

Exploring the Characteristic Profile and Parental Experiences of Child Criminal Exploitation Within Shropshire

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Abstract

The research presented expands upon the existing evidence around County Lines by exploring the characteristic profile of those vulnerable to Child Criminal Exploitation (CCE) in the previously unexplored rural region of Shropshire. The current research will also examine the role of parents within Criminal Exploitation by exploring the experiences of parents and those working closely with parents affected by CCE. A mixed methodology design was employed whereby data for the quantitative component was collated via a case management system and then used to identify the characteristic profile of those vulnerable to Criminal Exploitation. For the qualitative component parents and caseworkers took part in a semi structured telephone interview, discussing their understanding of Criminal Exploitation, key indicators of Criminal Exploitation and the parental impact and support for those affected by Criminal Exploitation. It was found that while the profile was consistent with some previously identified characteristics of Criminal Exploitation, there were some inconsistencies. These inconsistencies were related to the dominant presence of cannabis as a primary substance and core risk factor among those affected by CCE, the increasing prevalence of historic suicide among those targeted for Criminal Exploitation, the utilisation of local travel within rural regions affected by CCE and the absence of a care status and criminal history challenging previous CCE profiles. Qualitative themes identified highlighted the parental trauma experienced by parents, grooming narratives and misconceptions associated with Criminal Exploitation, intimate physical and behavioural changes identified by parents, the role of cannabis within adolescent identity and gaps in parental service support. Finally, limitations and implications of the findings are discussed, with these implications highlighting the need for parental representation/feedback within local authorities and services, greater training around the role of grooming within CCE and its translation onto our societal schemas of crime perpetrator/victims, the inclusion of CCE support for those aged 18, educational awareness around the importance of cannabis within CCE and national awareness for Child Criminal Exploitation.

Literature Review

Over the past decade there has been a continuous increase in drug demand among urban cities enabling them to become a target for illicit drug markets until they become heavily saturated (Densley et al, 2018). This saturation has now led to these illicit drug markets travelling to rural and coastal areas to develop clientele, this change in criminal marketing model is known as County Lines (National Crime Agency;NCA, 2017). The term 'County Lines' is derived from the use of the branded phone lines that are used by the perpetrators to communicate and operate with line members in other rural, coastal and urban locations (NCA, 2017). Existing evidence around County Lines has focused around the three distinctive features of the model including the models drive for profit maximisation, violent practices such as cuckooing and the exploitation of children as drug runners (Whittaker et al, 2020;Spicer, Coomber & Moyle, 2019; Robinson, Mclean & Densley, 2019). Although there has been an increase in empirical evidence around the use/role of children in County Lines there remains key gaps, despite estimates suggesting as many as 30-50 children being implicated any single county line and up to 30- 50,000 children being affected by Criminal Exploitation within Britain (The Childrens Society, 2018).

Child Criminal Exploitation

Child Criminal Exploitation (CCE) has been at the forefront of academic and media attention through the County Line model with this new dimension of drug trafficking centring around the exploitation of children (Hesketh & Robinson, 2019;Stone, 2018). CCE can be defined as a form of child abuse occurring when an individual or group takes advantage of an imbalance in power to coerce, control, manipulate or deceive a child or young person under the age of 18 (Home Office, 2018). This typology of exploitation defines the exploitative practices of young children implicated in county lines who are often subjected to the role of runners, running drugs, collecting debts and attacking rivals (Stone, 2018). These exploitative processes are facilitated through a process of grooming occurring via physical interactions and online mediums such as social media, whereby senior line members can display their advantageous lifestyle characterised by status, money and affection whilst also coercing younger members through the fear of their sexual history/content being exposed online (Firmin, 2018; Sturrock & Holmes, 2015). Whilst class A substances have dominated attention within CCE (Coomber & Moyle, 2018), illegal substances such as cannabis have also been acknowledged for their role in mediating this power imbalance between senior and

younger line members. Research by Robinson, Mclean and Densley (2019) explored the experiences of young people exploited in Glasgow and Merseyside, whereby cannabis was identified a gateway drug into Criminal Exploitation with senior line members incentivising the use of cheap cannabis to develop close networks with local clientele and young recruits. This incentivisation of cannabis also serves to build the selling repertoire of younger members with possession of cannabis being less punitive than class A substances allowing young recruits to engage in drug selling practices whilst evading the serious consequences of law enforcement (Robinson et al, 2019). Evidence by Robinson et al (2019) also illustrated the versatile role of cannabis in debt bondage, with many young people initially being given cannabis through a no immediate payment scheme which they unknowingly to accrue to the extent they are forced to pay back, a process commonly known as 'debt bondage'. The subsequent process of debt bondage results in the physical harm implicit in County Lines, with one in nine children being physically harmed or sexually assaulted during the periods in which they are sent away to resolve these drug debts or 'bonds' (Rees et al, 2011; Biehal, Mitchell & Wade, 2003).

These threats of physical harm are often accentuated by an unhygienic working/ living environment of cuckooed properties, a property utilised as indoor drug market that typically belongs to those with mental health/substance misuse concerns or those personally involved with line members (Spicer et al, 2019). The normalisation of consistent drug use and risky sexual behaviour that is characteristic of these properties, negatively impacts the psychological wellbeing of young people with many presenting symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder and reporting a decline in their physical immune response, sleep hygiene and mood (Briggs, 2013; Windle & Briggs, 2015). These physical threats are reflected in the increase in crime rates among communities affected by Criminal Exploitation, evidence by Jaensch and South (2018) explored the affected coastal town of Claxton, where a continuous increase in crime rates in relation to county line activity was reported, with offences relating to the possession of a knife increasing by 15%, theft related offences increasing by 32% and offences relating to physical violence such as GBH and ABH increasing by 26%. This escalation in violence is attributed to out of town members setting up their establishment in which conflicts associated with territory and debt bondage are prominent. O'Hagan and Long (2019) review analysed the socio-economic effects of County Line operations on UK communities where their findings affirmed those of Jaensch and South (2018) with County Line activity being associated with an increase in homicides with 42% of UK police forces reporting an increase in knife related homicides among affected areas (NCA, 2017). Young people are subpopulation which are susceptible to the effects of this violence, with knife

related offences among those under 18 increasing by 93% within a five year period, 25% of which have been knife fatal attacks (Dodd, 2019).

Theoretical accounts of youth gang formation

Previous research has illustrated how the romantic involvement and excitement from being associated with senior line members along with the threat of violence are significant enticements for adolescents into Criminal Exploitation (Robinson, Mclean & Densley, 2019; Coomber and Moyle, 2018). Masculinity has also been recognised as a driving motivator, whereby young men experiencing a sense of incongruence between their masculine expectations and limited education/employment attainment are presented with a criminal backdrop of violence and status that provides them with the opportunity to resolve this masculine ambiguity (Hesketh & Robinson, 2019; Storrod & Densley, 2017). This masculine ambiguity is consistent with theoretical accounts behind gang formation in which gang membership has been attributed to the breakdown of societal structures (i.e. family homes or schools) and the social strain of members failing to conform to cultural norms (Thrasher, 1967; Merton, 1938).

However, the offer of acceptance and affection has been noted to be the most effective enticement into Criminal Exploitation among adolescent populations who may be otherwise segregated from mainstream society (Sharkey et al, 2011). Existing theoretical accounts of gang membership have been largely from a criminological perspective within minimal extant being given to the intricate psychological and social processes within gang membership. Interactional theory (Thornberry, 1987) presents an integrated theory of the psychological processes implicated in gang membership combining control theory, in which gang membership results from a reciprocal bond with the individual and gang due to weakened societal bonds (e.g. bond with social structures/schools, peers and family) and social learning theory whereby criminal behaviour is derived from the positive reinforcement of criminal activity (e.g. affection, status, money) and the imitation of members they value. Interactional theory combines this criminal learning and bond formation with specific risk factors that are indicative to social learning theory, all of which interact to provide a comprehensive account of gang membership. Although the purpose of this research is to not test the theory with interactional theory (Thornberry, 1998) successfully predicting and reducing gang membership (Bishop et al, 2017). Interactional theory (Thornberry, 1998) does provide the most appropriate theoretical framework for the current research incorporating the social learning/bonding process that is reflected within the grooming process of criminal exploitation, whilst also acknowledging the role of specific risk factors/domains in contributing towards ones vulnerability to gang membership and Criminal Exploitation.

The characteristic profile of young people

Previous research has examined the role of various risk factors/indicators within gang membership including age with those between the ages of 12-18 years being most at risk for gang membership with this risk often continuing into adulthood (Rizzo, 2003; Bullock & Tilley, 2002), gender with gang membership being predominantly comprised of males (Bennet & Holloway, 2004), ethnicity with some arguing gang membership to be both heterogenous and homogenous depending upon the community of which it is reflective of (Esbensen & Weerman, 2005; Gatti et al, 2005; Bullock & Tilley, 2008) as well as mental health concerns and learning disabilities also being identified as a high risk factor to gang membership (Hill et al, 1999). Additionally, prosocial criminal attitudes, criminal beliefs, family criminality and related constructs such as impulsivity and risk taking behaviour have all been noted to be associated with gang membership (Esbensen et al, 2001; Esbensen & Weerman, 2005). Interactional theory (Thornberry, 1998; Thornberry & Krohn 2005) provides account for how both those with extensive and limited criminal history are recruited into gang membership through a process of facilitation and enhancement. Facilitation describes the function in which the association with gang members provides criminal/illicit opportunities to adolescents who were not engaged in criminality beforehand, whereas enhancement refers to selective recruitment of high risk youth with a history of criminality who will through gang membership be provided with the opportunity to further enhance their criminal activity committing offences relating weapons possession, robbery and drug trafficking (Bennet & Holloway, 2004; Gordon et al, 2004; Gatti et al, 2005). This facilitation process has been attributed to factors such as low self-esteem, with gang membership also providing the opportunity to develop self-esteem, identity and companionship (Klein & Maxson, 2006; Donnellan et al, 2005).

