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## Tackling Child Exploitation Support Programme

# Child Exploitation: Definition and language



Department  
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## 1. Introduction

This paper will explore the ways in which the term ‘child exploitation’ is defined and communicated, with the aim of identifying the implications of current language and definitions for strategic leaders working in the field of child exploitation and safeguarding. This is a complex and fluid issue, and it is important to recognise from the outset that experiences will vary.

The paper focuses on child exploitation as it has been defined in England, in accordance with the remit of the [Tackling Child Exploitation \(TCE\) Support Programme](#). The history and development of child exploitation has varied in the different countries of the UK, though there are now more similarities than differences in legal definitions and in the language of policy and official guidance<sup>1 2</sup>.

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1. For information on the legal definitions of child exploitation in Scotland, see: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/child-sexual-exploitation-definition-practitioner-briefing-paper>  
In Wales, see: <https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2019-04/safeguarding-children-and-young-people-from-sexual-exploitation.pdf>  
In Northern Ireland, see: <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/child-sexual-exploitation-cse-definition-and-guidance>
  2. For information on policy approaches to child criminal exploitation in Scotland see: <https://hub.careinspectorate.com/media/4577/national-guidance-for-child-protection-in-scotland-2021.pdf>  
In Wales, see: <https://www.safeguarding.wales/chi/c6/c6.p1.html>  
In Northern Ireland, see: <https://www.niccy.org/publications/2021/july/30/advice-to-government-child-criminal-exploitation-safeguarding-children-and-young-people-from-abuse-and-exploitation/>

## 2. Background

Initial scoping of the evidence at the outset of the Programme (2019) identified questions of language and definition as being important. It was noted that research identifies significant definitional issues regarding each of the different types of exploitation, their relationship to one another and to other forms of exploitation and abuse. Definitional boundaries are blurred, permeable and contested.

These issues have continued to emerge as significant during the delivery of the Programme. At the same time, it has also become clear that the use of child exploitation as an umbrella term (National Crime Agency, 2018; 2021) for different forms of exploitation and extra-familial harm has significant implications for how decisions are made to design and develop services. This is complex, even in the relationship between child exploitation and extra familial harm: child exploitation can include extra-familial harm, but can also take place within the family. Equally, extra-familial harm can include child exploitation but also other forms of harm that occur outside the family home.

As the concept of ‘child exploitation’ has sought to identify parallels between sexual exploitation, criminal exploitation, trafficking and modern slavery, it has been questioned whether services can and should become more integrated in their response.<sup>3</sup> This can be seen as a logical development of the partnership approach, long considered as necessary in addressing different forms of child exploitation, which also recognises the often overlapping and multiple needs of children and young people who are exploited or identified as being at risk of exploitation. However, it can make it more difficult to discern areas of difference and similarity *between* and *within* different forms of exploitation, and the nature of the causal connections between them. New approaches to responding to exploitation and extra-familial harm are also emerging, and these are also accompanied by new terminology, including Contextual Safeguarding (Firmin, 2020), complex safeguarding (Tregidga & Lovett, 2021), transitional safeguarding (Cocker et al., 2021), the social model (Featherstone et al., 2018; 2020), and extra familial harm (Wroe & Lloyd, 2020). It is therefore important to engage with questions regarding the ‘utility and application’ of current terminology relating to child exploitation (Beckett & Walker, 2018; Holmes, forthcoming).

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3. For further discussion on ‘horizontal’ and ‘vertical’ integration of services, see: <https://tce.researchinpractice.org.uk/join-the-conversation-on-tackling-child-exploitation-2/>

### 3. What methods have been used to produce this briefing?

There are many questions that could be asked regarding the language of child exploitation and the ways in which this has been interpreted. For the purposes of this briefing, the following questions were identified and underpinned the research for the review:

- > How are different forms of child exploitation defined in legislation and policy?
- > How have these different definitions evolved over time and in different professional domains, and what is the significance of this for current policy and practice?
- > What are the implications of current language and definitions for children and young people who have been exploited or are identified as being at heightened risk of exploitation?
- > What evidence exists regarding the views of children and young people, parents and carers regarding current definitions / language relating to child exploitation?
- > What evidence exists regarding the views of strategic leaders and frontline professionals regarding current definitions / language relating to child exploitation?
- > What are the implications of changing language and definition for strategic leaders developing local policy and services relating to child exploitation?

The underpinning questions, therefore, emphasise the need to consider not only the technical definition, but also evidence about how this is operationalised at different levels of policy and practice, and the implications for children, young people and their families and carers.

