



Tackling Child Exploitation  
Support Programme

# Excluded or missing from education and child exploitation: literature review and stakeholder views on safeguarding practice – strategic briefing

## Introduction

This paper highlights strategic findings from research commissioned by the Tackling Child Exploitation (TCE) Support Programme and carried out by an independent researcher. This was an exploratory piece of research looking at school exclusion and child exploitation; how schools identify and respond to risks of exploitation and how education can be an effective safeguarding partner in child exploitation.

12 in-depth interviews were carried out with participants identified in either strategic roles or known to be examples of good practice. Stakeholders held varied roles in education, the police, third-sector organisations and academia. A rapid evidence review was carried out alongside the interviews, reviewing literature that focused both on school exclusion and child exploitation. Further research could be helpful to look at strategic solutions to the key issues identified.

## School exclusion and child exploitation

From 2014 to 2019, exclusion rates were rising, especially in secondary school. Children from certain groups have been disproportionately excluded. These include children from low-income households (eligible for free school meals), children with special educational needs (SEN) and children in need. Boys are more likely to be excluded than girls. Children from Black Caribbean backgrounds and those from Roma Gypsy Traveller groups are excluded at a disproportionately high rate.

There is a relationship between school exclusion and exploitation. Causality is less clear, but the relationship between the two is important. Permanent school exclusion can act as an escalation of risk on a pathway where risk is already evident. Attending school full time can be a protective factor. Preventing exclusion reduces the risks around child exploitation.

There are different ways in which children are excluded from school. There are official exclusions, unofficial exclusions and unlawful exclusions. The scale of unofficial and unlawful exclusions is unknown. The pathway to exclusion from school can begin years before formal school exclusion and can be a gradual process of a child being marginalised. Intervening early is seen as likely to be the most effective approach, alongside broadening the way schools approach inclusion.

There are children missing entirely from official statistics - in unregistered settings, out of placements or in certain home school environments. These children may not be effectively safeguarded until they come to the notice of a statutory agency (e.g. they are arrested). Ensuring safeguarding access to these children has long been campaigned for by some local authorities.

## Schools and exploitation

Mainstream secondary schools have variable awareness and knowledge around child exploitation. Their thinking is often seen as more developed in child sexual exploitation than in child criminal exploitation.

While schools may recognise the signs of possible child criminal involvement, they may be less able to identify exploitation, instead ascribing agency and choice to the child's involvement. It should be noted that signs of child sexual exploitation may be harder to identify.

Having spotted warning signs, schools may struggle to establish exactly what is happening – assessing the risks accurately is an area where practice is generally still in development. There are also different patterns between boys and girls, with persistent absenteeism more likely amongst girls. Having a flag for possible criminal involvement can risk schools then responding more strongly to later behaviour issues. For example, calling the police when child X is involved in a fight because of flags around criminal involvement but not calling the police when child Y is involved in a fight.

Data-sharing and intelligence could be strengthened to identify risk earlier. This is in both an individual and a place-based sense. Child exploitation rarely happens to one child alone. Schools can have vital intelligence on students of concern (e.g., in their safeguarding logs) as well as intelligence on local locations of risk. Local police could share intelligence that elevates schools' awareness of risk and ensures they prioritise awareness-raising with their student body. Police forces saw value in having access to schools' exclusion and absence data – helping them to concentrate their support of schools that are likely to have a bigger need.

Schools wanted to respond to the risk of criminal involvement with early help. Mentoring, diversionary activities and intensive support for those struggling with literacy were seen as most effective. However, finding the resource to meet these needs was a key challenge.

## Exploitation and safeguarding

Detecting and addressing exploitation risk depends on a schools' safeguarding approaches. Those with a whole-school approach and those that used contextual safeguarding were seen as most effective around exploitation. It also helped to have a strategically thinking, proactive model of safeguarding rather than being responsive. This depends in large part on the designated safeguarding lead (DSL). This is a role that has grown significantly in recent years and requires training, expertise, strategic thinking and time. DSLs in schools tend to be senior managers with other areas to cover in their portfolio. This suggests it could be useful for local authorities to do more in developing and supporting the DSL role, to help schools take a proactive and contextual safeguarding approach that is embedded across the whole school.

