

Tackling Child Exploitation Support Programme

How many and who is missing – using data to understand the scale of exploitation.

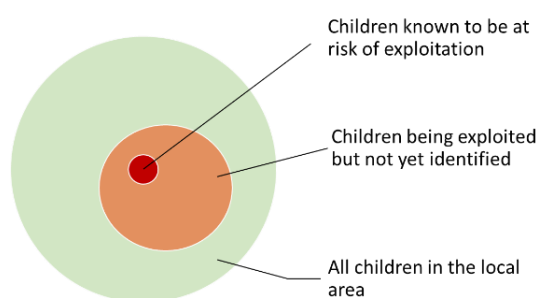
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The public and policy attention on child **exploitation** and extra-familial harm has led national and local agencies to try to answer the question “*how many children are being exploited?*” and “*which children and young people are at risk of being exploited?*”. Different research studies have explored these questions, and have gathered relevant data, and provided a range of estimates, but there are important limitations to all these studies. In this think piece, I explore why it is hugely challenging to answer this question using only the quantitative data collected by public services.

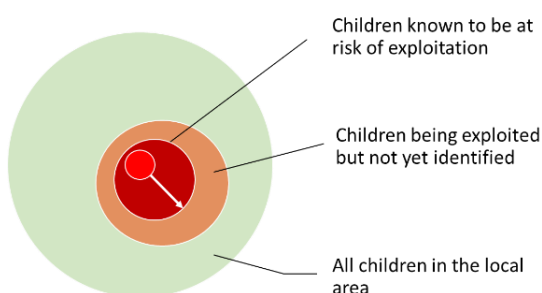
Whenever we consider what a particular table or chart based on data is telling us, it is important to think about where the data came from. Public sector data usually result from the records that practitioners and professionals make in the course of their work and enter onto IT systems designed for the purpose, for example the records kept on ICS in children’s social care, or information about crimes and suspects kept on the National Police Database (NPD). What we mean by data in this context is explored in the “Data for intelligence” [think piece](#).

We often have rich data about children known to our services, but our data tell us very little about people who are **not** in contact with services. This means that we cannot count the number of children and young people known to social care for reasons of exploitation and use this as an estimate of the actual occurrence of exploitation in the local community. The number of children and young people who are being exploited or are at risk of exploitation will be greater than the number of children who have been exploited and are known to services.

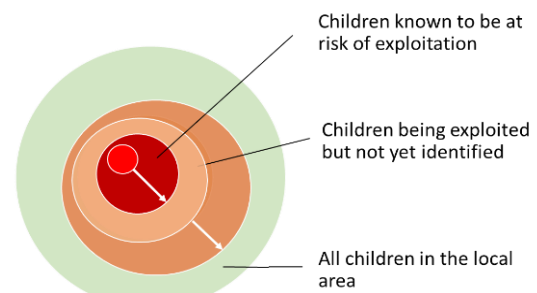
What would it mean for the red circle to get bigger?



Better identification, same number being exploited



Better identification, more being exploited



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This becomes clearer when we think about what an increase in the number of children known to services for reasons of exploitation (those in the red circle) might indicate – an increase in the number of children known to social services means exactly that, more children are **known**. That might be as a result of better identification, but we don't know, because we don't know how big that orange circle was before, or how big it is now.

Who is not being counted?

In order for children and young people to be identified by practitioners as at risk of or being exploited, they need to be:

- a) **Be showing signs** of symptoms of exploitation – some children and young people will be accomplished at hiding their needs, and may be coached by perpetrators as to how to conceal their situation. There are a range of reasons why a young person might feel unable to talk about what is happening to them.
- b) **Be seen by someone who recognises those signs** and knows how to respond – some parents and practitioners don't know enough about exploitation to understand the severity of what they are seeing, or may misinterpret it as bad behaviour
- c) **Be willing to engage with professionals** who can confirm exploitation and assess the risk of harm. Some young people will not recognise themselves as victims, and will be suspicious of offers of help.

(Research in Practice, 2017)

Many young people who are being exploited will not come to the attention of services and so will not end up being recorded by services or included in our count of children known to services.