Although there is limited evidence around the risk indicators/ profile characteristics of those vulnerable to Child Criminal Exploitation there are some parallels to those prominent within gang membership, with adolescent males being between the ages of 14-17 years being identified as a target subpopulation and a now well-known methodology of line members (Coomber & Moyle, 2018; Robinson et al, 2019). However, females have also been identified to have an integral role in the delivery and transportation of drugs (NCA, 2016; Cohen, 2018; Jaensch & South, 2018). Research by Finlay and Williams (2019) revealed the risks for females implicated in Criminal Exploitation, with many being sexually exploited by their own and other line members. This trajectory in sexual exploitation is parallel with the increase in Criminal Exploitation, with around 35% of UK police forces reporting sexual exploitation in relation to County Lines (NCA, 2017). Ethnicity is another demographic indicator implicated in criminal exploitation with senior line members who are generally young black men typically

recruiting white young men to be runners with this preference being attributed to our social biases around perpetrators of crime (Windle et al, 2020). Expanding on these demographic characteristics are additional risk indicators, Windle et al (2020) review identified economic insecurity and a disruptive/chaotic home and academic environment to be core risk factors for Criminal Exploitation. These findings are consistent with Longfield (2019) who found those affected by Criminal Exploitation to be more likely to have a parent with substance misuse problems (41%), be absent/missing from school (37%) and to have social and emotional health concerns (95%). A care history has also been reported to be a significant risk indicator of CCE with those with a looked after children status or those known to social care and Youth Offending Teams (YOT) being reported to be at risk of CCE (Andell & Pitts, 2018). These profile characteristics/ risk indicators are often mirrored in the vulnerability criteria's set out by organisations such as NSPCC and Childrens Society as well as the guidance from the NCA (2017), where those with: unstable living conditions (often characterised by domestic violence and parental substance misuse), a care history, educational vulnerability due to permanent exclusion/ pupil referral units, mental health and substance misuse concerns, experiences of poverty and the presence of a learning/physical difficulty and frequent missing episodes to be more vulnerable targets for Criminal Exploitation. Transport is another key indicator with previous research highlighting the importance of trains as a dominant mode of transport among criminally exploited population with 40% of county line transportation being railway based allowing line members to move freely between counties (NCA, 2018).

However these criteria's are subject to change, with one of the most unique challenges of the county line model being its continuous and evolving nature leading to shifts in target populations, for example the models original main focus being on looked after children now shifting to those who have been/are excluded, in pupil referral units or on reduced timetables. Equally the majority of the empirical evidence informing these criterions are not only derived police data that is noted for its concerns around partiality (Windle & Silke, 2019;Maguire, 2007) but also focuses around the line operation and recruitment within coastal and urban areas, despite each line's operation and recruitment process being regionally distinct. Rural regions have been identified as a target area for Criminal Exploitation due to their limited police presence and declining economy providing line members with the opportunity to effectively evade law enforcement (Coomber & Moyle, 2018). The present research aims to reconcile this gap by exploring the characteristic/risk profile those vulnerable to Child Criminal Exploitation among the traditional rural area of Shropshire.

Research setting

Shropshire is an English county running 1,235 square miles, situated in the adjacent west border of Wales, north and east border of Cheshire and Staffordshire and south border to Herefordshire and Worcester. The population of Shropshire as of July 2019 was 323, 136 with 160,155 females and 162,981 males (Office National Statistics, 2018). Shropshire itself is a largely rural areas comprised of several neighbouring towns including towns including the county town of Shrewsbury, Oswestry, Ludlow, Bridgnorth and various market towns such as Whitchurch and Market Drayton. Current estimates indicate there to be around 10 county lines operating within Shropshire (Boddington, 2019). Based on these estimates and estimates indicating around 30-50 children to be implicated in any single county line (Childrens Society, 2018), this equates to around 300-500 children being at risk of CCE within Shropshire.

The role of parents

One risk domain within the empirical evidence around gang membership is family in which historically family variables such as family structure, violence, parent absenteeism, direct familial ties with gang members and familial gang endorsement have been associated with the prevalence of youth gang membership (Hoffman, 2006; Miller, 2001; Loeber & Farrington, 1998; Maxson & Whitlock, 2002). Interestingly with further expansion within field many now argue family variables to be less restrictive within gang membership, with gang membership emanating from all family backgrounds (Young, Fitzgibbon & Silverstone, 2013). Similar propositions have also been noted with many arguing educational and community risk domains to have more importance within the context of gang membership (Hoffman, 2006). Due to these inconsistencies and the previous core focus around the role of parents within adolescent gang membership as well as the interconnectivity of risk domains between gang membership and criminal exploitation, it is important to consider the role of parents within Criminal Exploitation. The present research aims to gain a deeper insight into the role and perspective of parents within County Lines by qualitatively exploring their experiences and understanding of CCE.

The existing body of qualitative research around CCE has focused on the safeguarding perspective of local authorities and agencies (Mills & Unwin, 2020), whereby police responses have been at the centre with many debating their effectiveness with some arguing organised intelligence led strikes to only be effective in targeting street level members and the classification of modern slavery for CCE offences to be more effective in challenging the traditional badge of honour held by organised crime perpetrators for gang related convictions (Spicer, 2019). Evidence has also illustrated the challenges the County Line model presents

for officers with perpetrators operating at a business level when evading law enforcement selling and buying targeted lines, utilising cuckooed properties, and relocating younger members (Spicer, 2019). These challenges are echoed in the difficulties faced by those in safeguarding roles such as nurses and transport police with the need for greater awareness around Criminal Exploitation being identified (Blackburn & Smith, 2020; Plastow, Finlay & Williams, 2019). One dominant narrative within these experiences is the controversy around the victim/perpetrator narrative present within Criminal Exploitation, with many of the adolescent males targeted conforming to our societal schema of a perpetrator of crime rather than crime victim resulting in some professionals to perceive them as crime perpetrators seeking a particular lifestyle rather than crime victim (Windle et al, 2018).

The present research

The purpose of the current study aims reconciles key gaps within the field of literature of Child Criminal Exploitation, by quantitatively examining the characteristic/risk profile of those vulnerable to Criminal Exploitation in the previously unexplored rural region of Shropshire. Although existing evidence has identified risk factors associated with Criminal Exploitation, this research is not only derived from police data that susceptible to partiality but only focuses on the operation and recruitment of urban and coastal regions, despite rural regions such as Shropshire being identified as target area for criminal exploitation (Boddington, 2018). Equally, the current research will also provide qualitative insights into the perspective of parents within Criminal Exploitation, with parents being noted a key risk domain for adolescent gang membership. These insights will focus on the experiences of parents and those working closely with parents affected by Criminal Exploitation. Overall, the current will adopt a mixed methodological design to address the following research purposes:

1. To examine the characteristic risk profile of those vulnerable to Child Criminal Exploitation within Shropshire
2. To gain a deeper insight into the role of parents within Criminal Exploitation by exploring the experiences of parents and those working closely with parents affected by Child Criminal Exploitation?

Method

Participants

Participants for the quantitative data were identified by their case workers as historic/current victims of criminal exploitation within the last year. A sample of 58 young people were obtained consisting of 41 males and 17 females between the ages of 13-20 years. For the qualitative component, a sample of (N=6) participants were obtained consisting of parents,

social workers and case workers, all participants were recruited via email at the request of their case worker/ the young person's team service manager. Representatives from policing were also approached for recruitment but participation was declined. Due to the sensitivity of the research topics and participants request for confidentiality and anonymity no demographic information was obtained for the qualitative sample.

Inclusion/exclusion criterions/referral process

Participants for the quantitative data were identified by caseworkers if: a risk assessment/SMARTER screening tool had indicated concerns of Criminal Exploitation, Criminal Exploitation was present within the initial referral made by professional third parties and a young persons needs were consistent with Shropshire's exploitation pathway enrolled September 2019 whereby Criminal Exploitation is identified. Referrals for all of the participants included in the quantitative component, where made through strong multiagency partnerships where young people were identified through the multi-agency exploitation triage or by contacting the appropriate professionals for individuals at risk of Criminal Exploitation due to their known associates who may have previously been referred.

Materials

NEBULA. All quantitative data was obtained and stored via Nebula a scalable web-Based system used to manage client- centred information in the fields of substance misuse, mental health and criminal justice. The system is comprised of modules that relate to every aspect of substance misuse management including client records, assessments, risk assessments, care plans, document storage and psychosocial assessments that track client service outcomes and progression. Each identified participant/ young person was searched via NEBULA and relevant information was manually extracted.