Being able to discuss a case informally, either with child social services or with a designated police officer, facilitated effective referral. It also helped when a school understood the social care system, structure and language, and could reflect this in discussions and referrals. There were examples where a senior social worker attended safeguarding discussion meetings in a school once a term to help address concerns and identify appropriate intervention.

There is a, 'gap in the middle' between logging early concerns and things having escalated enough to meet the threshold of referral to statutory safeguarding partnership. The gap in the middle is where resource is particularly needed.

## Exploitation and school exclusion

A low exclusion culture was seen as desirable. However, reducing exclusion was seen as requiring increased resource. Expecting a school to ‘hold’ a child in place when that child is unable to access what the school offers, and the school lacks the resource to effect change was described as unrealistic and unhelpful.

The behaviours demonstrated because of being at risk of exploitation may be the same behaviours that put a child at risk of school exclusion. In decisions around exclusions, safeguarding and behavioural policies can be seen at odds, with behavioural policies often prioritised. As well as requiring schools to consider mitigating circumstances, safeguarding considerations could be helpfully made a part of the decision-making framework for school exclusion.

Schools exclude children as a last resort, although there was thought to be significant variation in what ‘last resort’ means. Ensuring transparency and better consistency in exclusion decision-making was seen as desirable.

There is a ‘perverse’ financial incentive for schools in permanently excluding a child who needs intensive and costly support. It costs more for a school to have a pupil dual-registered in a setting like a pupil referral unit than it does to exclude them and have the local authority assume funding responsibility. This is a barrier to reducing exclusions.

A key issue is the lack of supervision following a suspension or a permanent exclusion. Schools are required to make provision for a child after five days of suspension, but not before. In permanent exclusion, participants were aware of cases where children wait for the appeal period to elapse, or are excluded towards the end of a term and wait until the next one before starting an alternative placement. This means children can be without supervision for weeks. This was a finding echoed in work by the Children’s Commissioner in 2017, in a review of school exclusions. Given the escalation of risk in exclusion, and the potential for exclusion to be a ‘reachable’ moment for a young person, ensuring a child is given supervision and a placement at the point of exclusion may reduce risks.

## Strategic partnerships and safeguarding in exploitation and exclusion

Five core issues were seen to influence the ability of schools to be an effective safeguarding partner, and to work effectively at a strategic level with the statutory safeguarding partnerships. These were:

- > Limitations in how well exploitation was recognised, especially in cases of criminal exploitation.
- > The fact that the current child protection system was designed for intra-familial not extra-familial harm.
- > The ‘unharnessing’ of schools from local authorities.
- > Schools’ role in statutory safeguarding.
- > The lack of resource around early help.

## **Limitations in how well exploitation was recognised, especially criminal exploitation**

Schools were described by participants as having more awareness of child sexual exploitation than child criminal exploitation. Compounded by the emphasis on young people having agency that underpins much behaviour management in schools, this meant that criminal involvement was more likely to be seen as a choice, with consideration of whether a young person was being coerced or manipulated less front of mind. As highlighted in this report, the behaviours associated with child criminal exploitation, such as carrying a weapon or drugs, can result in immediate permanent exclusion from school. The exclusion can then act as a ‘tipping point’, accelerating risk.

Later identification of child criminal exploitation is particularly problematic for effectively helping a child. Entrenchment ‘can happen fast’, and when criminal exploitation is entrenched it can be particularly difficult for services to effectively help or extricate a child from it (Child Safeguarding Practice Review, 2020).

## **Current child protections system designed for intra-familial not extra-familial harm**

The child protection system in England was not set up to address extra-familial harm (Chard, 2015; Violence & Vulnerability Unit, 2018). It focuses on the private spaces of family life rather than the public spaces where adolescent risks can ‘percolate’ (Firmin, 2019). As a result, there are key gaps in effectively responding to the harm that happens outside of families, which includes child exploitation.

## The unharnessing of schools from local authorities

From 2010, the government in England embarked on a policy of academisation of schools, which in effect removes those that become academies from local authority oversight. By 2019, nearly three-quarters of secondary schools were academies (West & Wolfe, 2019). Reflecting national debate, some interview participants felt there was benefit in the academy system because Trusts could act more effectively and efficiently in functions previously run by local authorities. Others, however, felt that much had been lost in terms of the relationship between local authorities and academies. Local authorities were described as having responsibility but little leverage in engaging schools on a range of strategic issues including school exclusions and inclusion policies and practices.

