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Using data to explore equalities, diversity and inclusion



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Funded by the Department for Education

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Introduction

This article is an attempt to start a conversation about using quantitative and qualitative data to explore the disproportionality associated with:

a) preventing and disrupting exploitation

b) the provision of specialist exploitation services.

It is based on a rapid review of literature and data on exploitation, evidence of wider discrimination and injustice, and on discussions with Tackling Child Exploitation (TCE) Support Programme staff, and delivery partners and local partnerships participating in the Programme. This piece should be read as part of the Programme's transparent and iterative approach to sharing thinking and learning and will be the subject of ongoing feedback, comment and review. You can find out how to get involved in this process below.

This is by no means a complete overview of either the literature or the available data, nor are the questions posed here the only questions local areas can and should ask. Data alone does not give us the answers we need to address systemic inequality across our systems, but it does offer a starting point for conversations within and across local partnerships.

Disproportionality occurs when groups with particular characteristics are over or under-represented in services, compared to the number of people in that group in the general population. The discussion below focuses on three protected characteristics - gender, ethnicity and disability - and the intersections between them. These characteristics feature widely in the existing literature and are important to consider in relation to understanding the power dynamics underpinning both exploitation and system responses to it.

One of the reasons this piece focuses on ethnicity, gender and disability is that much of the (limited) research on using data to understand disproportionality in public services is centred on these characteristics, which tend to be recorded more widely and consistently in data systems across services.

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1. The rapid review searched for literature on exploitation and the experience of children and young people of different genders and from different ethnic backgrounds and with disabilities, including special educational needs. Grey literature and academic papers were included, to incorporate issues emerging in practice and policy. This search was augmented to include wider issues of data justice and equity in relation to gender, ethnicity and disability in other sectors and areas of public policy. The approach used was pragmatic, drawing on the knowledge of TCE staff and partners, and 'snowball' searching using the references in papers identified.

This article aims to prompt local partnerships to think about the data they have about these characteristics and what it might tell them about the experiences of young people being exploited, or the pathways to exploitation locally. In exploring the reasons for any disproportionality based on these characteristics, local partnerships can begin a conversation about the social, structural and organisational dynamics underpinning these patterns. Where national data and tools exist these are signposted below.

This practical focus means that this piece is limited to the scope of current systems for data collection and reporting in various agencies. There are, of course, other characteristics, such as sexuality and low socio-economic status. Such young people might receive differential or disproportionate responses to their needs, but these are inconsistently recorded and therefore aren't as visible in our data. Even within the three areas being discussed, data systems do not capture nuanced ethnic identities or trans or non-binary gender identities. Notably, socio-economic data is also often absent.

Exploring the experiences of young people with these characteristics is a task for qualitative research, rather than quantitative data. In this way, the data we choose to collect and not collect directly correlates to whether particular characteristics are visible or not. The limitations of using data are further discussed below. Other ways in which the decisions we make about data and data systems influence what we know and the kinds of actions we take are explored in a subsequent piece.

Why are we talking about data and disproportionality?

Exploitation is still an emerging issue – the evidence base is sparse and our definitions of the phenomenon are not always clear on what is and is not considered exploitation (Cockbain et al., 2017). But while our formal knowledge is still growing, the issue has grabbed the public’s attention. The media reporting is often sensationalist and, in attempting to tell a compelling story, draws on stereotypes and socially-constructed assumptions about both victims and perpetrators. These assumptions about capacity and agency, consent and coercion, and culture and culpability lead to different standards and thresholds of acceptability being applied in public discourse to individuals based on their demographics (e.g. age, ethnicity, gender), their needs (whether they have a disability or mental health condition), or their socio-economic status or class.

The discussion about who is at risk of exploitation and who perpetrates it mirrors many of the social dynamics that exist in wider society. The often shocking details of sexual and other serious violence amplifies pre-conceptions based on gender, ethnicity and disability. It is part of the same discourse that uses personal histories, sexual preferences and offending behaviour to blame victims for the violence they experience, prompts an outcry about violence done to photogenic white children while remaining silent about the violence experienced by Black boys, and which rejects the right of people with disabilities to have fulfilling romantic and sexual lives (Grubb & Turner, 2012; Moore et al., 2011; Rich, 2019).