Variables for analysis. Derived from existing literature around the risk factors of gang membership and the profile characteristics of criminal exploitation within urban and coastal areas the following variables were included for analysis:

- Gender
- Age
- Ethnicity
- Substance misuse history (including each young person's primary, secondary and tertiary substance as well as the substance misuse patterns)
- Family history (including presence/ absence of domestic violence, family structure tradition/ non-traditional, current/historic presence of parental abuse and parental neglect, significant family bereavement and parental substance misuse)

- Educational history (including those attending mainstream education/alternative education, educational absenteeism, permanent exclusion, attendance to apprenticeship, current employed and unemployed)
- Criminal history (including type of offence committed)
- Mental health history (including different types of mental health disorders/concerns present within the sample)
- Mental wellbeing (mental wellbeing is monitored under the psychosocial assessments within NEBULA with mental wellbeing being reported through the variables of anxiety, self-esteem, happiness, life satisfaction, family and close relationships, patterns of mental wellbeing)
- Social care involvement (e.g. absence/presence of social care involvement)
- Missing episodes (e.g. absence/presence of missing episodes)
- Care status (e.g. absence/presence of care status)
- Mode of transport used

Interview Schedule. Semi-structured interviews followed a schedule of seven open ended, non-directive questions encouraging free narrative and detailed responses necessary for IPA (Smith, Jarmon & Osborn, 1999). Questions focused around the parents/ those working with parents understanding of Criminal Exploitation (e.g. Based on your experiences/ experiences working with parents what are some of the key factors that make a child at risk of Criminal Exploitation?), impact of Criminal Exploitation on parents (e.g. Drawing on your own experiences/ experiences working with parents how would you describe the impact Criminal Exploitation has on parents) and gaps within parental support and education for those affected by Criminal Exploitation. (e.g. What would you say are the key gaps in parental support/education for parents and young people affected by Criminal Exploitation?). Questions were derived from concerns highlighted by previous literature and research gaps around the role of parents within CCE.

Procedure

Quantitative component. For the quantitative component data was obtained and stored via NEBULA. Data relating to each of the research variables (age, gender, ethnicity, substance misuse history, family history, criminal history, mental health history, mental wellbeing, educational history, social care involvement, missing episodes and care history) was manually extracted via NEBULA, whereby an initial search was made from clients initials or case number and variable data was sought from clients risk assessments and their assessment/review documents. Data was then converted into an Excel format in preparation for analysis.

Qualitative component. For the qualitative component data was obtained through semi-structured telephone interviews and were approximately 30-90 minutes long. Interviews adhered to a seven-item interview schedule asking participants about: their understanding of Criminal Exploitation (e.g. Based on your experiences/ experiences working with parents what are some of the key factors that may put a child at risk of Criminal Exploitation?), the impact of Criminal Exploitation on parents (e.g. Drawing on your experiences/ experiences working with parents how would you describe the impact Criminal Exploitation has on parents?) and gaps in parental education and support for those affected by Criminal Exploitation (e.g. From your experiences/ experiences working with parents what are if any the gaps in the parental support and education for those affected by Criminal Exploitation). Interviews were recorded using a Dictaphone which all participants were made aware of prior to participation, after interviews were transcribed audio files were erased.

Analytical Plan

Quantitative component. Averaging data for each of the variables: gender, age, ethnicity, family history, substance misuse history, educational history, criminal history, mental health history, mental wellbeing patterns and social care, care and missing episode history was analysed and reported.

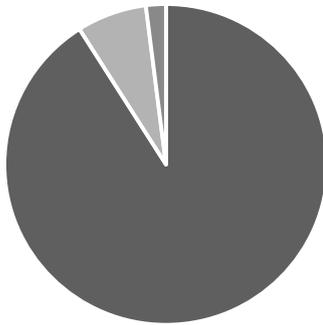
Qualitative component- Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA; Smith et al, 1999) was deemed the most suitable approach to explore and understand how individuals perceive their social world (Smith et al, 1999). IPA assumes that participants are experts in the area being explored and results will reflect their underlying thoughts and feelings associated with their experiences (Smith et al, 1999). The analysis allows the researcher to generate insight into the research area, reflect on their own psychological interpretation and its influence on existing theoretical understandings. IPA has also been noted to be an effective methodology when discussing emotionally laden and complex subjects (Smith et al, 1999). Therefore, IPA was employed to gain a deeper insight into the role of parents within Criminal Exploitation, exploring the experiences of parents and those working with parents affected by Child Criminal Exploitation. The analysis followed the guidelines set by Smith et al (1999) whereby: initial cluster themes were noted on each transcript, these clusters were grouped into primary themes which were then developed and rearranged into subordinate themes ensuring they were based on participant insights.

Results

Quantitative Data

Demographic Data

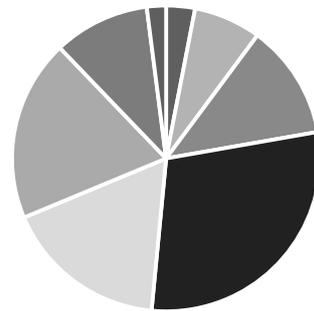
Ethnicity for sample



■ White British ■ Mixed Ethnicity ■ Not Stated

Figure 1. Example of a Circle (or Pie) Graph. This figure shows an example pie graph of sample ethnicity

Age for Sample



■ 13yrs ■ 14yrs ■ 15yrs ■ 16yrs
 ■ 17yrs ■ 18yrs ■ 19yrs ■ 20yrs

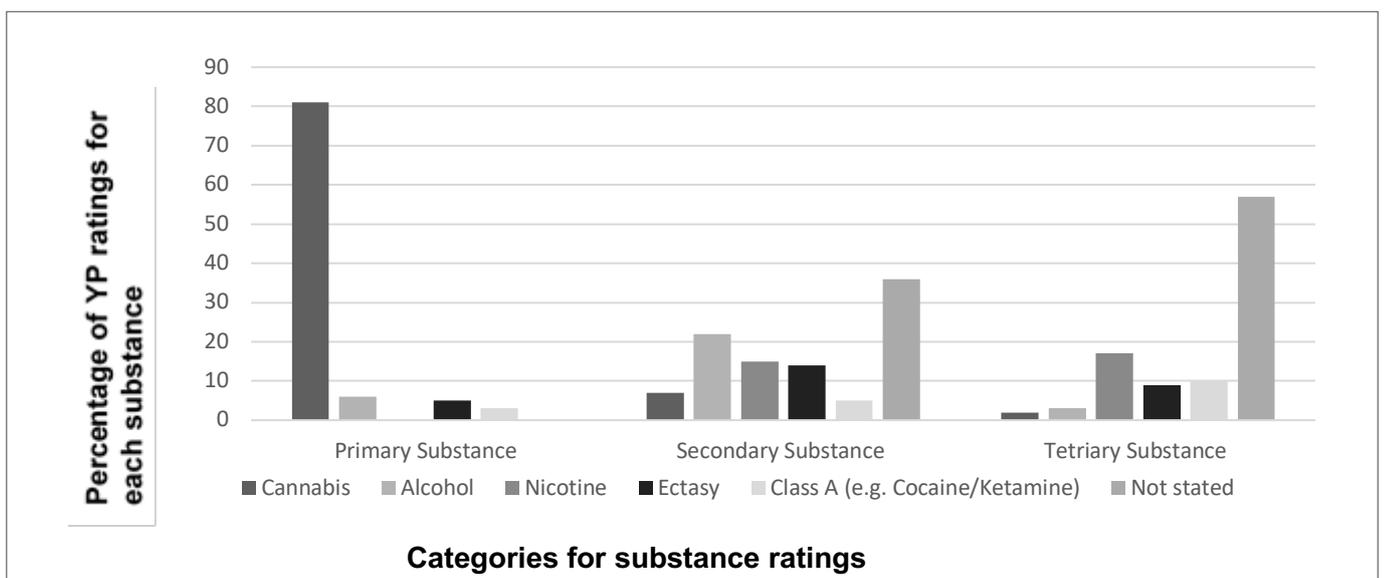
Figure 2. Example of a Circle (or Pie) Graph. This figure shows an example pie graph of sample age.

Demographic data for young people affected by Criminal Exploitation within this sample contained two identified sex categories: male (71%) and female (29%), nine age categories: 16 years (29%), 18 years (19%), 17 years (17%), 15 years (12%), 19 years (10%), 14 years (7%), 20 years (2%) and 13 years (3%), and 3 ethnic categories: White British (91%), Mixed ethnicity (7%) and not stated (2%).

Substance Misuse

Figure 3

Bar graph of sample substance misuse ratings



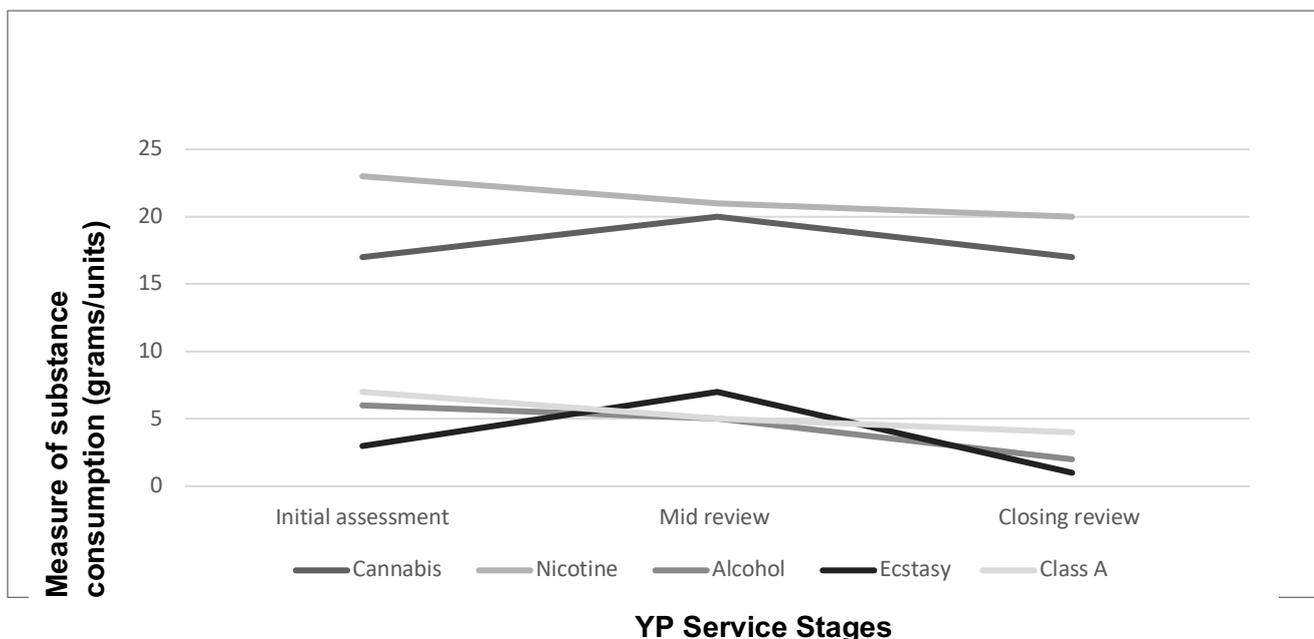
Note. A bar graph containing figures for young persons (YP) substance ratings.