This briefing is based on a scoping review of the literature (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005). A useful approach when there is a need for timely appraisal of said available literature, but which lacks capacity for a more systematic reviewing process. Searching has been undertaken via academic search engines and grey literature sources. There is an absence of studies that address the question of language and definition specifically and directly. Information on these issues tends to be nested within other work and, therefore, a wide-ranging and flexible approach to searching has been necessary. A higher level of reference harvesting and hand searching has been required than would normally be expected within a literature review.

## 4. Talking and writing about exploitation

This paper addresses questions of language and definition relating to child exploitation. It is important to recognise that the language relating to child exploitation is located in many different places. It is found in written law and policy and in the documents produced by different services and organisations. In addition to these written texts, the language and definitions associated with child exploitation are interpreted and expressed during encounters between those who have been exploited and abused, their peers, parents and carers, and a range of professionals. The issue is also talked about in media – film and television drama, newspapers and online blogs – and through everyday conversations, both on and offline.

The ways in which individuals and organisations describe and discuss different forms of exploitation are influenced by a range of factors, including their personal biographies and – with a degree of circularity – the wider social, cultural and political context. This may be described as the ‘narrative’ or ‘framing’ or ‘discourse’ relating to child exploitation (Woodiwiss, 2017; Parton, 2014). The act of talking or writing about child exploitation will contribute to this wider discursive context. Crucially, some of the thinking that infuses the talking and writing will also become embedded in institutional structures through formal documentation, including policy guidance, risk assessments and other materials, as well as the formal and informal interaction that takes place between individual professionals (Wroe, 2021). This has real implications. As Tregidga and Lovett (2021, p. 3) note in their work on complex safeguarding: *‘Definitions matter because they determine which cases are referred to and taken on by complex safeguarding teams, and because any misunderstanding or misapplication of terms might mean that child sexual abuse in certain contexts is obscured or overlooked.’*

How we ‘come to tell these stories’ (Woodiwiss, 2017) about child abuse and exploitation is also influenced by the way in which thinking about these issues has developed over time (Melrose, 2013). Different forms of harm and abuse achieve prominence at different times and places, and are accompanied by different ‘stories’ or ‘discourses’. The history of safeguarding demonstrates that different definitions can reflect both new knowledge about different types of harm, and the shaping and reshaping of societal concerns. There will also be absences or silences about different aspects of that abuse, which may be framed as forms of denial (Cohen, 2001). The naming of child abuse and exploitation of different kinds, and the associations made with these, are, therefore, political issues that reflect powerful social norms and generate strong emotional reactions (Parton, 2014).

Within this history the experience of adolescents has been construed more in the language of problem and trouble than need and protection (Pearson, 1983; Pearce, 2009). Adolescence has tended to be viewed as a ‘dangerous’ age, and this has often been linked to sexual development and behaviour. The construction of this is highly gendered, reflecting a sexual double standard where girls and young women are viewed as morally corrupt. This strand of thinking has persisted to a considerable degree (Sharpe & Gelsthorpe, 2009). Race and ethnicity are also important.

Paradoxically, the intersections between race, ethnicity, culture and other indicators of deprivation can mean that Black young people are both at heightened risk of different forms of exploitation and less likely to be identified as exploited (Barnard, 2019). Further to this, policing interventions focused on criminal exploitation, which have often been associated with gang involvement, *'disproportionately target and criminalise young Black boys and young men with significant implications for their experiences of criminal justice interventions (for example Joint Enterprise), safety, access to employment and support.'* (Wroe, 2019, p. 7)

In addressing exploitation, services have been forced to consider the relationship between safeguarding and child development, specifically the way in which, as children age into adolescence, the risk of exploitation and abuse increasingly relates to spaces, individuals and groups outside the familial home. A key question within this has been the degree to which individual young people are viewed as legitimate victims of crime, and how far they should be viewed as 'responsible' for their actions.

The 'ideal victim' in its original formulation was referred to as, *'a person or a category of individuals who – when hit by crime – most readily are given the complete and legitimate status of being a victim. The ideal victim is... a sort of public status of the same type and level of abstraction as that for example of a "hero" or a "traitor".'* (Christie, 1983).

It follows, then, that when a 'new' social problem is identified, there is a strong emphasis on demonstrating the nature and degree of victimisation that is part of the problem, *'that it is widespread and serious yet remains hidden, so extraordinary measures are needed to identify it.'* (Best, 2021, p. 51).