Practitioners and strategic leaders seeking to understand and tackle exploitation as it actually happens in the real world are not immune from these preconceptions and biases. Our mental models of the world are influenced and shaped by the societies in which we live, and the media we consume, as well as our personal values and professional knowledge, and the systems we work in. There is a danger, then, that without critical reflection and deliberate confrontation of our personal and organisational biases, our efforts to protect all children and young people are weakened by preconceptions about who is vulnerable to or experiencing exploitation, and who poses a risk to others.

This is not to say that the experience and practice of exploitation is not differentiated along lines of gender, ethnicity or disability. Young people’s perceptions of themselves, what is ‘ normal’ for them to experience and the response they expect from public services are shaped by the media and by societal expectations based on their demographic characteristics. The gangs, groups and individuals perpetrating exploitation are as much a product of the divisive culture and discriminatory attitudes as victims, professionals and decision-makers. And, of course, we know that the line between victim and perpetrator of exploitation is blurred - young people can be both.

It is likely that the choice of victim is informed by social status, i.e. the relative power and capacity for social dominance of the perpetrator, plus a calculated assessment of how likely it is that the victim will be seen and heard, i.e. the chances of being caught and punished.

These social realities, rooted in ethnicity, gender, age and disability, do not exist in isolation, but intersect in individuals and communities, and compound existing levels of social exclusion, life expectancy and wellbeing (Hagell, 2021). Applying the theory of intersectionality supports organisations ‘[to interrogate] how intersecting forms of oppression converge for racialised and minoritised groups in complex and subtle ways’ (Bernard, 2019, p. 15). Using an intersectional approach emphasises the combined effects of economic and social discrimination based on ethnicity and gender (Bernard, 2019).

In order to understand these dynamics, we need to talk about them explicitly and use them in our exploration of vulnerability and harm to adolescents. This is not always happening. In a recent analysis of serious case reviews featuring child sexual exploitation, issues of gender, ethnicity and disability are not explicitly raised, reflecting the wider silence on these issues in child practice reviews about exploitation (Brandon et al., 2020; Mason-Jones & Loggie, 2019). Critical reflection and discussion, including with people from minoritised communities and identities, can help organisations to explore and disrupt power imbalances within society, between practitioners and young people, and within organisations (Spillett & Florek, 2018). This supports practitioners and managers to challenge their own assumptions and preconceptions, which might affect their judgement about the nature and dynamics of exploitation. Silence on these issues risks organisational and professional decision-making that perpetuates the power differential between exploiters and their victims by failing to recognise exploitative situations.

Getting these conversations started is not easy. The first hurdle is often convincing people that disproportionality is present in the local area’s systems and services. The next section explores how these disproportionate patterns might appear in local and national data about exploitation. It encourages local areas to explore a wide range of data from across the partnership to understand how these patterns might be influencing responses to young people at risk of or experiencing exploitation.

How might data help explore issues of equality, diversity and inclusion?

Individual reflection on our own biases and preconceptions is important, but it takes more than individual action to unpick systematic disproportionality. By using data derived from lots of decisions made by different practitioners, managers and organisations over time, it is possible to see patterns in those decisions about who is and who is not being exploited, and patterns in what support or intervention is offered that might not be obvious in individual instances.

There is no published national dataset exploring the gender, ethnicity and disability of young people identified as victims of different forms of exploitation. Therefore, the national extent of the disproportionality of response based on these characteristics is unknown. **The responsibility to explore patterns of decision-making and relationships to gender, ethnicity and disability in relation to exploitation therefore lies with local strategic leaders.** The studies cited below use quantitative and qualitative data from specialist services working with young people, including data held by local authorities and the voluntary sector and records held by the courts and criminal justice system.

Bringing data together from across the local partnership and beyond provides a richer and more nuanced picture of disproportionality across the system. In exploring the reasons for any disproportionality based on these characteristics, local partnerships can begin a conversation about the social, structural and organisational dynamics underpinning these patterns.