Substance misuse data identified the following ratings for primary substances: cannabis (81%), alcohol (6%), ecstasy (5%) and class A (2%), secondary substances: nicotine (15%), ecstasy (14%), cannabis (4%), alcohol (22%), class A (5%) and 36% stated no secondary substance. Tertiary substances identified include: cannabis (2%), Ecstasy (9%), Nicotine (17%), alcohol (3%) class A (12%) and 57% stated no tertiary substance. Overall, cannabis was revealed to be the highest primary substance, alcohol the highest secondary substance and nicotine the highest tertiary substance within the sample

Substance Misuse Patterns

Figure 4

A line graph for sample substance misuse patterns



Note. A line graph containing figures of young persons (YP) patterns of substance misuse
 Substance misuse patterns revealed a stable decline in substance use for class A substances, alcohol and nicotine, however ecstasy and cannabis show a peak in substance misuse at the mid review point with this significantly declining after this point and cannabis use gradually declining but remaining at a high level of use.

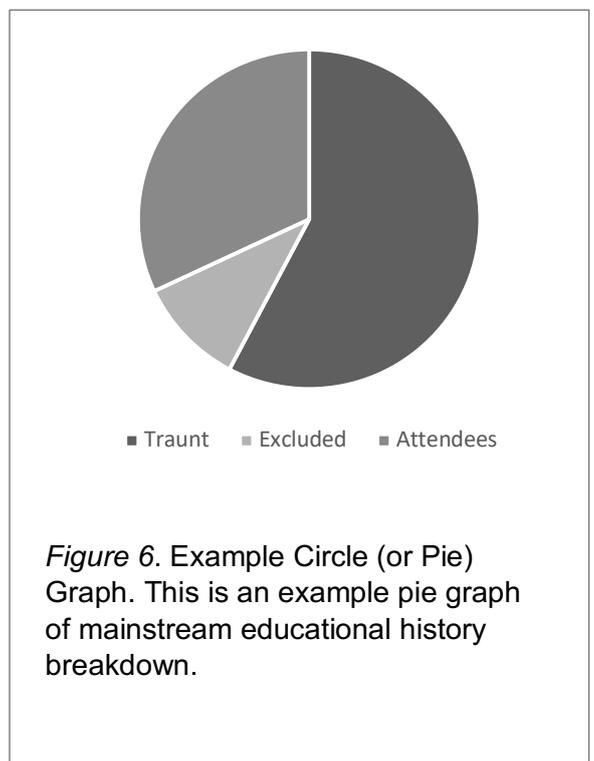
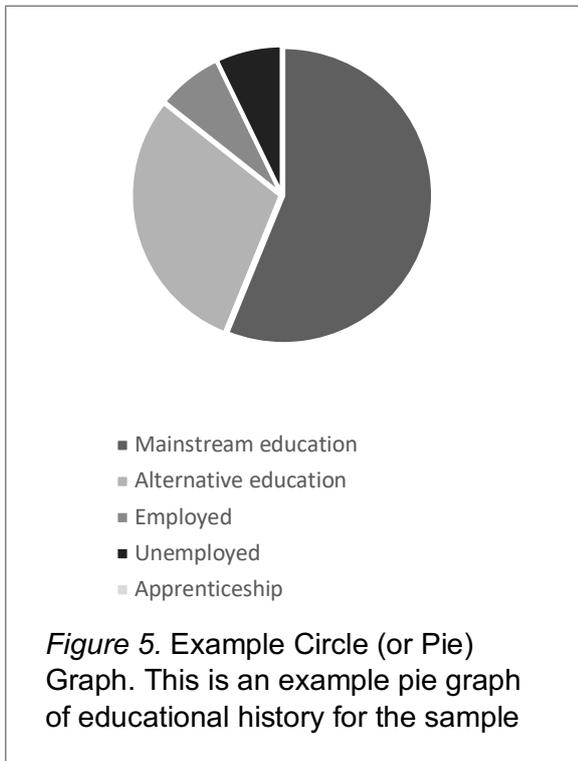
Family History

Table 1 Family history data for sample

Family Disruption	No Family disruption/concerns	Not stated
Family disruption- 71%	29%	10%
Parental substance misuse- 27%		
Domestic violence- 22%		
Parental abuse- 7%		
Parental neglect- 12%		
Significant family loss- 3%		

Family history data revealed the majority of young people within the sample to have been affected by some form of family disruption whether that be domestic violence, parental abuse, parental neglect, parental substance misuse or a significant family loss, with the rest of the sample either having no family concerns or no family history being stated. Please note that this data reflects comorbid family disruptions.

Educational history



Data for educational history revealed the majority of young people within the sample to attend mainstream education (55%) of those in mainstream education 56% were truant and 13% had been excluded, the rest of the sample attended alternative education (29%), were employed (7%) / unemployed (7%) or attending an apprenticeship (2%).

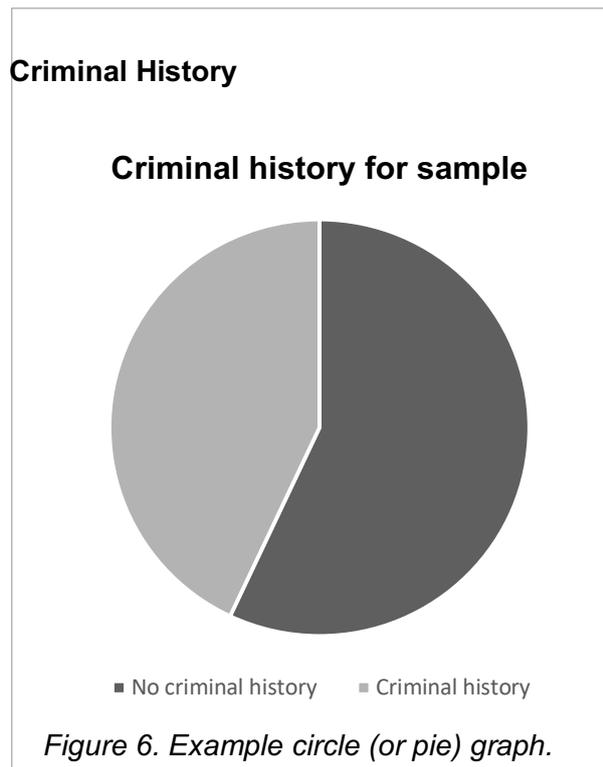


Figure 6. Example circle (or pie) graph. This figure is an example pie graph of the offence history within the sample