## Schools' role in statutory safeguarding

Schools are not one of the designated statutory safeguarding partners (health, the police and the local authority are the statutory triumvirate). In his review of the new safeguarding arrangements, Wood (2021) argued that this was appropriate. The number of schools covered by multi-agency safeguarding partnerships in local areas ranges from 50-500 (Wood, 2021). There is, in his view, no, 'command and control lever' which makes seeking 'collective or consensual views from headteachers difficult'. As a result, a sole representative from one school cannot speak with authority for all schools or hold all schools to account. He also argues that the lack of strategic role for schools is consistent with their safeguarding responsibilities.

There was disagreement from some participants who saw the lack of statutory safeguarding role for schools as a 'massive, missed opportunity'. Requiring schools to have strategic involvement could have a significant impact on their role in the system, moving them from being reactive partners who refer into the safeguarding system toward being proactive contributors to a whole-system approach.

Because of its fragmentation and not being geared to meet extra-familial risk, as well as the lack of recognition of exploitation, the current system was described as needing a, 'headteacher to put their hand up and say "I've got exploitation happening in my school"'. This was described as requiring bravery, implying a reputational risk is involved.

## Schools' attendance at statutory safeguarding meetings

Participants thought that the current system can mean that some schools do not attend safeguarding meetings discussing a child they have raised concerns about. This was unhelpful as they will sometimes be the only agency in the room to have spent time with the child. Schools' attendance in safeguarding meetings will depend on the school as well as on the MASH's (or equivalent body's) approach.

Engagement was also seen as an issue. Sometimes schools might attend but not necessarily actively participate in meetings. This may be in part because they are not a partner with statutory responsibility. Finding a 'hook' or benefit for schools to attend was suggested as crucial. Leaders in schools were described as time-poor and necessarily selective about what meetings they attend beyond their school. Schools will tend to go along to meetings where they feel likely their school will benefit, either in the outcome for a particular child or in resources for a child or children more widely.

In the most serious exploitation safeguarding cases, a participant pointed out that there is often not a school (or alternative provision) to include in discussions. A different participant felt that previous schools may still have a key information-giving role to play here. They will have rich information about a child that may help safeguarding practitioners, even though the child is no longer at their school.

Ensuring consistency across different schools and areas was seen as important, even if schools are to be seen as having a responsive and non-strategic role. Currently, there is significant variability. A participant argued for national guidance that compels schools to attend safeguarding meetings to which they are invited.

## The lack of resource around early help

Children who are excluded from school are more likely to be from low-income families, have special educational needs or be children in need. Children who are exploited are often those who have heightened vulnerabilities. Addressing children's needs earlier was seen as the most effective solution to avoiding both exploitation and reducing school exclusion.

Early help and intervention have been stripped out over the last decade, as budgets across services have experienced cuts. Youth work in particular has been affected. Participants pointed to waiting lists of up to a year for 'crisis' intervention in CAMHS as indicative of strain in the system. Without the support that early help can provide, services and systems downstream are overwhelmed by more acute service needs.

While more resources for early intervention were seen as necessary to reverse the upward trend in exclusion, participants felt better use could be made of existing services, especially those in the third sector. Participants described how helpful it would be for schools to have a directory of local services. Another idea was that schools could pool resources to have better access to provision like counsellors, educational psychologists or mentoring services across a geographical area. Local authorities could play a key role in coordinating this which may act as a helpful 'lever' to engaging schools.

In turn, schools need to 'open up' to working with other organisations. A third-sector participant reported that schools can be 'like fortresses', which can make for a 'tense relationship'. To facilitate a more outward-facing approach, it would help if schools could be designated as community hubs that facilitate and coordinate additional support.

Facilitators of more effective safeguarding for children at risk of exploitation were to:

- > Find effective ways to share intelligence proactively across organisations, and work effectively across systems to address gaps.
- > Reduce exclusions by working with schools to support inclusion and early identification, and supporting problems by having a trauma-informed approach to challenging behaviour across secondary school staff.
- > Ensure exclusion decision-making is transparent, consistent (especially around the interpretation of 'last resort') and takes safeguarding risks into consideration.
- > Have accountability in the school exclusions system in what happens to a child from the moment of exclusion up to placement in alternative provision or at a different school.
- > Ensure consistent quality in alternative provision. While some alternative provision settings are excellent, others are not and educational outcomes from alternative provision can be poor.

## References and further reading

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