

# Tackling Child Exploitation Support Programme

## Identifying children potentially vulnerable to exploitation

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This article explores ways of understanding vulnerability to exploitation through data. It is part of a series of articles describing the content of and rationale for the [multi-agency intelligence framework](#). The framework seeks to answer the questions

- What is life like for young people here?
- What does exploitation look like here?

The question I am most often asked by local areas exploring data to understand exploitation is “*how many children are being exploited and how many are at risk of exploitation?*”. That is not an easy question to answer, as the post on children missing from data explores (see database attached).

[Vulnerability Data List \(xlsx file\)](#)

Nor is it easy to see what a local area might do with the answer, if they are not also identifying **which** factors increase risk to children and **why**.

The Identifying Potential Vulnerability spreadsheet provides information and links to data that we think might be useful to explore patterns of potential vulnerability. This is a work in progress that we hope to develop with the sector.

If you have any **comments or suggestions about additions** to the list, or want to share your work understanding patterns of potential vulnerability, please email: [TCEadmin@researchinpractice.org.uk](mailto:TCEadmin@researchinpractice.org.uk)

### Children known to be victims of exploitation

Published data that clearly identifies children being exploited is limited to those who have been identified as such by social care, and, for the moment, this is limited to child sexual exploitation only, and those who have been referred to the National Referral Mechanism.

Other risks and needs associated with exploitation are also listed in the “Factors identified following a social care assessment”, including trafficking. But there is no doubt there are more children and young people being harmed and exploited that are not yet known to specialist services. If we focus only on those we know about, we risk going down a path of validating our own assumptions about who is at risk and why.

### Data on known exploitation or associated harm

Factors identified in Assessment: Trafficking

Factors identified in Assessment: CSE

Number of referrals to the National Referral Mechanism

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Once we acknowledge that we don't know how many children are being exploited, inevitably, we begin to talk about those "at risk" of or vulnerable to exploitation. There is a long list of vulnerabilities identified through research that might suggest a risk of exploitation.

But, focusing on characteristics of children at risk of exploitation locates the risk of harm in the young person, rather than locating it with the perpetrators of exploitation. These "vulnerabilities" need interpreting more carefully: Many young people who are vulnerable to harm are vulnerable because of the context in which they live and the ways in which perpetrators take advantage of that context.

## Understanding how perpetrators exploit vulnerability

Starting from the principle that exploitation is a result of the actions of perpetrators and the absence of protective structures around young people, I began to think about what we know about the grooming tactics used by perpetrators, and how young people's context and experiences might make them more susceptible to those tactics.

Grooming tactics identified by the Children's Society (2019) include:

Free food
Prestige / cool factor
Gifts
Online grooming
Offer of a place to stay
Offer of protection
Offer a sense of belonging
Access to drugs
Tests of loyalty

When seen through the eyes of a young person, these tactics might be particularly effective if what is on offer is something that the young person feels they need or want but don't have in their everyday lives. As the list indicates, these things may be material, or emotional, and there is also an interaction between these factors.

### *Material resources*

Overall measures of children living in deprived areas or below average income households, or other poverty and deprivation measures are clearly relevant, as are a range of indicators that tell us about things that young people might lack, or feel they want.

- Young people accessing Free School Meals during term-time might miss out on hot meals at home and be particularly susceptible to offers of free food in the school holidays
- For young people over 16 living independently, access to material goods is affected by the availability of jobs and benefit entitlements.
- Understanding smartphone use and internet access among young people also offers insights into patterns of online and offline grooming.

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## Data on material resources

Number of secondary school pupils on free school meals

Young people aged 16 -24 claiming universal credit: In employment

Young people aged 16 -24 claiming universal credit: Not in employment

### Conversation starter

What else do we know about the material resources, available to young people, including young adults?

### *A place to stay*

Young people who do not have a safe and welcoming place to live might be more willing to accept the offer of a place to stay. There are a number of reasons why a young person might lack stability at home. In some cases, this will be as a result of decisions by the local authority and their partners about where a young person should live, or less directly a result of the availability and accessibility of housing in local communities.

(To remind us that the housing available to some young people is a direct consequence of the decisions that services make about how to support them, we have included housing related data in both potential vulnerability and in patterns of help.)

- Data are available about young people (including young adults) who are homeless or in temporary accommodation with family.
- We know more about the living situations of young people who are or have been looked after including inspection ratings of placement providers, numbers in unregulated or unsupported accommodation and care leavers in unsuitable accommodation.
- Adults with learning difficulties can be at risk of having their housing taken over by exploiters, so-called "cuckooing". Understanding how many such adults live in stable and appropriate housing provides an indicator of risk, if an imperfect one.