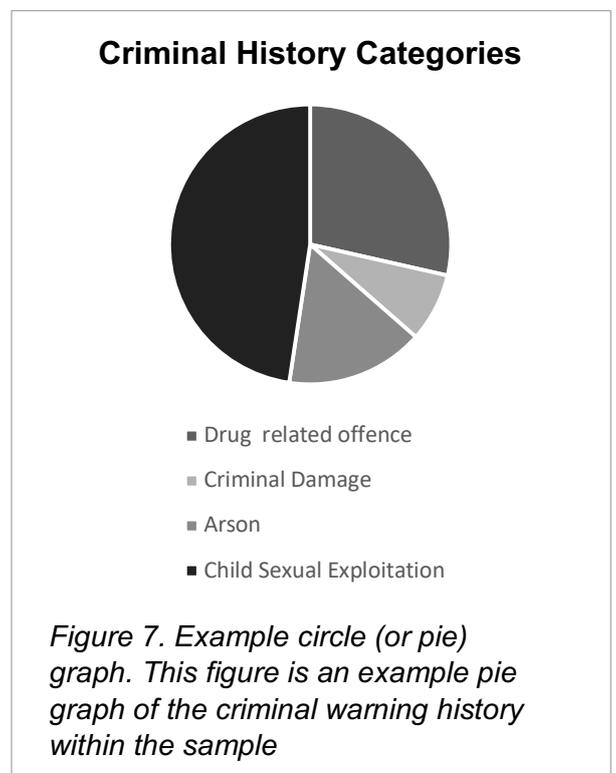


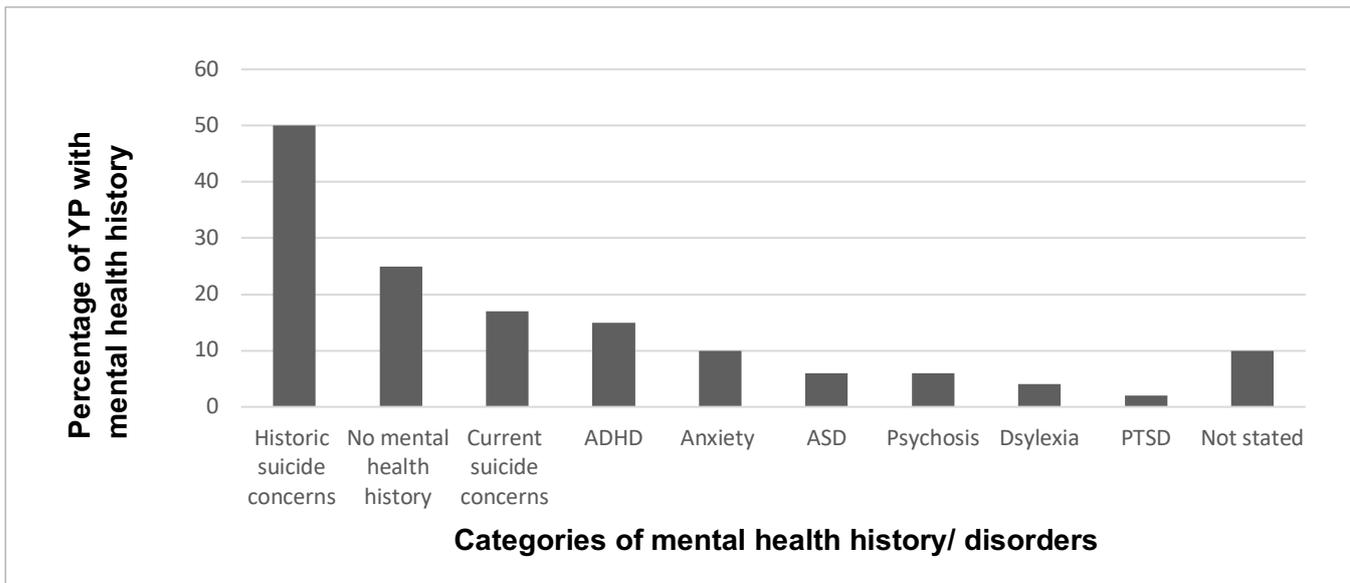
Figure 7. Example circle (or pie) graph. This figure is an example pie graph of the criminal warning history within the sample

Criminal history data revealed the majority of the young people within the sample to have no previous criminal history (57%) of those that do (33%), their history has been categorised with the majority of having a history of Child Sexual Exploitation concerns (30%), followed by those with drug related offences (18%), criminal damage (5%) and arson (10%).

Mental health history

Figure 8

A bar graph of mental health history within the sample



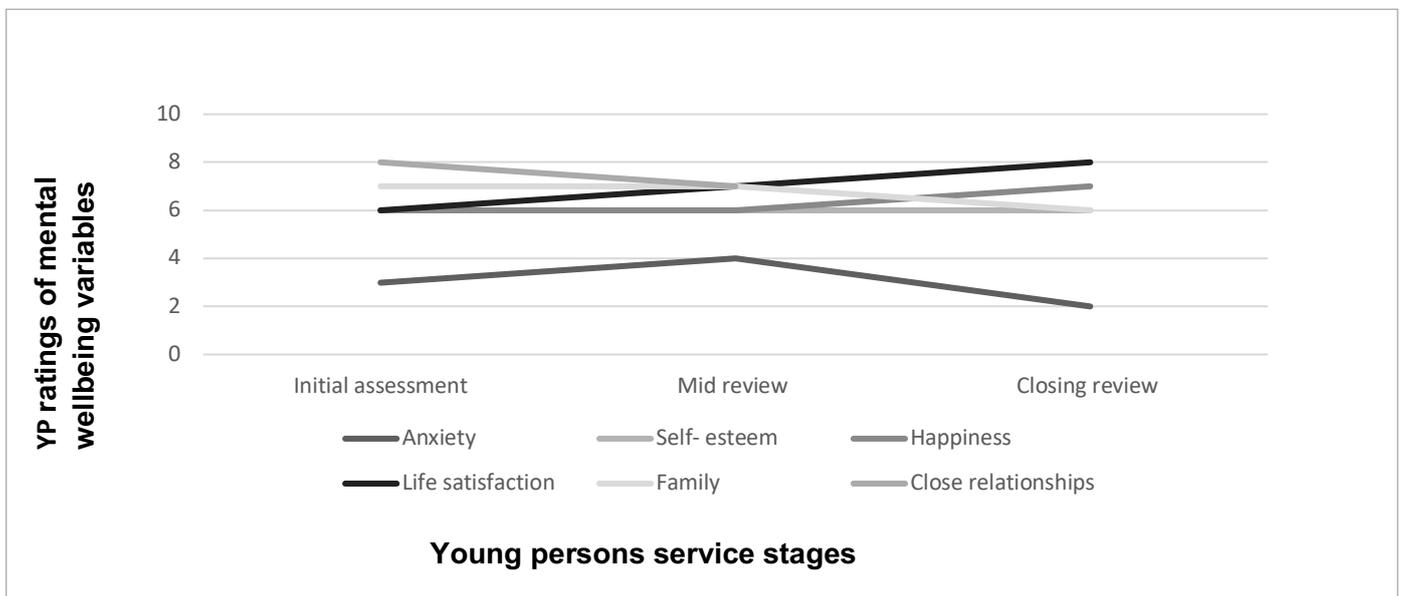
Note. A bar graph containing figures for young persons (YP) mental health history, abbreviations: ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, ASD (Autism Spectrum Disorder, PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress

Data for mental health history revealed the majority of young people within the sample to have a history of suicidal ideation/self harm/ suicide attempts (45%), followed by no mental health concerns (22%), current suicidal ideation/self harm (16%), ADHD (14%), not stated (10%), Anxiety (9%), Psychosis (5%), ASD (5%), dyslexia (3%) and PTSD (2%). Please note that data is representative of those with a mental health comorbidity.

Patterns of mental wellbeing

Figure 9

A line graph of patterns of mental wellbeing within the sample



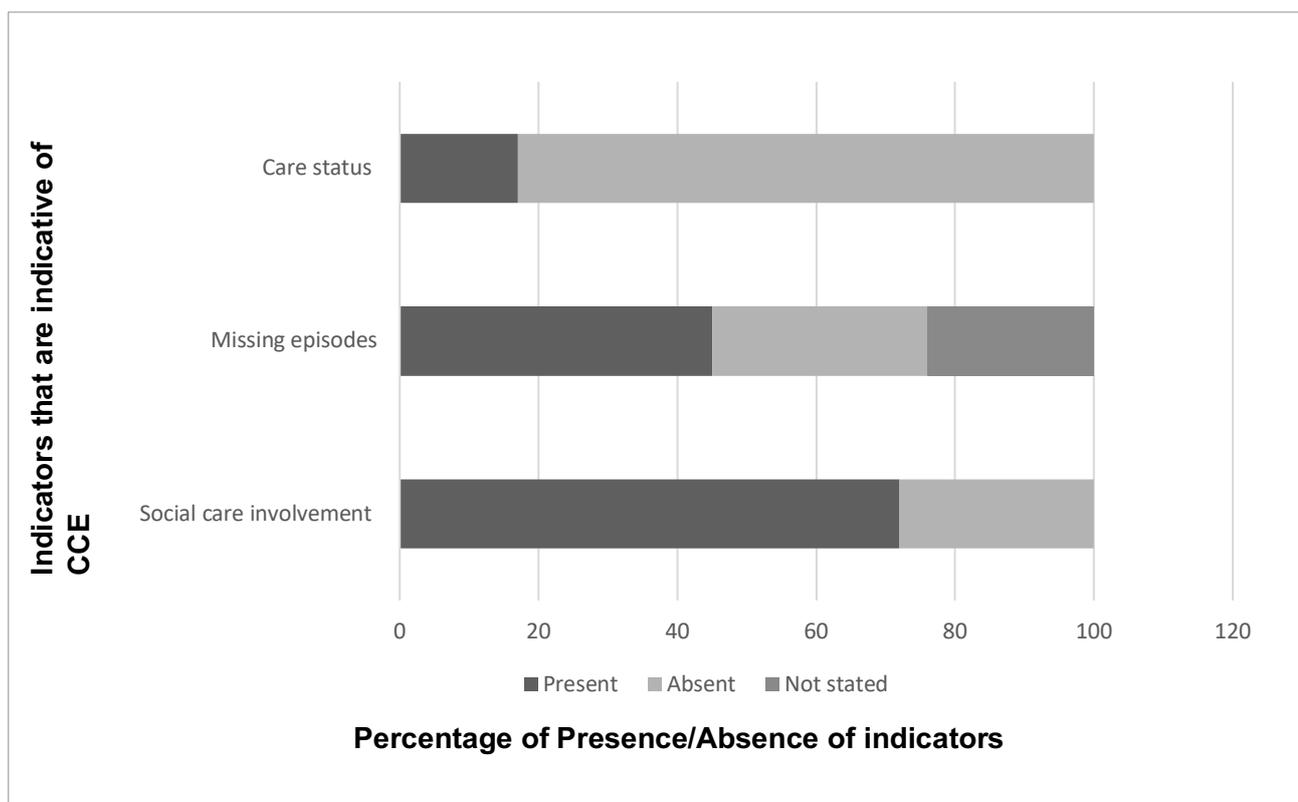
Note. A line graph containing figures for young persons (YP) mental wellbeing variables.

Patterns of mental wellbeing revealed a gradual decrease in close relationships and family and a peak and then continuous decrease in anxiety. While self-esteem remained stable, happiness and life satisfaction demonstrated a continuous increase

Social care involvement, missing episodes, and care status

Figure 10

A bar graph for the presence of traditional indicative factors of criminal exploitation (social care involvement, missing episodes, and care status).