To help strategic leaders access data to support their thinking and reflection about disproportionality, we've collated below links to relevant data tools and visualisations on a range of issues that are closely related to either pathways to exploitation or pathways to help and support. These tools allow you to explore the data in various ways and with varying levels of detail about different groups and the intersections between them. Some provide data on inequalities based on either gender or ethnicity. Some are more comprehensive.

As you explore the tools, consider which subgroups are missing from each analysis and how you might use local data to understand the experiences of these groups:

Are the patterns of disproportionate responses found in research evidence and national data reflected in your own local patterns and trends?

How might these disproportionate responses in other parts of the system be affecting how well your partnership identifies exploitation?

What do these patterns mean for the way you prevent, identify and disrupt exploitation in your local area?

Who needs to be involved in these conversations across the partnership to include a range of perspectives?

Exploring equality diversity and inclusion in your local data

Local areas record gender, ethnicity and disability across a number of databases relevant to exploitation. This section explores the different types of data that local areas might hold, and the questions about disproportionality that they can explore through closer interrogation of that data.

Thinking about things like how young people come to (or don't come to) the attention of exploitation services, the different pathways to receiving support for different groups of children, and data on the gender, ethnicity and disability of young people known to exploitation services can be starting points for a line of enquiry about the wider system and the disproportionate (and sometimes discriminatory) responses that some young people experience within it.

Biases based on gender, ethnicity and disability shape the questions that young people are asked when they come into contact with services, and the way that their experiences are interpreted. Research with practitioners suggests that boys going missing are more likely to be seen as having been involved in offending than as having been sexually exploited (note that this study was conducted before the concept of criminal child exploitation became more well-known - McNaughton Nicholls et al., 2014).

The risk and experience of harm signalled by sexualised behaviour by B lack girls can be dismissed or normalised by professionals who apply different thresholds of appropriateness based on ethnicity and perceived cultural norms (Davies, 2019).

People from minoritised communities may feel less willing to disclose abuse that has happened to them due to previous experiences of not being listened to by professionals, or through shame and fear of stigma in their peer group, family and wider community (Bernard, 2019; Harrison & Gill, 2019) . These records feed into the systems that output quantitative data that in turn feeds into strategic decision-making, so it is important for strategic leaders to be conscious of this potential bias.

The assumptions and preconceptions of practitioners in the wider system, and disproportionality in decision-making outside of specialist services, may influence who does and does not get offered a service. The personal and family histories of young people are used to inform practitioners' assessments of risk and vulnerability to exploitation. This is important, given the potential roles of past trauma and adverse childhood experiences in increasing vulnerability (Hickle, 2019). As well as wider concerns about the ability of such risk assessments to accurately capture experiences of or potential for exploitation (Brown et al., 2017), it is important to acknowledge that the picture of past experience painted in referrals is often based on how services have responded to the young person's needs in the past. These responses can themselves be gendered, racialised and fail to take into account a young person's disability. Building a culturally competent organisation that recognises and addresses the biases of practitioners, managers and processes is a significant task, and senior

leaders might consider [the tools produced by The Staff College here](#) to understand the steps needed.

One large scale study of specialist child sexual exploitation services found that boys experiencing child sexual exploitation are more likely to present with a history of interactions with services that has labelled them as offenders, i.e. they are more likely to have been referred to specialist sexual exploitation services by youth offending teams, rather than social care, and to have a prior criminal record. Conversely, girls were more likely to be referred with specific concerns about exploitation (Cockbain et al., 2017). This reflects gendered and racialised trends in who is criminalised and subject to enforcement activity rather than being supported by the system.

Questions to ask of your local exploitation data

What does your local data from specialist exploitation services tell you about the gender, ethnicity and disability of the young people those services work with?

How do the demographics and characteristics of young people known to specialist services differ from the demographics of the local population? Are some groups over or under- represented?

What are the patterns in the responses and types of support young people receive associated with gender, ethnicity or disability?

Are there similar patterns in the referral sources and types of concern when young people are referred to specialist services?

What do the personal and family histories of the young people we work with tell us about discrimination and disproportionality in other parts of the system, in public services, or in the community?

How might we approach the official records of these personal histories with a critical eye on the role of services and systems in defining and labelling families and young people?