Within this social process, researchers play a key role in garnering evidence to support the existence of the problem, and the associated need for resources. Melrose (2013, p. 159) argues, therefore, that in the early 21st century, use of the term 'abuse through prostitution' helped generate public interest while *'signalling that although this was a form of child abuse, it was not 'child abuse' as it had traditionally been conceived'*. Since then, the discussion has shifted again, with the term 'child sexual exploitation' becoming dominant. In turn, discussion now centres on the extent to which the current definition of 'child sexual exploitation' is helpful and how far it may obscure the relationship between different forms of abuse in the lives of children and young people (Beckett & Pearce, 2017).

Other forms of harm, now described as child criminal exploitation and 'county lines', modern slavery and trafficking, have also been brought under the aegis of this discussion. Again, commentators have noted that these issues are not necessarily 'new' and that the *'picture is more complex than the prevailing narrative might suggest'* (Wroe, 2021, p. 40).

This is not, of course, to dispute the extensive evidence that exists regarding the very real impact of abuse and victimisation. Nor should these debates be taken to mean that different forms of child exploitation do not exist. What it does do, however, is highlight the need for ongoing critique of the narrative that surrounds exploitation, and the language used within this.

## 5. How is ‘child exploitation’ defined in law and policy?

The concept of ‘child exploitation’ has changed over time, but children have always been exploited (Brown & Barrett, 2022). The exploitation and abuse of children continue to take place throughout the world, taking many different forms<sup>4</sup>. During the 21st century, different forms of child exploitation have been identified and defined or redefined.

While the language attached to this has changed, it is worth remembering that the ways in which such abuse has been understood and conceptualised continues to exercise an influence on contemporary culture<sup>5</sup>. This holds true even while the legislative and policy frameworks have changed in response to shifting attitudes regarding the protection of children and the extent to which state intervention in family life has been perceived as legitimate (Fox-Harding, 1995; Hendricks, 2015). These lingering attitudes include the sexual ‘double standard’ by which young females have been censured for having sex (whether consensual or abusive), often linked to concerns about immorality, social purity and the behaviour of the working classes. Similarly, the idea of the ‘delinquent’ child or youth has remained persistent.

This relates to the question of *who* defines child exploitation? International organisations such as the UN, national governments, media, NGOs and individuals all have an interest in defining exploitation, and do so in different ways. The relationship between definitions at an international and domestic level will also vary, sometimes with significant implications for the ways in which victims of abuse are labelled and identified (Bradley & Cockbain, 2014).

Turning to different forms of exploitation, there are three main types which have some formal definition, even if not defined in law:

- > child sexual exploitation (CSE)
- > child criminal exploitation (CCE)
- > child trafficking and modern slavery.

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4. See, for example, Moynihan et al. [\*Child Abuse & Neglect\*](#).

5. Guidance relating to child sexual exploitation in Scotland continued to include the term ‘moral crime’ until 2014 (see Brodie & Pearce, 2012). More generally, there is an extensive body of anecdotal evidence attesting to the use of language that places blame on young people.

The trajectories through which each of these categories has developed are distinctive, and will be discussed in turn below.

## 1. Child sexual exploitation

The actual term ‘child sexual exploitation’ emerged in response to concerns being expressed by children’s charities in the 1980s and 1990s regarding use of the term ‘child prostitute’ in respect to children who were being sexually abused and exploited (Melrose et al., 1999). Guidance from the Department of Health (2000) stated that children *‘involved in prostitution should be treated primarily as the victims of abuse’* but retained the view that there could be a criminal justice response. New government guidance in 2009 established the language of child sexual exploitation and advised local safeguarding boards on an appropriate response (DCSF, 2009).

This guidance was replaced in 2017. Child sexual exploitation is currently defined as follows:

*‘Child sexual exploitation is a form of child sexual abuse. It occurs where an individual or group takes advantage of an imbalance of power to coerce, manipulate or deceive a child or young person under the age of 18 into sexual activity (a) in exchange for something the victim needs or wants, and/or (b) the financial advantage or increased status of the perpetrator or facilitator. The victim may have been sexually exploited even if the sexual activity appears consensual. Child sexual exploitation does not always involve physical contact; it can also occur through the use of technology.’ (Department for Education, 2017)<sup>6</sup>*

The 2009 guidance had been criticised as having become strongly aligned with a single model of exploitation, namely the ‘pimping’ or ‘grooming’ model (Melrose, 2013; Coy, 2016). In the period between 2009 and 2017, however, the evidence base had also developed to take account of a range of ways in which exploitation could take place (Beckett et al., 2014; Franklin & Smeaton, 2017; Hackett & Smith, 2018). A key shift in the 2017 definition was the clear statement that child sexual exploitation is a form of child abuse, but this statement in itself is not necessarily helpful in understanding the similarities and differences between CSE and other forms of sexual abuse.