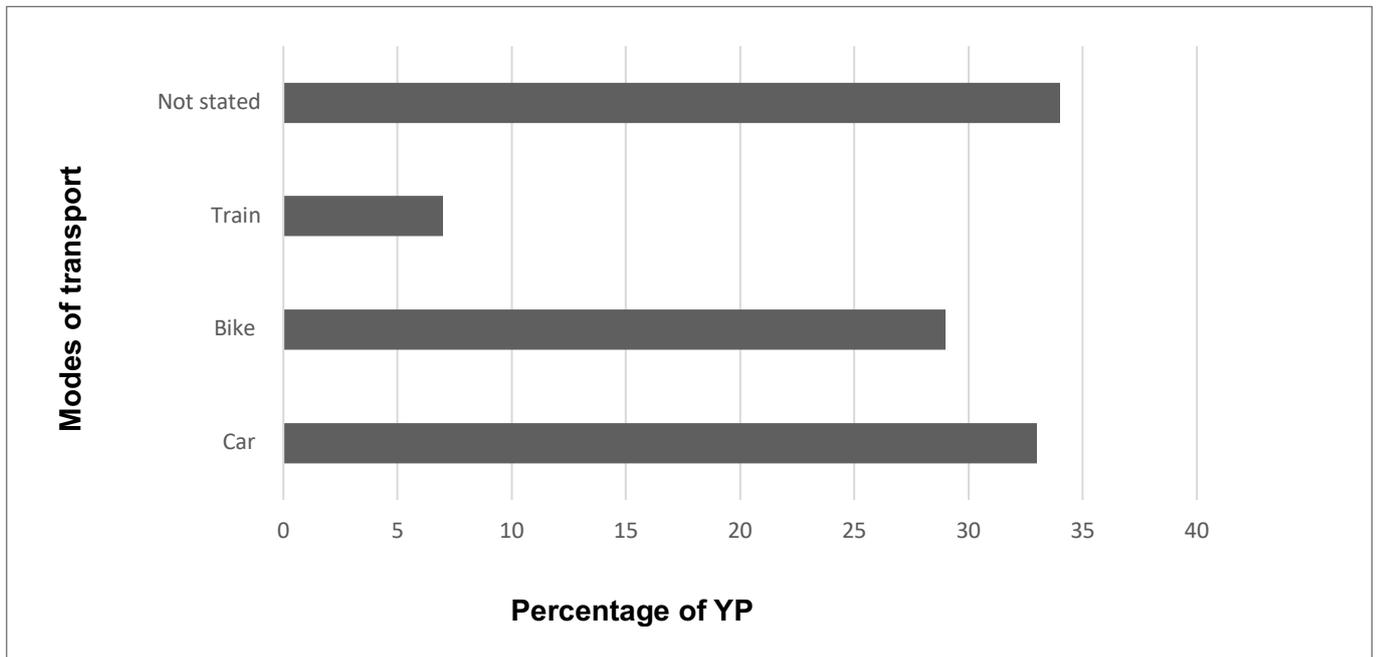
Note. A bar graph containing figures for young persons (YP) percentage of social care involvement, missing episodes, and presence/absence of a care status

Data also revealed the majority of young people within the sample to not have a care status (83%) compared to those who did (17%), the majority had previous involvement with social care (72%) than those that didn't (28%) and the presence of missing episodes was evident in more cases (45%) than those where they weren't missing episodes (31%) or missing episodes were not stated (24%).

Modes of Transport

Figure 11

A bar graph for modes of transport within the sample



Note. A bar graph containing figures of Young person's (YP) modes of transport

Data for modes of transport for those that stated revealed the majority of the sample to travel by car (33%), bike (29%) and train (7%), however 34% of the sample did not state a form of transport.

Qualitative results

IPA analysis of the data identified five key distinct yet interrelated themes: (1) Parental trauma; (2) Grooming Narratives; (3) A Parents Eye View; (4) Barriers to service engagement and (5) Cannabis: substance vs identity. The superordinate themes are discussed in detail below:

Parental trauma

One of the most dominant narratives within participants experiences is the trauma experienced by parents affected by Child Criminal Exploitation, this trauma is manifested through the sense of loss and fear.

'Well loss mental health, loss of job, loss of relationships, loss of child not just death, serious injury but if they are separated for protection and the part of them you lose because of the anger and violence although its crippling as a parent to see you own

child doing that to you haven't got time to think about that because you know that your child wherever he is could be dead at any moment so you just have to push with that part of that battle and its horrible the parent can't sleep, eat or think'- Participant 1

Participant 1 recalls the layers of loss that are experienced by parents affected by Criminal Exploitation with these layers ranging from loss of jobs, relationships, decline in mental health to the loss of child from death, separation or the loss of childhood identity due to the behavioural changes associated with exploitation such as anger and violence resulting in parents failing to recognise their own child. Participant 1 also recalls how the use of repression as coping mechanism is used when dealing with these traumas with many parents repressing their trauma as a form of self-neglect in order to focus on their child outcomes that are most likely to be death or prison.

'Its devastating to all of us you just live in state of fear I mean my partner with the stress he has been to hospital my daughter just locks herself in her room, I've had to put a lock on all the doors in the house because they might know where we live I was scared to death but I don't have time to think about that because my daughter she was coming home from school at 4pm it was winter nights it was dark and I was terrified what if someone grabs her, hurts her it's just terrifying'- Participant 3

Participant 3 reveals the salient role of fear within parents' experiences with this fear often being characterised by fear for the health and safety of the immediate family including partners and younger siblings. The example given highlights this fear through actions such as locking the doors locks. In addition to this constant fear, is the subsequent impact on parents physical and mental wellbeing fuelling the trauma experienced by parents, as well as the further impact on younger siblings mental wellbeing with many siblings like in the case of participant 3 isolating themselves away from family.

Grooming narratives and misconceptions

Grooming is defining feature of Criminal Exploitation; the extent of this grooming process is identified by parents and professionals through particular narratives and misconceptions centred around the intentions of parents, the stigma around the term 'grooming' and misconceptions of the victim/perpetrator narrative among exploitation victims transitioning from adolescence to the age of 18.

'They fed him that his family didn't love him quite often he would say you don't love me and we said we love you we're trying to help you but that's obviously what they fed him that we don't want him or love him anymore. I mean he doesn't think

anything has happened to him after he was arrested he used to say have any of mates been to the house to check I'm okay and I went no they weren't your mates , he couldn't get that into his head when we said they are just using you'- Participant 2

For participant 2 the extent of the grooming implicated in Criminal Exploitation was revealed through the villainised narrative of parents embedded into young people through the belief that their parents have no affection or concern for them. From this vulnerability and perceived parental isolation affection is then used entice young people with many referring to their grooming process as friendship, consequently many young people use denial to cope with their exploitation experiences.

'If you can imagine a seesaw with family and outsiders it starts reversing the outsiders becoming the family and the child is told tales about their home and then police and social worker enter these homes with the child as the voice of the groomer saying it's the parents that's the problem they do XYZ I mean its grooming but these young boys groomed view grooming as what happens to young girls not men but if you ask what makes them family well they showed me love they showed me how to cook and pack it they took me in, it gets worse when they are 18 when they have been so deeply groomed but they become a perpetrator once they enter prison and if that lifestyle is all you've known you will become higher in the line and start recruiting'- Participant 1

This villainised parental narrative dominant within Criminal Exploitation is echoed by participant 1 with the perpetrators adopting the role of family coercing the child against the parents. This coercion against parents is perpetuated through social work interventions where the child is able to villainise the parents leading to further trauma and fear of blame for parents from services and professionals. Participant 1 also highlights the misconceptions around the grooming process implicated in Criminal Exploitation with many young males rejecting the term 'grooming' due its female stigma and synonymous connotation with the term victim, this victim narrative is further strained by the transitioning from adolescence to the age of 18 with victims now conforming to the social narrative of a perpetrator leading to potential imprisonment and deeper embedment within the line.

From a parent's eye view

Throughout each parents narrative was the recognition of key behavioural, physical and emotional changes traditionally associated with Criminal Exploitation as well as some more intimate changes noticeable to a parent due to the nature of their family role, these changes were largely related to self-care.

'He was like a Jekyll and Hyde sort of person he could be the old him and then flip, I mean he punched me in the face I thought he broke my nose he was completely off his head and would flip over anything even just washing his top, he didn't seem interested in washing, his face was spotty and gaunt he must have lost 2 stone in weight because obviously they got him hooked on the drugs he just didn't look like my child anymore'- Participant 2

The experiences of participant 2 highlight the intimate changes noted by parents relating to both temperament and self-care, with some referring to a Jekyll and Hyde analogy with their child at times reverting to their previous calmer self and then changing to become overly aggressive and defensive with these outbursts often being fuelled by substance misuse. The impact of exploitation also manifested in relation to self-care with participant 2 noting how washing and eating had now been abandoned with this abandonment being attributed to both their child's substance misuse and continuous mental deterioration from their exploitation experiences, these changes in physical appearance fed into the sense of loss experienced by parents with some not recognising their child's appearance.

'He has always been a really shy person I mean this whole thing kicked off last year when he got really depressed I mean that's how they got him and now he's really really overly confident but when he is frightened hes that shy little boy again its weird hes just a different person hes not my child he's a stranger that just says no comment he thinks I don't understand so when I'm telling the police or social worker stuff he's like your over exaggerating but his confidence has got quite big now he is very arrogant I don't know how to talk to him'- participant 3

The account from participant 3 recalls how these changes noted by parents are not restrictive to just self-care and temperament but also changes relating to personality and confidence. For participant 3 this change in confidence shifts when he becomes vulnerable, yet this vulnerability is where this confidence is derived from with senior line members using his mental health vulnerability as an enticement. This confidence is also demonstrated throughout interactions with services in which parent-child relationship changes with the child becoming overly dominant and silent towards the parent to the extent that the parent becomes unsure of how to interact with the child.