Protective structures

A lack of protective structures like schools, supportive families and communities, or good relationships with public services can increase young people's vulnerability to exploitation and their susceptibility to offers of things like money, gifts, safety and a sense of belonging (Beckett, 2019). We can identify evidence that these protective structures are being denied to young people based on their gender, ethnicity or disability, suggesting that these groups might be more vulnerable to exploitation as a result. This lens produces

a new urgency to understanding systemic disproportionality across public services, and to tackling discriminatory ideas in the wider community as a means of preventing exploitation of young people.

Boys, pupils with special educational needs and Black Caribbean young people, particularly those with two or more of these characteristics, are subject to increased enforcement activity, both in terms of rates of exclusion from school and harsher treatment within the criminal justice system (Timpson et al., 2019; Youth Justice Board, 2021).

They are more likely to be remanded in custody or care for an offence and more likely to receive a custodial sentence (Youth Justice Board, 2021). This criminalisation serves to increase alienation from professionals, and reflects and affects community attitudes towards young people. In the long term, such criminalisation affects life chances and employability, feeding young people's lack of self-worth and a disbelief that they can escape poverty. This lack of opportunity then forms part of the structural constraints that inform young people's behaviour when in potentially exploitative situations (Beckett, 2019). The following actions provide a starting point for local areas to reflect on their position in relation to these concerns:

- 1) Explore your local authority's rates of exclusion by school type, gender, ethnicity and disability, compared to other areas and over time.
<https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/permanent-and-fixed-period-exclusions-in-england>
- 2) Compare the stop and search rates per 100 people by ethnicity for your police force area using the Home Office data on ethnicity (section 5 in the linked webpage).
[Stop and search - GOV.UK Ethnicity facts and figures \(ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/stop-and-search-ethnicity-facts-and-figures)
- 3) Talk to your YOT to access the YJB Ethnic Disproportionality Tool to explore experiences with the criminal justice system for young people from different ethnic groups
<https://yjresourcehub.uk/over-representation-and-disproportionality/item/485-ethnic-disproportionality-tool.html>

Black and Asian children and young people have a different pattern of involvement with children's social care services compared to white children and to each other. This might affect the rates of recognition and response to exploitation identified by social workers in non-specialist teams.

While Black families are over-represented in the child protection system, Asian families are under-represented. Importantly, the relationship between social care intervention and deprivation is different for Black families than for white families: Black families in more affluent neighbourhoods are more likely to be involved with social care than white families in the same area, while in poorer neighbourhoods this pattern is reversed (Bywaters, 2019; Bywaters et al., 2020).

'Much more work is needed to explore the reasons behind these very large inequalities in children's circumstances and patterns of intervention. It will be important to dig below these broad categories. As yet, we do not know whether children are having better childhoods in some communities than others or if services are failing to reach some groups.' (Bywaters, 2019)

Young people with special educational needs may not receive sex and relationship education, or not in a tailored form that allows them to understand issues of consent and personal safety. They are more likely to experience social isolation than their peers and over-protective attitudes of professionals that leave them unaccustomed to making their own judgements about risk and threat. All of this leaves them more vulnerable to grooming and exploitation (Franklin & Smeaton, 2017).

Exploring disproportionality in disability diagnosis provides an insight into intersectionality. There is disproportionality in diagnosis of different types of learning difficulty in girls and boys. Black children are more likely to be identified as having behavioural, emotional and social difficulties, whereas white children demonstrating similar behaviour are more likely to be identified as having moderate learning difficulties, signalling different interpretations based on ethnicity. The same study highlights disproportionality in the level and type of support offered, with white children more likely to have a statement (now an Education Health Care Plan) and to attend specialist education. However, the picture is clearly complex, as there are also differences in diagnosis based on gender and higher rates for young people on free school meals (Strand & Lindorff, 2021).

- 4) Use the [Child Welfare Inequalities App](#), developed by Dr Cal Webb at the University of Sheffield to explore:
 - a. the relationship between the ethnic makeup of neighbourhoods (LSOAs) and deprivation / access to public amenities
 - b. the ethnicity and disabilities of looked after children and children known to social care in your authority.