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6. Please note, further guidance on the definition of child sexual exploitation can be found in Beckett et al. [Child sexual exploitation: definition & guide for professionals](#). See also, Department for Education (2018) [Working Together to Safeguard Children](#) and Home Office (2020) [Group-based Child Sexual Exploitation: Characteristics of Offenders](#).



Beckett and Walker (2018) argue that both CSE and other forms of child sexual abuse can vary according to a host of factors, including who is perpetrating the abuse, the nature of the power imbalance at play, where and for how long the abuse occurs, the type of sexual activity involved and the degree of threat utilised, and whether there are single or multiple victims of perpetrators. They conclude that changes to government guidance notwithstanding *‘the challenges of where CSE ends and other forms of CSA start... is still one that causes difficulties for both data capture and practice responses.’* (p. 13)

However, other elements of the language remained, including the emphasis on exchange as a defining feature of this form of abuse. Again, it is not clear if this is a helpful means of delineation of child sexual exploitation as a form of abuse. A further difficulty lies in the terminology contained in the Serious Crime Act (SCA) 2015, which replaced references to ‘child prostitution’ and ‘child pornography’ with ‘child sexual exploitation’. However, this legislation did not amend the meanings attached to the language – and states that a person (i.e., B - see below) is sexually exploited if:

- > On at least one occasion and whether or not compelled to do so, B offers or provides sexual services to another person in return for payment or a promise of payment to B or a third person; or
- > An indecent image of B is recorded.

In other words, within this legislation the behaviour described as ‘sexual exploitation’ is exactly the same as was described as child prostitution and pornography, with no reference to exchange. Beckett and Walker (2018) argue that this represents a ‘clear mismatch’ between the policy and legislative definitions.

## 2. Child criminal exploitation

There is no legal definition of child criminal exploitation, but it is defined in HM Government’s Serious Violence Strategy (2018) as:

*‘...where an individual or group takes advantage of an imbalance of power to coerce, control, manipulate or deceive a child or young person under the age of 18 into any criminal activity (a) in exchange for something the victim needs or wants, and/or (b) for the financial or other advantage of the perpetrator or facilitator and/or (c) through violence or the threat of violence. The victim may have been criminally exploited even if the activity appears consensual. Child Criminal Exploitation does not always involve physical contact; it can also occur through the use of technology.’*

This definition is widely accepted across government (DfE, 2020). It is immediately evident that this is almost a precise replication of the definition of child sexual exploitation, with the ‘sexual’ exchanged for the ‘criminal’. The term ‘county lines’ is often used alongside or interchangeably with criminal exploitation (National Crime Agency, 2018; 2021), though there are forms of criminal exploitation which fall outside county lines. There are long-standing links between children and young people’s involvement in gangs and drug misuse, though this has come to attention more recently in the UK literature than in the United States.

The Home Office (2018) defines county lines as *‘a term used to describe gangs and organised criminal networks involved in exporting illegal drugs into one or more importing areas [within the UK], using dedicated mobile phone lines or other form of ‘deal line’. They are likely to exploit children and vulnerable adults to move [and store] the drugs and money and they will often use coercion, intimidation, violence (including sexual violence) and weapons.’*

County lines therefore involves a geographical shift, specifically the migration of gangs from their home area into a new geographical setting, where they can establish a new physical and organisational base, and expand their business interests (Harding, 2020; Maxwell et al., 2019). The phenomenon of expanding drug markets to provincial and rural areas is not in itself new; it has been described as the ‘latest term’ adopted by the police and government agencies to describe trends and practices in contemporary drug dealing (Robinson, et al., 2020). However, it has been argued that supply mechanisms and markets have changed over recent years, facilitated by changes in technology, including the use of social media in the ordering, supplying and distribution of illegal drugs, as well as by wider social factors, including policies of austerity (Andell & Pitts, 2018; Windle et al., 2020). Maxwell et al. (2019) suggest, therefore, that the precise term is less important than the fact that *‘the boundary between street gangs, organised crime networks, drug retailers, wholesalers have become blurred and embedded,’* in part facilitated by the responses of the criminal justice system to the issue, including the concentration of gang-involved young people from different regions in the same prisons and Young Offender Institutions and the relocation of gang members to different parts of the country (Andell & Pitts, 2018).