Barriers to professional services

Another theme highlighted by participants was the barriers noted by both parents and professionals when engaging with services in relation to Criminal Exploitation, with these barriers relating to the fear from engaging with services, limited legal understanding, under representation of parents and the parental stigma around the term 'neglect'.

'Firstly there is barely any early intervention but my understanding changed when police and social workers got involved which is scary anyway I mean the police they tell you all this stuff and precautions they may have to take which is great and it might be a blasé comment but I didn't know what any of it meant and its terrifying I don't know what to say to keep him out of prison I mentioned the NRM but there was nothing. I mean with social care its really difficult as well because there is no category for where he is they have put him under a neglect category implying I can't parent him and I mean as a parent hearing the word neglect is really hard to swallow'- Participant 3

The experiences of participant 3 illustrate how parents' realisation over the cynical nature of their child's exploitation experiences becomes clear when there is involvement with law enforcement and social care. This fear of this realisation is accentuated by parents limited understanding of the legal terminology and procedures with many parents now taking on the role of preventing their child from imprisonment. In, addition to this fear is the shame experienced by parents from the use of the term 'neglect; with this perpetuating any feelings of guilt or blame experienced by parents within the villainised narrative expressed by their child, with this guilt or blame now expanding to include perceived blame from professionals and services.

'Language I think we tend to use all that jargon don't we so its parents understanding that and being frightened about our involvement for a start and being anxious that services become involved with their family and the stigma around that its not always children from disadvantaged background we've had some quite affluent families and suddenly they've got a social worker involved and it can become quite stigmatising for them asking for help or support or reporting concerns. I mean professional meeting are good for young people's understanding, but parents aren't really involved in those processes/meetings so the next step for me is parental participation to hear their feedback and experiences'- Participant 5

The account from participant 5 reaffirms the challenges expressed by parents working with social care with parents often fearing service involvement/engagement and the terminology or categorisations used, in addition to the stigma around the service involvement and the impact of this stigma within neighbouring communities. Equally participant 5 also reveals the importance of young people's and parental understanding with parental understanding/feedback often being underrepresented with the need for parental inclusion being identified.

Cannabis: substance versus identity

Participants also emphasised the role of cannabis within Criminal Exploitation with cannabis use being a prominent risk characteristic for Criminal Exploitation as well as a significant coping mechanism when coping with the exploitation experiences and re- establishing their identity.

'I mean he is still using cannabis I mean that's what got him into all this but he just isn't ready to let go I think many including me thought its just another drug but it has been a crutch for him recovering from these experience he doesn't view is as drug but part of his life he was using cannabis before all this and then after and I think it means more to him because it still gives him the kudos with his mates without all the harm he had before' – Participant 5

Participant 5 describes the role of cannabis within criminal exploitation with cannabis being a significant risk factor for Criminal Exploitation and significant crutch during recovery in helping young people coping with their exploitation experiences. In the case of participant 5 cannabis become a way to re-establish their identity following their exploitation with cannabis still giving them the sense of kudos among peer groups but not the physical harm implicated the drug selling practices and consumption of class A substances.

Discussion

The present research aimed to reconcile gaps within the literature around county lines by exploring the characteristic risk profile of those vulnerable to CCE within rural regions. Findings revealed core demographic characteristics to be consistent with existing demographic with the majority of the sample being White British adolescent males within the age cohort of 16 who engage in educational absenteeism. These findings are consistent with existing evidence inferring White British adolescents males between the age of 16-18 years to be common methodology within CCE, with those prone to educational absenteeism also being identified as at risk for Criminal Exploitation and gang membership (Coomber & Moyle, 2018;Windle et al, 2020). The characteristic profile also revealed substance misuse patterns with the majority of the sample identifying cannabis, alcohol and nicotine as their primary, secondary and tertiary substance with misuse patterns for most substances (including Class A) demonstrating a significant decline and stable plateauing, however cannabis use decreased and plateaued but remained at a consistently high level. Previous research has affirmed these substance misuse patterns with cannabis being recognised for its role as gateway into exploitation and a key mechanism within the exploitative practices of CCE including debt bondage (Robinson et al, 2019). In addition to these substances misuse patterns, the current findings also revealed profile characteristics within the domains of family history, criminality, mental health and those indicative of criminal exploitation (e.g.

missing episodes, care status, social care involvement). The current sample was largely affected by family disruption (including domestic violence, parental substance misuse, parental neglect/abuse), had an increasing prevalence of historic suicide, no criminal history (with those that do being dominated by child sexual exploitation concerns) and care status and a presence of social care involvement and missing episodes. Although there are some profile consistencies with existing evidence highlighting the role of family disruption and the presence of social care involvement and missing episodes (Longfield, 2019; Windle et al, 2020; Andell & Pitts, 2018), there are some inconsistencies with the majority of the sample having no criminal history. Affirming propositions made by transactional theory (Thornberry, 1998) with adolescents with no criminal history also being targeted for recruitment due to their lack of police attention (Spicer et al, 2019). Those that did have a criminal history were dominated by sexual exploitation concerns reiterating trends highlighted by the NCA (2018) where an increasing prevalence in sexual exploitation has been reported in relation to County Lines. Furthermore, the absence of a care status and the dominant use of car as transport made was also contradictory to previous research in which a care history had been recognised as a significant risk factor for CCE and the majority of County Line travel had been railway based, despite the current trend of car/bike for transport implying a reliance on local county movement within rural regions (Andell & Pitts, 2018; NCA, 2018).

Interestingly, the present findings also illustrated the increasing prevalence of historic suicide within the sample, despite only current suicide and self-harm being recognised within the context of criminal exploitation as a significant indicator (Childrens Society, 2018). This finding can be attributed to need for acceptance prominent among those who have been through previous trauma as well as consistent narrative among perpetrators of young people especially those with existing vulnerabilities such as historic suicide concerns being somewhat disposable (Windle et al, 2020; Fisher et al, 2015). Expanding upon this, are patterns of mental wellbeing highlighted within the current findings through the related variables of self-esteem, life satisfaction, happiness, anxiety, close relationships and family, in which a decline in family, close relationships and anxiety were found with this being attributed to the strain of the grooming process on young people's peer and parental attachments. Patterns also revealed happiness and life satisfaction to continuously increase following service intervention and self-esteem to remain stable, contradictory to previous research inferring low self-esteem to be significant draw factor into gang membership and Criminal Exploitation (Donnellan et al, 2005; Sharkey et al, 2011). It is important to recognise that while the risk profile for those vulnerable to CCE demonstrates some consistency with previous profile characteristics and indicators, there are some inconsistencies with some of these inconsistencies often reflecting that of a typical

adolescent population (i.e. those with no concerns in the domains of mental health, criminality etc), thus illustrating the complexity of CCE with some factors increasing a child's risk but the targeting and effects of CCE not being restrictive to risk factors.

Family disruption characterised by domestic violence, parental abuse, parental neglect and parental substance misuse were largely present within the sample, due to this finding and the large amount of empirical attention towards the role of parents within gang membership (Hoffman, 2009; Young et al, 2013; Miller et al, 2001; Loeber & Farrington, 1998), the purpose of the qualitative component of the research was to gain a deeper insight into the role of parents within CCE by exploring the experiences of parents and those working closely with parents, affected by Criminal Exploitation. The present research identified five core themes, the first of which narrated the trauma experienced by parents affected by Criminal Exploitation with this trauma being derived from a sense of fear for the wellbeing and safety of their child and immediate family, as well as the sense of loss experienced by parents with these losses ranging from loss of job, relationships, mental wellbeing to the loss of child in instances of death, serious injury, separation and identity due to the behavioural changes of anger and violence that are implicit in CCE. Subsequently this fear and loss leads the use of coping mechanisms such as repression leading to parents self-neglecting their own needs resulting in a deterioration in parental wellbeing, all of which are consistent with experiences of parents affected by the exploitative practices of sexual exploitation and those affected by gang involvement, with many parents reporting a decline in mental health, cognitive function and appetite (Palmer and Jenkins, 2013; Unwin and Stephens-Lewis, 2016; Shuker and Ackerley, 2017; Kakar, 1998).

Equally, this trauma was further fuelled by the defining role of grooming within criminal exploitation with young children often being indoctrinated with a villainised narrative of parents centred around their lack of affection and concern, which perpetrators fulfil through the façade of a mutual friendship. This villainised narrative is perpetuated by interactions with services such as law enforcement and social care leading parents fearing from the perceived blame from services, this aggression towards parents and the child's detachment from the parent and family home resonate with the grooming experiences of parents affected by sexual exploitation (Shuker & Ackerley, 2017). Expanding on this villainised narrative are various grooming misconceptions implicated within CCE with these misconceptions focusing on the connotations of the term 'grooming' which adolescent males reject due to its connotation with the term 'victim' a traditionally female label leading to many young people using denial to cope with the trauma of their exploitative experiences. Ellis (2018) provides further insights arguing many young males to positively perceive their exploitation as a

willingness to survive in order to gain access to resources (e.g. money, clothing etc) that may be absent in their current living conditions (Ellis, 2018). This rejection of the victim narrative is further strained during the transition from adolescent to the age of 18 with many young people conforming to the perpetrator narrative leading to potential imprisonment and thus deeper embedment within the line. Research by Windle, Coomber and Moyle (2019) emphasises the challenges around the terminology of Criminal Exploitation with the term victim and perpetrator being socially constructed whereby the perpetrator is often an older male, conforming to the profile of CCE victims turning 18 years of age, who are often criminalised rather than safeguarded due to their complex needs despite many of experiencing the same trauma as younger victims (Sturrock & Holmes, 2015; Hoyle et al, 2011).