- 5) Examine gender differences in early years development and attainment on special educational needs support using the [Council for Disabilities 0-25 Multi-Agency Dashboard](#).

As well as interactions with the state, young people's exposure to and risk of involvement in exploitation is shaped by their local community and wider social and economic situation. Therefore public attitudes to young people from different ethnic groups and genders influence how far the community provides a protective structure around them. If young people experience racist abuse, sexual harassment and / or ostracism or abuse due to their disability when outside the family home, they may feel less safe and have a reduced sense of belonging, which in turn increases barriers to seeking help and reduces hope for future opportunities outside of criminality and exploitation (Coy, 2019; Smeaton, 2019).

Discriminatory attitudes against particular ethnic groups and / or gender normative attitudes are enacted in schools and peer groups through bullying, harassment or stigmas around seeking help , and, in a community context, through hate crime or expressions of negative feelings towards particular groups of young people (Firmin, 2020). As noted at the start of this piece, such attitudes are not restricted to any one community based on ethnicity or faith, but exist across different cultures and through the mainstream media and public discourse.

Data on such community issues might be held by Community Safety teams or the Community Safety Partnership, local police and victim support, or through local residents' surveys. Practitioners and community organisations working with members of minoritised groups will have qualitative insight into their experience of public spaces and which areas feel unsafe.

Which organisations or services might be able to provide data and intelligence about:

- > Incidences of hate crime and other discriminatory behaviour in schools and public spaces?
- > Young people's feelings of safety in the local area and the relationship to gender and ethnicity?

Interpreting data on equalities: cautions and caveats

Interpreting the patterns revealed through data analysis to ascertain what they tell us about a young person's experience in a local area is not a technical task, but one that requires reflection and discussion. The usual practice of reporting summary data in routine meetings without discussion or comment about what it means will not lead to new insights or understanding of disproportionality, but only serve to reinforce preconceptions and assumptions about young people's experiences and our responses to them. The data itself is not neutral, it reflects the biases in the system and wider society (Zimeta, 2021).

In using data to explore the characteristics of young people in contact with services, we need to be cautious about assuming that patterns in the data about exploitation services reflect patterns of exploitation actually occurring. There is a danger of a distorting feedback loop if we rely only on data produced as a result of supporting victims of exploitation. If we only see exploitation in particular circumstances or related to particular elements of an individual's identity, then these biases will be reproduced in our data. When we then use that data to understand patterns, we reinforce our assumptions about the nature of the problem, and who is vulnerable. The voices of children and young people and of practitioners and communities are necessary to differentiate organisational or professional blind spots from patterns of criminality.

Using data to explore disproportionality requires a position of professional curiosity, similar to that used by individual practitioners when trying to understand the dynamics within a family or peer group.

Practicing professional curiosity involves:

- > 'Asking questions that give and solicit information without being intrusive or making the [service user] feel threatened. These should be open-ended and allow for additional probing.' (Williams & Chisholm, as quoted in Penhale, Anka & Thacker, 2019)
- > 'Choosing to seek out additional information, exploring and considering alternative views, and asking questions about the causes and conditions.' (Serkaka et al., as quoted in Penhale et al., 2019)
- > Exercising an attitude of tolerance to unconventional thinking, an ability to adapt, to be sceptical.
- > A willingness to challenge institutional frameworks and procedures and to deconstruct stereotypes of service users (Penhale, Anka and Thacker, 2019).

Think about who is not in our data, or which characteristics are not visible

Learning disabilities and difficulties are often not recorded in our systems. And even when they are, some children and young people are more likely to be identified and diagnosed with a disability than others (Stalker & McArthur, 2012). Reporting practices can also vary substantially between local agencies across the country (Bywaters et al., 2016). This makes it particularly difficult to understand patterns of disability in young people using services, but does not mean that there are not young people with disabilities, just that we cannot see them. Similarly, many systems do not have the functionality to record trans or non-binary gender identities. And practitioners might find it challenging to address questions about gender identity or sexuality so make assumptions instead, meaning that these young people are similarly hidden.