The origins of the language of child criminal exploitation can be traced both to UK definitions of child sexual exploitation, where there is clear overlap, and wider, international law and policy. Villacampa and Torres (2019) note, in the context of international human trafficking, that trafficking for ‘criminal exploitation’ was, until recently, given little attention, owing to the absence of this form of trafficking in international protocols. The concept of child criminal exploitation has evolved in a criminal justice context, but reflects the paradigm shift discussed above in relation to child sexual exploitation, in seeking to ‘reframe’ young people’s behaviour as requiring a welfare or safeguarding response rather than one which criminalises.

### 3. Child trafficking and modern slavery

Modern slavery is defined as the recruitment, movement, harbouring or receiving of children, women or men through the use of force, coercion, abuse of vulnerability, deception or other means for the purpose of exploitation (Modern Slavery Act 2015):

*'Child victim of modern slavery: Modern slavery includes human trafficking, slavery, servitude and forced or compulsory labour for the purpose of exploitation. The Modern Slavery Act 2015 (section 56(3)) defines a child as anyone under the age of 18. For the purposes of the National Referral Mechanism (NRM) the UK recognises that slavery, servitude and forced or compulsory labour have the same meaning as they do under Article 4 of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR). Trafficking is defined within Article 4 of the Council of Europe Convention Against Trafficking in Human Beings.<sup>20</sup> However, for the purposes of trafficking, in the case of a child there is no requirement to meet the 'means' component within that definition as a child is not able to give informed consent. Therefore, any child who is recruited, transported, transferred, harboured or received for the purposes of exploitation is considered to be a trafficking victim, whether or not they have been forced or deceived'. (Home Office, 2021)*

Until the introduction of the Modern Slavery Act, the terminology of 'human trafficking', 'forced labour' and 'contemporary slavery' dominated UK law and policy. As Hynes (2021) explains, these terms were also subject to critique and for different reasons considered unsatisfactory. These included the elasticity of the term and that the language of trafficking, as applied to children, did not describe the risks to which they have been exposed or their need for protection (O'Connell-Davidson, 2011). The association of trafficking with young people entering the UK from other countries could also mask the extent to which UK victims of CSE and other criminal activity were being moved around the country but were not viewed as legitimate victims of trafficking (Bailey & Cockbain, 2014).

The introduction of the Modern Slavery Act and the application of the language of modern slavery is therefore significant, though it has not erased these issues. As with other forms of exploitation, it has been successful in placing the issue *'firmly on the British political agenda, providing important leverage for campaigners in the years to come'* (Craig, 2015, p. 11). At the same time, the definition is complex and has also been linked to a wide range of situations and legal definitions affecting 'children on the move'.

However, it has been argued that children continue to be marginalised within anti-slavery policies, as child trafficking has been framed primarily as a criminal justice and immigration issue (Gearon, 2019). Concerns often surround the identification of children who have been trafficked, with young people's narratives often subject to suspicion, and involve a preoccupation with age assessment and immigration status (Pearce, 2011). There is ongoing confusion about children's referrals to the National Referral Mechanism (NRM). While children constitute almost half of all those referred to the NRM, and criminal exploitation represents more than half of these claims, it is not clear whether children have to disclose exploitation in order to be referred (Lundy et al., 2020). The term 'modern slavery' has also been criticised as drawing on imperialist language to describe a wide range of practices that may not, in fact, reach legal standards for 'slavery', even while they might well be unacceptable in their own right (Dottridge, 2018).

## 6. What are the common threads in language and definition of different forms of child exploitation?

There are clearly many shared elements across different forms of child exploitation, not least the violence, coercion and threats that may be key to exploitation taking place. However, there are also important differences: child sexual exploitation does not equate to child criminal exploitation, or the trafficking and modern slavery that may comprise it, or a separate phenomenon.

As the above discussion illustrates, there has been overlap in the language and behaviours described in relation to different forms of exploitation and this has been reinforced in different policy guidance and debate in the field of safeguarding policy and practice. To some extent, this has been a constant in the development of policy and practice. Since publication of the 2009 guidance on child sexual exploitation, there has been a recognition of the cross-cutting nature of CSE and the need for engagement with, for example, policy and practice relating to missing children, gangs and serious youth violence, and domestic violence (Beckett & Warrington, 2014). This has been replicated in relation to child criminal exploitation, drug misuse, knife crime and [other forms of youth violence](#), trafficking and [modern slavery](#).