The third theme identified focused around the intimate behavioural and physical changes noted by parents with many young people experiencing a deterioration in self-care failing to wash or change their clothes. This deterioration in basic self-care skills resulted in many young people's physical appearance changing to the extent of some becoming unrecognisable further contributing to the sense of loss experienced by parents in relation to their child's identity. Frequent drug use, exhaustion from working morning to late evening drugs trades and the impact of exploitation on young people's wellbeing have all been attributed to this decline in self-care and physical appearance (Coomber & Moyle, 2018; Windle et al, 2020). Whilst a decline in self-care may not be present in sexual exploitation, similar physical changes have been noted (i.e. provocative dressing) with these physical changes often being accompanied by changes in personality that are associated with exploitation and the grooming process. Similarly, these changes in physical appearance associated with CCE were also accompanied by changes in temperament such as increasing levels of aggression and violence as well as an increase in confidence to the point of arrogance with this confidence being associated the increase in false hope and self-esteem that has been identified as a significant enticement into gang membership (Sharkey et al, 2011).

Another core theme identified within participants narratives was the some of the key barriers to professional engagement, with these barriers relating to the limited legal understanding/ information given to parents by local law enforcement with the NRM being a prime example as well as the categories used to define CCE within the field of social care and the shame and stigma associated with service involvement. One dominant narrative expressed by parents is the fear from interactions with service with the involvement from social care and law enforcement often being a catalyst for realisation for many parents that their child is

being criminally exploited. This realisation and the emotional labour of trying to protect their child from criminalisation is strained by parents and professionals limited legal knowledge/ understanding of CCE (including the NRM; National Referral Mechanism) resulting in parents feeling isolated from law enforcement. Existing evidence has highlighted similar concerns with parents affected by gang involvement reporting their limited legal understanding and complex interactions with law enforcement to be an isolating experience creating a barrier of 'us' versus 'them' between parents and agencies (Aldridge, Shute, Ralphs & Medina, 2011). For social care parental barriers were centred around terminology with term 'neglect' often amounting to the already present feelings of guilt and shame associated with stigma of social care involvement, with parents affected by gang involvement also reporting a sensitivity to the shame from law enforcement and social care as well as the perceived shame from their neighbouring community (Aldridge et al, 2011). In addition to these barriers was the emphasis for early intervention and parental representation from key services with this emphasis being echoed within academia and statutory agencies.

Finally, the last theme recognised the pivotal role of cannabis within exploitation whereby cannabis acts as gateway drug into exploitation and becomes increasingly versatile within the exploitative processes of debt bondage and adolescent selling practices. The current findings reveal our misconceptions around cannabis as solely a substance than part of a young persons identity with cannabis being present within their lives before their exploitation and afterwards as a coping mechanism when re- establishing their identity with cannabis still providing them with peer status and approval. The association between cannabis and identity has been well documented with cannabis often being part of our social identity in which cannabis use provides regular social interactions through buying and selling exchanges with these exchanges underlying the formation and maintenance of many adolescent friendships (Parker et al, 1998;Hammersley, Jenkins & Reid, 2001; Holm,Sandberg, Kolind & Hesse, 2014;Mostaghim & Hathaway, 2013; Blevins et al, 2018). These finding are further supported by the conclusions of Dahl (2015) who concluded cannabis to add to user's identity signalling independence, free thinking and sociability, with this identity preventing users from reducing their substance use.

Limitations and Implications

There are limitations to the present research with the sample being representative of those being criminally exploited within the period of the last year, additionally this data is derivative from referrals dependent upon partner agencies and parents who are often limited by resources availability, time constraints, youth engagement and societal conditions such as

the recent Covid 19 pandemic, therefore it is likely that they will be a portion of young people affected by CCE who are not represented. Equally while the location of Shropshire provides insight into the CCE profile within rural regions, these findings are likely to differ amongst other rural locations with each CCE profile being impacted by the responses of local authorities and agencies within education and health care domains as well as the constraints and availability of transport. Furthermore, the current research provides no causality between the variables measured, as an exploratory study it is vital that future research continues to explore the profile characteristics of those vulnerable to Criminal Exploitation across all regions to provide a more holistic depiction of CCE as well as future longitudinal research into the impact of Criminal Exploitation on adolescent mental wellbeing, self-concept, substance misuse and attachment being beneficial for youth services and CCE interventions.

Nevertheless, the current findings have practical and theoretical implications with this characteristic profile and the insights into the role/impact of grooming from parental narratives supporting the framework of transactional theory, whereby these weakened societal bonds with societal structures (i.e. declining familial relationship and educational absenteeism) are attributed to these villainised narratives of parents and the imitation of perpetrators as role models and the reinforcement of acceptance they give through the façade of mutual friendship . In addition, to the risk characteristics/indicators of cannabis use, historic suicide etc, providing a clear account of the targeting and impact of criminal exploitation. From these findings are practical implications and recommendations with the need for further training for services implicated in CCE, around the language of Criminal Exploitation including our societal schemes and attitudes towards the term victim and perpetrator and how this translates into the effectiveness and use of the procedures such as the National Referral Mechanism (NRM). Additionally considerations around the categories used by social care to define CCE are also recommended, with all these inconsistencies further highlighting the need for a national understanding and strategy to address CCE, through a 'brotherhood' model that recognises the defining role and challenges associated with the grooming within Criminal Exploitation.

Additionally, several service gaps were identified with the emphasis for parents to have an active voice within service delivery being recognised therefore recommendations for regular parental feedback and/ or an independent parental advisor within relevant services would help reconcile these parental barriers and increase parental engagement for parents who may be isolated from services due to these barriers with trust and reassurance from services playing an active role in the underreporting of missing episodes. Equally, the concerns were

also raised around the limited number of specialist parent services and the minimal existing support for parents within local authorities and services, despite the qualitative findings highlighting the negative impact Criminal Exploitation can have on parents' mental wellbeing and parent and child relationships. Applications of the results can be used to inform a family approach similar to the approach of parents affected by sexual exploitation (Shuker, 2017) whereby relevant services recognised the importance stages of exploitation for parents including realisation, reassurance and resilience with this approach incorporating parental interventions centred around coping with loss and fear, the role of shame, exploitation expectations for parents and the importance of self-compassion.

Further applications that could be incorporated into relevant services is support for those within the age cohort of 18 who are still vulnerable to the impact of exploitation but due to our societal narratives of crime victims and perpetrators are often depicted as perpetrators leading to potential imprisonment and thus deeper embedment within the line.

Recommendations for local services and authorities to include interventions for those transitioning from adolescence to the age of 18 being recognised, whereby interventions such as a transition worker or bridging the gap scheme could be used to help support those transitioning to 18 with the aim being to utilise diversionary activities and goals to prevent imprisonment and break the vicious cycle of recruitment utilised by perpetrators of Criminal Exploitation. Finally, the current findings also have applications to drug awareness campaigns within local youth and substances services as well as schools and higher education with the need for greater recognition around the role of cannabis, within Criminal Exploitation being focused cannabis as gateway drug into exploitation and mechanism to re-establish identity following the trauma of exploitation. Building upon this application, is the use of peer mentoring schemes for those at risk of criminal exploitation whereby the purpose of the mentor is to promote adaptive coping skills for coping with trauma with attention being given to protective factors of suicide due to the profile's focus on historic suicide concerns.

Conclusion

The overall purpose of this study was to firstly explore the characteristic profile of those at risk of CCE within the rural region of Shropshire and to gain insight into the role of parents within CCE by exploring their experiences. It was found that whilst some aspects of the characteristic profile were consistent with previous literature, some inconsistencies were identified including: the dominant role of cannabis use, the increasing prevalence of historic suicide concerns/ideation/self harm, the absence of a care history and criminal history and reliance on local modes of transport. Therefore, whilst there are factors that increase a child's risk to Criminal Exploitation, the effects and targeting of CCE are not restrictive to this

profile with the present research demonstrating discrepancies between current and existing CCE profiles. The qualitative findings recognised the implicit parental trauma within CCE, the grooming narratives and misconceptions associated with Criminal Exploitation, intimate physical and behavioural changes noted by parents, the role of cannabis in re-establishing adolescent identity and key barriers to parental service engagement. Despite, these findings being limited by concerns around the representativeness of the sample, applications of the findings could be useful for law enforcement and social care with the need for further training around our societal narratives of crime victims and crime perpetrators and the language and procedures (such as the NRM) associated with Criminal Exploitation being identified . Additionally, applications of the findings could also be beneficial to local services and towards the development of specialist services whereby a parent centred approach is recommended focusing around parental trauma and coping, as well as transition workers/bridging the gap schemes also being beneficial in preventing those at the pivotal exploitation age of 18 being criminalised and embedded deeper within the line. Other domains in which the current findings may be applicable is education, with awareness around the role of cannabis within Criminal Exploitation as both a significant risk factor and crutch when re-establishing adolescent identity following these exploitative experiences being highlighted. Finally, the present research expands upon the current body of literature by recognising both the unique profile characteristics of those vulnerable to CCE within rural regions and the fundamental impact of CCE on families with this impact further emphasising the vital need for a national strategy in order to protect both children and parents.

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