The people recorded in our data depend on our definitions of exploitation and the systems we use to record it. We only collect data on types of exploitation that we are aware of. In most local areas, there will be better data on child sexual exploitation than other forms, because the sector has been raising awareness, working on definitions and establishing recording systems to support efforts to tackle CSE for some time. As the definitions of exploitation broaden, we must be careful to ensure that the different types of harm are recorded carefully, while being open to discovering new forms of harm through listening to the voices of children, young people, families, communities and practitioners. Currently, many local areas will not have a way to record other forms of exploitation identified in social care assessments directly onto their social care recording system and will be using ad hoc or bespoke recording systems to do this.

Emerging forms of harm are not visible in our data and people who do not fit our preconceptions about what a victim looks like may not be identified as victims.

These limitations of our data about victims of exploitation are mirrored in police data about perpetrators. Official data on arrests, prosecutions and convictions only count those perpetrators against whom official actions are taken. Police intelligence databases cast a wider net, but still only capture those known to the police. We know that perpetrators of exploitation often work in gangs or networks, but our way of recording data does not make it easy to count all of those affiliated with those networks.

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People connected to and affiliated with perpetrator networks who are not part of police intelligence are not included in counts of perpetrators.

These limitations are important, firstly so that we don't assume we know the prevalence of exploitation, but also so that we recognise the limitations of drawing conclusions about the characteristics or experiences of perpetrators and victims based only on those cases we know about.

Comparing service data and survey data

If we want to understand the scale of exploitation and extra-familial harm beyond those known to services, we need to look at other methods of data collection.

The Office of the Children's Commissioner report "Keeping Children Safe" matched data from children's social care (CIN Census data) with data from youth offending teams and the National Pupil Database to:

- Provide a total of the number of children and young people known to be involved in gang activity and criminal exploitation across social care and youth offending teams;
- Compare that total with national survey data asking young people about their involvement in gangs

The result is an estimate of the gap between the children known to services and the children self-identifying as being in or associated with a gang.

The survey is conducted nationally and local breakdowns are not available, so local areas can't replicate that approach without a local survey. There are wider benefits in understanding young people's experiences and attitudes through surveys, and this may something local areas want to explore as an additional source of intelligence. As with all survey data, some groups will be under-represented due to the way the survey was conducted, for example, children not in school will be missing from school-run surveys etc).

Estimating wider vulnerabilities

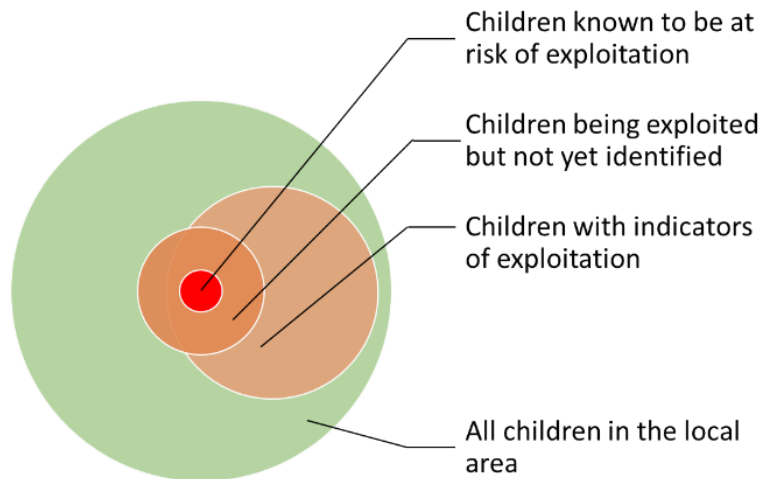
Another approach to understanding how many children might be at risk of being exploited is to attempt to count how many children and young people have other needs and vulnerabilities that might be related to risk of exploitation.

The "Keeping Kids Safe" report also considers some of the patterns of needs seen in children and young people known to services to be being exploited, and estimates from other sources of how many children and young people nationally experience these needs. For example, the LGA identified a relationship between experience of domestic violence and gang activity, and 825,000 children nationally are reported to have experienced domestic violence.

There is a need for caution in interpretation here. These patterns of needs and experiences do not represent causal relationships - experiencing domestic violence does not cause a young person to be a victim of exploitation. Young people's history and needs do not cause them to be exploited, responsibility must always rest with the perpetrator.