Greer et al. (2016, p. 11) note the significance of wider safeguarding guidance (specifically Working Together to Safeguard Children, 2013, published in the wake of the 2011 riots), locating different forms of child exploitation within a common framework and that, *‘the response to gang crime and the emergent phenomenon of county lines should focus on support around vulnerability and exploitation, rather than drug arrests, was a further driver of multi-agency work and information sharing.’* They argue that this approach was subsequently endorsed by the Modern Slavery Act of 2015, with its focus on forced labour, child exploitation and debt bondage, all of which had been identified with the operation of county lines by the National Crime Agency. Certainly, the overlap between different forms of exploitation, and identification of very similar characteristics as representing an effective response, has been an ongoing theme in policy related comment (Pepin, 2018).

This also suggests that there has been a need to identify a common language through which professionals from different backgrounds and experience could communicate, a common ground that would help promote partnership working and would operate in the interests of children and young people. A recognition of some of these parallels is evident in the accounts of professionals (Mills & Unwin, 2020). Others view the emergence of child criminal exploitation as part of a more linear progression, that policy attention has moved from child sexual exploitation to child criminal exploitation, and that lessons can be learned through this process (Children’s Commissioner for England, 2019), specifically in terms of treating children as victims. Inevitably, perhaps, professionals will also draw on their existing vocabularies regarding one form of exploitation – usually CSE – to describe other forms of exploitation.

The current definitions of different forms of exploitation, and the associated concepts and meanings, seem to present a number of shared issues, summarised below:

- > Within each definition, there are many other, contested, concepts. Therefore, the language that is being used to describe any one form of child exploitation is likely to contain language which is debated. Examples of this would include ‘organised crime’ in relation to child criminal exploitation (Robinson et al., 2019), ‘slavery’ in relation to modern slavery (Dottridge, 2019) and trafficking, and ‘exchange’ in relation to child sexual exploitation (Beckett & Walker, 2018).
- > The current definitions of child exploitation exist to enable identification of exploitation. However, this often takes place in association with a focus on risk assessment, with an accompanying language of risk and vulnerability, resulting in highly individualised responses to the exploitation (Robinson et al., 2019).
- > There has been an emphasis on children and young people as individual, often helpless ‘victims’ of exploitation. This fails to take account of the active role of young people in making rational choices, albeit within highly constrained circumstances, in relation to their exploitation (Beckett & Pearce, forthcoming).
- > There has been an absence of attention to the multiple and interconnected structural factors that young people and professionals agree are key to understanding the conditions in which exploitation is more likely to take place (Melrose, 2010).
- > There is a strong body of evidence highlighting the range of needs which young people who are exploited and identified as being at heightened risk of other harm tend to have (Beckett et al., 2013; Greer et al., 2019).

Meanwhile, new approaches to exploitation and abuse aim to reframe the issues. These emphasise the need for an understanding of the interconnected conditions for exploitation and extra-familial abuse, and that the exploitation of vulnerability depends on a source of harm, whether that is an individual or the dangers associated with a particular environment, on or offline (Firmin & Lloyd, 2020). It has been emphasised that understanding the principles and theoretical bases of different approaches are more important than the application of prescriptive models, with a focus on the assessment of the young person’s individual needs and the appropriate help for them. Further, the focus of attention should not only be those individual needs, but also patterns of need across groups of young people, assessment of the places and spaces where harm occurs, and intervention that reduces that harm.

## 7. What are the implications of current language and definitions for children and young people who have been exploited or are identified as being at heightened risk of exploitation?

There is limited evidence regarding young people's perceptions of current language and definitions. The official 'labels' attached to different forms of child exploitation may or may not be recognisable or familiar to children and young people.

Young people have their own lexicons in terms of how they describe sex and sexual violence, drug misuse and gangs (Beckett et al., 2013; Harding, 2020). In turn this can be repurposed by professionals, as has happened with the language of criminal exploitation, gangs and county lines which '*has become embedded in the bureaucracies of criminal justice, most notably in the maintenance of databases comprising suspected gang members... and in efforts to codify gang-affiliation into law*' (Greer et al., 2019, p. 19). Adult stakeholders may, therefore, have considerable investment (albeit borne from good intention) to own and apply a particular terminology of exploitation, even if it is not recognised or accepted by the young people with whom they are working. While the term 'going county' may have emerged from the street (Harding, 2020), it can also be argued that other elements of street vernacular can be misunderstood by professionals, sometimes with serious consequences for young people, as exemplified in some of the debates regarding drill music videos (Ilan, 2020; Mills & Unwin, 2020). There are also local and regional variations (Ilan, 2020; Orr, 2021), which mean that terms related to exploitation cannot be assumed to have a shared definition.