Think about the analytic categories we use and how these might mask important patterns

The categories used in databases, analytic reports and research studies are often chosen for reasons of convenience of analysis and reporting, rather than as a reflection of the way people using services actually identify themselves (Shearer, 2020). This may be well intended - the numbers of people in a specific group may be very small, so the grouping is a way of maintaining anonymity. But this results in people with a range of backgrounds and experiences being grouped together in reporting, under 'umbrella' categories such as 'BAME' or

disabled, disguising the specific experiences of different ethnic groups or different types of disability (Bywaters et al., 2016; Franklin & Smeaton, 2017; Shearer, 2020).

The Office of National Statistics worked transparently in developing the tick boxes and terms used to describe ethnicity and gender identity in the 2021 census and their reporting illustrates the nuances and consideration needed when designing forms to record ethnicity (ONS, 2020). As a result of this work, the revised 2021 census will give local partnerships a much more up-to-date picture of the demographics, characteristics and living situations of young people in their community.

Think about intersectionality and how it is hidden by categorisation

Much of the data reported to decision-makers is one dimensional, reporting only on age, or ethnicity or gender. This obscures the effect of intersectional disadvantage, where particular patterns are seen for young people with a combination of gender, ethnicity, disability and poverty (Zimeta, 2021). A recent analysis of disproportionality in the identification and support for children with special educational needs highlights the more sophisticated analytical methods needed to unpick the inter-relationships between gender, ethnicity and poverty, and to consider them as factors influencing identification of need and receipt of support (Strand & Lindorff, 2021).

Resources for telling the story behind the data

Patterns in data can prompt lines of inquiry, but understanding how gender, ethnicity and disability relate to the power dynamics in a particular instance of exploitation, or within a specific local context, takes professional curiosity and investment in hearing the voices of children and young people.

What are young people's experiences of the police in your area?

[Read this Hackney Voice report](#) on young Black people's views of police in London. Think about how disproportionate responses might feed these attitudes and how this might in turn shape young people's likelihood to disclose exploitation or harm.

What next for TCE?

When we started a conversation on Twitter about equality, diversity and inclusion as priority themes for the Programme, we were met with two responses.

Firstly, a challenge from those with lived experiences of racism and discrimination who wanted to make sure we weren't presenting disproportionality as merely a question or a hypothesis, but as a well-evidenced fact. Secondly, silence from the wider group of stakeholders, who felt uncomfortable talking on a public platform about such sensitive issues.

The data and issues presented here aren't news. The disproportional experiences and responses to Black people in a range of public services has been widely discussed in the context of Black Lives Matters and the impact of Covid -19. And debates are often had about the ethnicity of groups involved in child sexual exploitation and the gendered responses to sexual violence and victimhood. Yet, to date, there has been limited discussion about equality or discrimination in the Bespoke Support Projects run by TCE. We want to understand why that is.

One barrier to having these kinds of conversations might be a difficulty in understanding how to explore disproportionality in data, or how to connect the patterns we see in exploitation services with disproportionality in the wider system. This piece has started to explore how this might be done, by drawing together the data from a wide range of contexts to see disproportionality in exploitation and extra-familial harm through a systemic lens.

We will continue to explore how we might support local areas to use data and other evidence to explore disproportionality with our Delivery Partners and with local areas, and update this piece with our reflections and findings.

But this might not be the only barrier. We know that having conversations about ethnicity, gender, disability and discrimination is difficult, especially when examining your own decision-making or that of your organisation. Tackling systemic discrimination can seem too hard, too big, or a distraction from the immediate risks of harm being faced by children and young people. The easiest route is often to leave these issues unexplored and unaddressed. But it is only through making systemic and structural changes that we will truly reduce the risk of and vulnerability to exploitation for all children and young people, and form part of a wider push for social justice and equality.

Through a series of guided conversations, we will reflect both as a team and with the wider partnership and community of local areas on why these conversations are so difficult, and how we create the safe spaces required to have these difficult but necessary dialogues.

A third barrier might be in the tools we are using to understand disproportionality, in both the data and the way that we use it to identify (or not) the differential impact of our decision-making on different groups. Data is not value-free. What we record and how we use it is an expression of power over those the data relates to.

There are ethical and relational dynamics in how we make data, and these will be explored in a subsequent article.

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