### Numbers vulnerable due to unstable or poor quality housing

Families living in temporary accommodation	Families
Households referred to housing for homelessness from children's social care	children known to social care
Total households with support need(s) owed a duty relating to homelessness: Young person aged 18-25 years requiring support to manage independently	Young adults
Total households with support need(s) owed a duty relating to homelessness: Care leaver aged 21+ years	children looked after and careleavers
Total households with support need(s) owed a duty relating to homelessness: Care leaver aged 18-20 years	children looked after and careleavers
Total households with support need(s) owed a duty relating to homelessness: Young person aged 16-17 years	Young people

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## Patterns of help for young adults at risk of homelessness

The number of young people aged 16-24 presenting to the council as at risk of homelessness	Young people including young adults
The number of young people accepted as homeless and owed a housing duty	Young people including young adults
The number of people aged 16-24 recorded as having received housing and/or homelessness support	Young people including young adults
Careleavers in unsuitable accommodation	Care leavers

### Conversation starter

What more detailed data can your local housing providers provide about young people?

### *A sense of belonging*

A sense of belonging goes beyond a place to stay. Grooming tactics and gang involvement exploit young people's desire to be cared for, noticed and to feel like part of something larger. Young people who do not feel supported in their everyday lives may be more easily exploited in this way.

Traditionally we have considered data about domestic abuse and neglect as indicators of risk at home, but it is helpful to think about how these factors influence a young person's sense of belonging. That helps us to think beyond harm caused by others to include life experiences that might leave a young person isolated, like bereavement and grief.

### Young people with unstable home and family lives

Factors identified in Assessment; Domestic abuse
Factors identified in Assessment: Neglect
Factors identified in assessment: Parental alcohol use
Factors identified in assessment: Parental drug use
18-24 year olds in receipt of bereavement benefits
Number of families in receipt of Windowed parent bereavement allowance

Young people can show us that they don't feel safe where they live, or feel 'out of place' through their behaviour, for example by going missing or becoming involved with gangs that offer them a sense of belonging. Understanding the data on these groups might provide some insight into the experiences of these groups.

### Data on young people absent from home, school or care

Number of pupil absences	School pupils
Factors identified in Assessment: Going missing	CYP known to Social care

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Factors Identified in Assessment: Gang involvement	CYP known to Social care
Factors identified in Assessment: Socially unacceptable behaviour	CYP known to Social care
Children Looked after who had a missing incident during the year	Children looked after
Children Looked After who went missing more than once during the year <sup>7</sup>	Children looked after

Using the contextual safeguarding approach, looking at data about involvement in, or separation from, family, school and community provides a perspective on young people lacking some of the protective structures that reduce risk of exploitation. Young people who have lost contact with services and peer groups might be particularly isolated and lonely.

### Data on young people who might lack a sense of belonging

Number of persistent absentee pupils
Number of fixed exclusions from secondary schools
Number of permanent exclusions from secondary schools
Number of pupils in pupil referral units or alternative provision
16-17 year olds not in education, employment or training (NEET) or whose activity is not known
Care leavers in the year ending 31 March 2019 aged 17 and 18 who are not in education, employment or training
Care leavers in the year ending 31 March 2019 aged 17 and 18 for whom local authority does not have activity information
Children Looked After placed out of area or at a distance
Children looked after in unregulated placements

#### Conversation starter:

Which other groups of children and young people might not feel that they “belong”?

#### *Additional needs*

So far, we have been careful not to root young people’s vulnerability in their own characteristics and needs, because it takes the focus away from the perpetrators of exploitation and the support systems in place. However, the research evidence to date does indicate that some children and young people are more vulnerable because their needs make it more difficult for them to identify and avoid risky situations, for example

- those with learning difficulties
- those with mental health needs.

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For others, their pre-existing needs may make them more susceptible to gifts and bribes from exploiters. Understanding substance misuse among young people provides indications of whether drug use might be used as a recruitment tool.

We have some indicators of the extent of these needs in our local population (though, as with much of our data, it only includes young people known to services and identified as having a particular need. Not all children with these needs will be counted.

## Data on children and young people with particular vulnerabilities

Children with Special Educational Need or Disability: Number of children with Specific learning difficulties	Children, young people and young adults known to local education service
Children with Special Educational Need or Disability: Number of children with moderate learning difficulties	Children, young people and young adults known to local education service
Children with Special Educational Need or Disability: Number of children with social, emotional and mental health needs	Children, young people and young adults known to local education service
Factors identified in Assessment: Self-harm	Children and young people known to children's social care
Factors Identified in assessment: Substance misuse (child)	Children and young people known to children's social care
Factors Identified in Assessment: Alcohol use (child)	Children and young people known to children's social care

We are excited to see what you come up with and how you use the framework and what questions it prompts you to ask. Let us know and share your brilliant ideas: [TCEadmin@researchinpractice.org.uk](mailto:TCEadmin@researchinpractice.org.uk)

**If you have any suggestions for other data to be included in the Intelligence Framework, please get in touch [TCEadmin@researchinpractice.org.uk](mailto:TCEadmin@researchinpractice.org.uk).**

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## References

Children's Society (2019) Counting Lives: Responding to Children who are criminally exploited

<https://www.childrensociety.org.uk/sites/default/files/counting-lives-report.pdf>