There is also some evidence that children and young people are uneasy with or even reject the term 'exploitation' as something that applies to them. A consistent finding over time is that young people do not see themselves as having been exploited, and are not willing to engage with professionals on these terms. This message applies to both child sexual exploitation (Warrington, 2013) and child criminal exploitation (Robinson, et al., 2019). Discussions of this with professionals can elicit frustration, in that the failure to accept the label of 'victim' of exploitation can make it more difficult to justify intervention.

There may be different reasons for any young person's reluctance to accept the victim label in the wider context of their lives and that their actions represent a reasonable response to their circumstances. Hallett's (2017, p. 2146) research with young people found that the 'narrow and misdirected' focus on their exploitation, and their associated need for protection, meant that the (usually many) professionals engaged in these cases failed to understand the meaning of exploitation within their lives. Contrary to the public discourse where exploitation is presented as irredeemably bad, these young people felt that it could represent '*a solution of sorts*', and '*a form of recognition and help, in a context where they felt invisible and with few options.*' (p. 2148)

For some young people, the language of ‘abuse’ and ‘exploitation’ also disguises the very real violence to which they have been subjected, and would prefer language that does not hide this (Jackson, 2017). Others have argued that a focus on ‘child sexual exploitation’ and ‘child criminal exploitation’ avoids discussion of the wider societal issues that they feel are central to understanding their experience. In a recent piece of TCE work, young people said that they would prefer the term ‘exploitation’ not to be used at all (TCE Children and Young People’s Voice Priority, 2021), arguing that it is a term imposed by adults which is meaningless to young people.

The implications of new definitions are hard to measure in any definitive way. It has drawn attention to the relationship between adolescent development and different forms of harm, family life and the wider contexts of the school and community. It has provided new tools for thinking about ‘exploitation’, and has enabled the identification of some individuals who might otherwise have had their experiences ignored.

This must be balanced, of course, with the potential of any one definition of exploitation to miss others who have also been abused in very similar ways but who do not fall within the definition as it is interpreted by professionals and do not meet thresholds for services (Beckett & Lloyd, forthcoming). The introduction of these new definitions has not, for example, increased the accessibility of safeguarding services for children and young people from Black and minority ethnic groups (Ali et al., 2021) or reduced the racial profiling of young people in gangs matrices (Amnesty International, 2020). Responses to enslaved and trafficked young people are highly politicised. To this extent, wider social discourses appear to run counter to attempts to ‘redefine’ child exploitation and place children and young people, and their families, at the centre of support and intervention.



## 8. What evidence exists on the views of strategic leaders and frontline professionals regarding current definitions / language relating to child exploitation?

Overall, there is a lack of a specific evidence base regarding the ways in which professionals working in different contexts understand and operationalise current definitions. Also, while it is proposed here that these definitions contextualise and to this extent inform decision-making, there will be other factors that are significant, including the background and history of local safeguarding strategy and service structures, and wider social, political and economic imperatives. Language is only part of the story.

There is some consensus amongst researchers that the definition of CSE often results in confusion amongst those making operational decisions, which in turn results in difficulties in identification and assessment of the scale and prevalence of the issue (Karsna & Kelly, 2021; Becket & Walker, 2017). Arguably, this confusion has increased with the move away from the ‘pimping and grooming’ model on which the idea of CSE was originally based (Melrose, 2013) to embrace recognition of a range of routes through which young people may be exploited, online and offline (Home Office, 2020). Very similar issues would seem to apply to child criminal exploitation, trafficking and modern slavery (Craig, 2017). All forms of exploitation, as with other forms of child abuse, also continue to be under-reported, with a skew in known cases towards white females, and a concomitant lack of reporting from males, young people from Black and minority ethnic backgrounds, and those with disabilities (Franklin & Smeaton, 2017).

These challenges may well persist regardless of the language used. There is inevitably delay in the translation of policy language to the frontline (Tregidga & Lovett, 2013), exploring the newer concept of complex safeguarding approaches (note that practitioners’ definitions of child sexual abuse and child sexual exploitation were not always consistent with the UK Government’s definitions). They found that the language used by practitioners to describe complex safeguarding mirrored that used to distinguish child sexual abuse from child sexual exploitation, with frequent reference to ‘traditional’ child protection work for the former and ‘specialist’ work for the latter.

