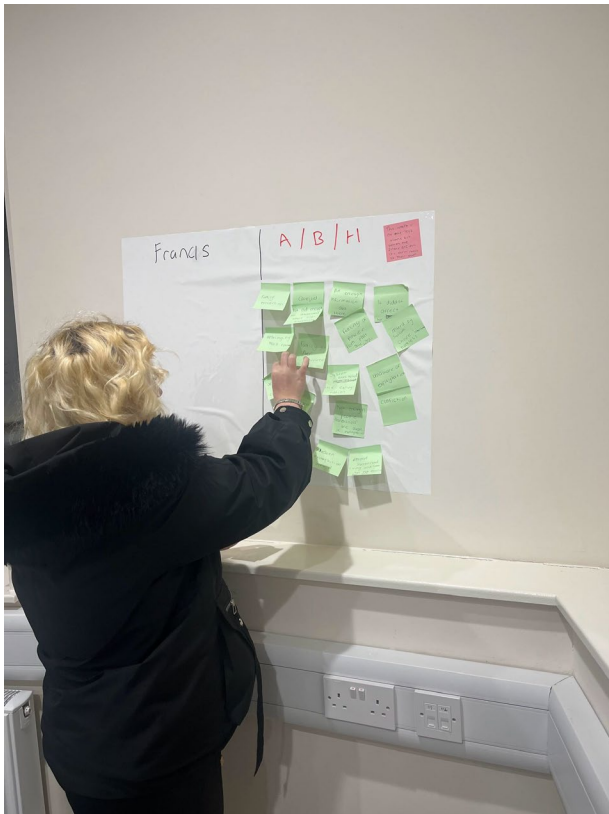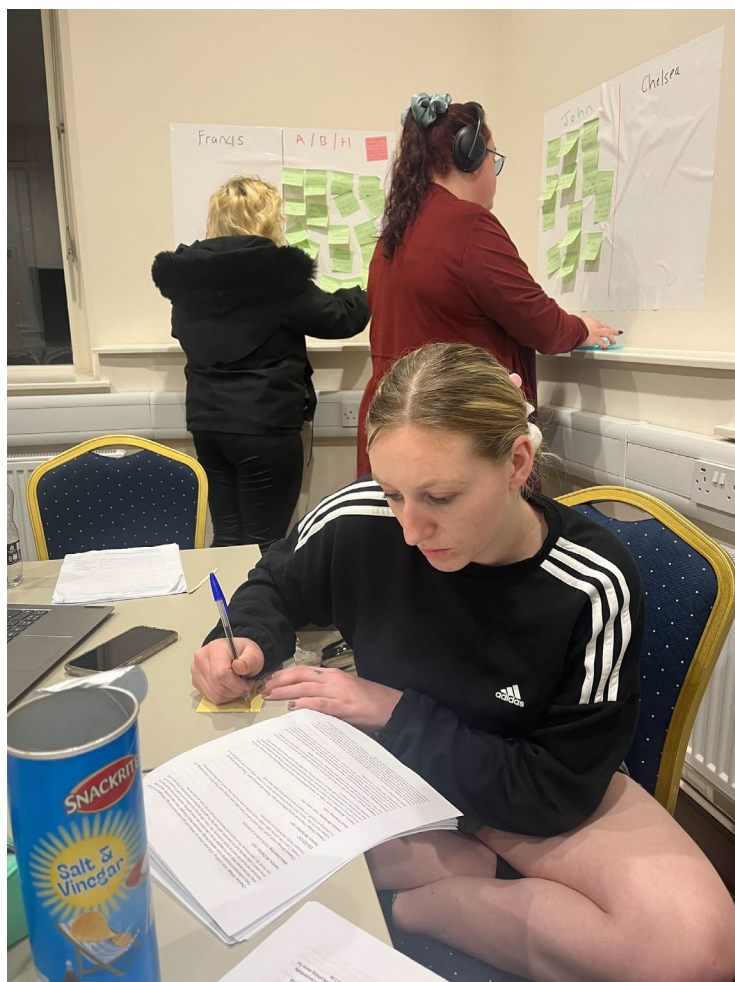
Themes

Themes	
guilt / shame	Everyone
homelessness	not Andi + Chelsea
generativity	James, Dolly, Ed, Andi, Francis, C+H, Chelsea, Hannah
Poor School experience	Chanel, Lilly, Harriet, Francis, Dolly, James, Ed, Andi, Hannah
Care Chpt	James, Dolly, Ed, Francis, Chanel, Harriet, Lilly, John, Chelsea, Hannah
SE into CCE	Harriet, Chanel, Hannah, Dolly

Animation of findings made with the co-researchers

<u>Reflections of care experienced young people on CCE</u>

Comments on the process undertaken by co-researchers

Overall comments/feedback

- Involvement in project described as having 'changed my life'.
- Project as an opportunity to reflect on peer researchers' experiences for the first time and being asked to think about key life experiences/moments in a supportive environment (rather than being questioned by a social worker).
- Project as an opportunity to build connections with peer researchers and join a community of support.
- Peer researchers have developed confidence with positive implications for seeking further employment and entering higher education. Peer researchers describe having never previously considered that 'someone like me could go to university' until participating in this project.
- Peer researchers developed reflexive practices insofar as being able to better understand their own limits, set their own boundaries more effectively, and know when to take a break from emotionally demanding activities.

Feedback on PI

- Danica made all peer researchers feel like equals throughout the project.
- Dani provided extensive and ongoing support to all peer researchers, including an acute sense of if/when peer researchers were finding elements of the project emotionally challenging.
- Extensive care taken by Dani to create a hybrid working environment that made everyone feel included.
- Dani sharing her own story meant that power dynamics across the group were equalised and everyone felt on an 'even keel'.
- Peer researchers felt hugely valued, never felt rushed in telling their own stories.
- Dani described as carrying out the study with 'authenticity and integrity'.

- Participating in the project was not 'all give give give' with peer researchers getting nothing back. Instead, participation was reciprocal and peer researchers took positive experiences and skills from the project.
- Dani was able to pitch the project just right, achieving 'empathy over sympathy'.

Post-project implications

- Involvement in the project has provided a pathway into employment and further education for peer researchers.
- The project has helped peer researchers to realise that employment is not only achievable for them but also can be made to work around their own individual needs (including disability-related needs).
- The recruitment process for the role was deemed accessible but also daunting initially (although this was later dispelled during interviews). Writing a CV was identified as potentially difficult but writing a cover letter felt much more achievable.
- The interviews were described as largely enjoyable due to Dani's handling of these interactions which were more like conversations than interviews.
- Going through the recruitment process was deemed as a good experience ahead of future recruitment processes.

Challenges

- The emotional toll of reading other people's stories was highlighted by peer researchers. However, as noted above, developing resilience and self-reflection during the project enabled peer researchers to manage their emotions accordingly.
- Peer researchers reflected that it may have been better to take more time than a single day to carry out data analysis. However, they acknowledged that logistical and financial issues made this difficult.
- Some aspects of hybrid working were challenging, and peer researchers felt that face to face meetings would overall have been preferable. Again however, they acknowledged that logistical and financial restrictions meant that hybrid/online working was necessary.

Suggestions for university

- Offer opportunities for career guidance and skills analysis post-project.

- Offer opportunities for networking with academic staff and other peer researchers involved in projects involving peer researchers and lived experience.
- Peer researchers would highly value opportunities to be involved in project dissemination, including conference presentations. Funding to support such activities would be welcome.

Photos of British Society of Criminology conference- Glasgow June 2024