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Not all children being exploited have known risk factors, not all with risk factors are being exploited.



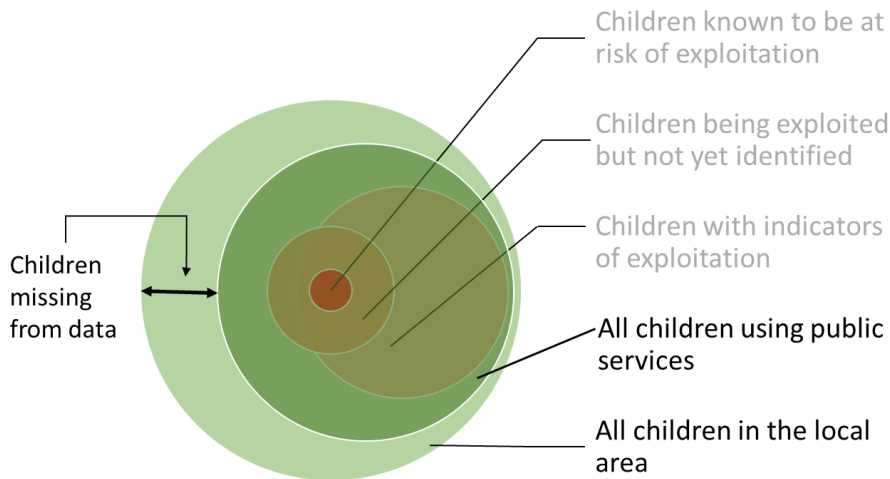
But that doesn't mean the pattern doesn't tell us something about the potential prevalence of exploitation or how we might target resources to reduce vulnerability. While they may not be victimised through exploitation, these children and young people's experiences may increase their vulnerability to perpetrator tactics (Hallett, 2016; Scott, McNeish, Bovarnick and Pearce, 2019). It is one piece of a more complex puzzle. This perspective has the benefit of helping us to see exploitation within a complex web of other needs and services and to identify opportunities to take a whole-system preventative approach to tackling exploitation.

Once again we must consider who is and who is not included in the data. If our patterns are drawn from the small and potentially unrepresentative sample of children known to services to be being exploited, we will miss emerging threats and new patterns. Perpetrators adapt to disruption techniques and move to find other vulnerable groups, for example moving from targeting children in a children's home to targeting a Pupil Referral unit. Our approach to collecting and reviewing data must be equally flexible.

There are also children and young people who may not appear in the wider administrative datasets that we are applying our patterns to. These children can be the most vulnerable as they are 'invisible' to services. The most inclusive dataset we have is the National Pupil database (and the local equivalent databases) including information about all school pupils. But even this is not fully "universal". Children who are home educated (OCC, 2019a), are missing a school place, or who have "unexplained school exits" (EPI, 2019) are not included. For children's social care, children and young people placed by another authority are only recorded if the placing authority completes the notification process, and information about their needs may be incomplete. Families in temporary housing (120,000 children), young people who are homeless, or sofa-surfing (estimated 90,000 children), will not appear on housing registers and may lose contact with support workers.

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We don't know very much about children who don't access universal services.



Conclusion

Trying to estimate how many children and young people are affected by exploitation, or are particularly vulnerable to becoming exploited is no easy task. There will always be children missing from these estimates and these children may be some of the most vulnerable to exploitation if they lack contact with professionals and trusted stable relationships.

The nature of exploitation means that it is often hidden from the systems where exploitation is recorded. When exploitation is visible, practitioners may only see what we expect to see, risking our data only confirming our preconceptions about what a victim of exploitation looks like. Wider vulnerabilities and system responses to those vulnerabilities can lead to children and young people moving between organisations and places (and therefore IT systems) making them harder to track.

The fact that our data is incomplete doesn't make it useless, as long as we keep in mind the limitations when drawing conclusions and acting on insights. The data we have may not be able to give concrete answers but it can provide pieces of evidence and indications of what strategic action is required. The questions raised by our data can support us to shift our gaze, to look for new evidence or collect new data to give us a fuller picture. In doing so, we need to always remind ourselves that the picture data provides is partial, and only one perspective on the system. The children missing from our data are equally important and must be borne in mind when making decisions based on data.

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