It could also be argued that the formal definitions are less significant than the response encountered by young people at the point of service delivery. The language of child exploitation is not confined to policy documents and governmental guidance; the perceptions of adults towards the children, young people and families in need of services also translates into everyday language that is prejudicial to those in need of help. There is ongoing anecdotal evidence of the ways in which professionals’ use of language can imply judgement or victim blaming (Nyarko, 2018).

## **9. What are the implications of changing language and definition for strategic leaders developing local policy and services relating to child exploitation?**

There are different arguments about the effects of the emergence of new definitions relating to child exploitation. All professional groups are expected to work to the same guidance with respect to safeguarding children and responding to exploitation and abuse, and to this extent are bound by specific language and definitions. However, research (albeit limited) and anecdotal evidence from different professional groups indicates that the contexts of professional and organisational cultures can result in individuals using a different ‘lens’ in their interpretations of exploitation, and the language associated with it.

The evolution of different definitions also needs to be viewed alongside the status and public profile of child exploitation, which contribute to the practice and ‘real life’ implications of the definitions. Messages about new definitions have been relayed in different ways and at a different pace to professional domains depending on the overall priority given to safeguarding, and the perceived level of concern attached to the particular harm. It cannot be assumed that the emergence of a new definition results in a clear route to practice understanding and change.

On one hand, it can be argued that the emergence of new definitions has helped garner resources and resulted in the development of services (Harris et al., 2017). There has been a strong emphasis on the value of multi-professional hubs which are able to respond more effectively to different forms of exploitation, or to sometimes integrate responses to several forms of exploitation (TCE Programme). Many police forces have begun to create modern slavery units which, with the improvements in some data collection, have arguably helped them to focus more clearly on modern slavery as a defined criminal offence and to better co-ordinate local work (Inter-Departmental Ministerial Group on Modern Slavery, 2016). At the same time, there is evidence that commissioning of CSE services has taken precedence over services for other forms of child sexual abuse and harmful sexual behaviour (Christie & Kaur, 2018; Christie, 2021; McNeish et al., 2019) and an associated decline in the actual availability of sexual abuse services.

There are also problems of variability in understanding and response to different forms of exploitation (Mills & Unwin, 2020; Maxwell et al., 2019)..Beckett and Walker (2018), discussing child sexual exploitation, note that a lack of clarity regarding the boundaries of CSE, and any consistent direction about how to interpret it, has resulted in regional variations in terms of whether cases are allocated to CSE or CSA service routes. Sometimes this is done by age – with adolescents directed to CSE services and younger children allocated to more traditional CSA routes. Others have differentiated according to whether the abuse is online or offline. And there are others still who categorise depending on whether the cases have a familial or non-familial perpetrator. This variability is also evident at strategic level. A 2019 Home Affairs Select Committee on ‘serious youth violence’ concluded there was a lack of strategic oversight regarding child criminal exploitation, and responses to young people impacted by ‘county lines’ fall between youth justice, child protection agencies and the voluntary sector.

There is also evidence that the existence of definitions does not necessarily generate action in the form of direct help to those who are identified as having been abused and exploited. Lloyd and Firmin (2020) examined 108 cases of extra-familial harm to explore decision-making on the part of social workers in statutory agencies, and what kind of support or further investigation (or, conversely, ‘no further action’) took place. They found that the majority of referrals were not progressed, and none were cases that were gang related, or involved serious youth violence or ‘extra-familial’ harm. They explain this both in terms of a legal framework that prioritises parental concern and control, but also social workers’ interpretations. In respect to children who have been trafficked, there is still an absence of a consistent and coherent advocacy or child protection response (Craig, 2017)..

## 10. Conclusion

What can we conclude from all this? It is very easy to become lost in an academic fog of definition and re-definition. Overall, it is clear that the language and conceptualisation of child exploitation is closely linked to a series of complex debates, many of which are rooted in historical approaches to the care, protection and control of young people. There are many shared features of all types of exploitation and extra-familial harm. But also, differences, and efforts to define and classify, have at times distracted from the business of protecting young people, with the label being the determinant of response rather than the nature of the harm experienced. At the same time, the emergence of these definitions has opened up possibilities in thinking about the nature of the extra-familial harm done to children and young people, especially those in adolescence, which was traditionally overlooked. This, in turn, is creating new opportunities in developing responses that are accessible and acceptable to children, young people and their families.

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