Characteristics of group-based child sexual exploitation in the community

Literature review

October 2020

Contents

1. Executive summary

This paper provides an overview of key literature focused on the characteristics of group-based child sexual exploitation (CSE) in the community. It sets out what is known about several aspects of group-based CSE:

- the prevalence of group-based CSE;
- the offending behaviours and strategies seen;
- the characteristics of offenders involved;
- the characteristics and make-up of offender networks; and
- the characteristics of victims.

This literature review is not a systematic review, but draws largely on recent research relating to the UK, such as published academic research, official statistics and grey literature. It aims to assess the available evidence about the characteristics of this type of offending, and consider challenges and evidence gaps in this area.

CSE is a subset of child sexual abuse (CSA). The Department for Education defines it as occurring when: *"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) for the financial advantage or increased status of the 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)

Groups have been defined as *"two or more people of any age, connected through formal or informal associations or networks, including, but not exclusive to, friendship groups"* (Berelowitz *et al.*, 2013). Whilst some members of groups will engage in co-offending (described in some research as co-involvement in specific criminal events [Cockbain, 2018]), this review will also examine other features of these networks, such as the members' social bonds and the enabling of each others' offending behaviour.

The term 'victim' is used to describe a person who has been sexually exploited. Some people who have experienced sexual exploitation prefer the term 'survivor', and the term 'complainant' is used in the criminal justice system when accusations have not been proven. For clarity, the term 'victim' is used throughout this review.

Understanding the prevalence of group-based child sexual exploitation

As with other types of CSA, CSE is under-reported and under-identified, which makes it very difficult to understand the true prevalence and scale of this type of offending. Whilst there are criminal offences of 'abuse of children through sexual exploitation' and 'sexual grooming', in practice these do not capture all CSE offending and so it is difficult to pick out from police or agency data. Different organisations have tended to use different definitions of CSE, making comparison of sources challenging. Under-reporting and under-identification are key challenges, with some victims reluctant to come forward and a varying ability of professionals to identify CSE (Beckett *et al.*, 2017). Furthermore, there have been no formal prevalence studies in the UK that measure CSE (or group-based CSE). Therefore, the available evidence is based on the small amount of CSE that is reported or identified.

Offender modus operandi

Offenders who commit CSE in groups operate in a number of different ways. Based on the available literature it appears that much contact with victims is initially a result of shared locality. It can develop into more structured grooming, with the provision of commodities (for example, drugs, alcohol, gifts) to victims often used to gain their trust and then to control them and reduce their likelihood of reporting (CEOP, 2011; Turnbull *et al.,* 2012; Skidmore *et al.,* 2016; Cockbain, 2018). Various models of this type of offending have been suggested in the literature, such as the 'boyfriend' model wherein the offender leads the victim to believe that they are in a relationship in order to exploit and abuse them, or the 'party' model wherein a victim is taken to a location and passed around a network of offenders. However, there is limited evidence for clearly delineated typologies of offending and whilst agencies and research do report seeing behaviour that fits into categories such as these, it is recognised that these models are not substantiated by robust evidence (Eaton and Holmes, 2017).

Offender characteristics

Research suggests that offenders are predominantly male, and that those offending in groups may be younger than those operating alone (Berelowitz *et al.,* 2012; Berelowitz *et al.,* 2013; CEOP, 2013). Some available research finds that, in line with the population of the UK, the majority of CSE offenders in certain samples are White (Berelowitz *et al.,* 2012; Berelowitz *et al.,* 2015; NPCC, 2015), but there is also some limited evidence of an over-representation of Asian offenders compared with their proportion of the population. However, this evidence is often based on small sample sizes not meant for generalisation to the wider population. With these small samples it therefore remains difficult to draw conclusions about the make-up of the offender population and compare this with the local demography of certain areas. Further, data on ethnicity are often poorly collected and incomplete (CEOP, 2011; Berelowitz *et al.,* 2012; Skidmore *et al.,* 2016).

Offending groups in the community have been seen to be commonly based on pre-existing social connections (CEOP, 2011; Cockbain *et al.,* 2011; Cockbain, 2018; Senker *et al.,* 2020). They can range from two offenders to groups in the tens of offenders (CEOP, 2011; CEOP, 2013). Offender motives vary, and whilst some operate for financial gain (Berelowitz *et al.,* 2012; Gohir, 2013; Skidmore *et al.,* 2016) some research suggests that offenders in certain samples may be motivated by misogyny and a desire for control rather than a specific sexual interest in children (CEOP, 2011; Gohir, 2013).

Victims of child sexual exploitation

CSA as a whole is under-reported and under-identified, with evidence that as few as one in four victims of certain types of abuse report their experiences to anyone at the time, according to the Crime Survey for England and Wales (Office for National Statistics, 2020). The understanding of victim characteristics is therefore limited to those who do report or are identified, either at the time or later in life, and whether they report to the authorities or in surveys and other research. In general, it is known that victims of CSE are mostly female (CEOP, 2011; Berelowitz *et al.,* 2012; NPCC, 2015), although it is likely that this is exacerbated by known under-reporting and

identification of CSE targeting males (Fox, 2016; Beckett *et al.,* 2017; Allnock *et al.,* 2019). Known victims of this type of crime are also most often White (CEOP, 2011; Berelowitz *et al.,* 2012; NPCC, 2015), but again, there are widely acknowledged barriers to disclosure by, and identification of, victims from ethnic minority backgrounds (Gohir, 2013; Fox 2016; Beckett *et al.,* 2017; The Children's Society, 2018; Allnock *et al.,* 2019). Known victims of CSE are most commonly aged between 14 and 17, with a peak age of 15 (Berelowitz *et al.,* 2012; CEOP, 2013; Gohir, 2013; NPCC, 2015). However, these findings may be a result of the ways that CSE is defined and conceptualized, and it is not possible to look more closely at the characteristics of victims of group-based CSE more specifically. Some victims may also come to the attention of authorities or services much later than when their abuse actually started, thus skewing the picture in the recorded data.

Any child can be a victim of CSE, but there are certain risk factors and life events that are thought to increase vulnerability. Victims tend to display a variety of risk factors such as:

- being looked-after;
- having a disability; and
- having a history of running away.

These risk factors may intersect in dynamic ways and heighten their vulnerability to CSE (Brown *et al.,* 2016; Beckett *et al.,* 2017).

2. Introduction

Group-based child sexual exploitation (CSE) in the community, sometimes called 'street grooming' or 'localised grooming', has been the subject of considerable media attention in the last decade (CEOP, 2011; Cockbain, 2013; *Huffington Post*, 2013; *Guardian*, 2014; Eaton and Holmes, 2017; *Yorkshire Evening Post*, 2017; *Huffington Post*, 2019; *The Independent*, 2019; T*he Telegraph*, 2020). The term 'on-street grooming' was first used in 2011 when Andrew Norfolk, a journalist for *The Times* reported on what was described as a new type of crime (Norfolk, 2011; Cockbain and Tufail, 2020). The term 'grooming gangs' is commonly used to refer to such offending, despite there being no clear definition, legal or otherwise, for this distinction (Cockbain and Tufail, 2020).

It has been argued that this type of offending has been drawn out from other types of child sexual abuse (CSA) offending, and commonly reported on as a uniquely racial crime threat (*ibid.*). Here the media is described as having commonly focused on high-profile cases that fit the narrative of the 'Asian offender' model (Cockbain, 2013), such as cases exposed in Derby, Middlesbrough Oxford, Preston, Rochdale, Rotherham, Shropshire, and Telford (Gill and Harrison, 2015). Coverage of these cases tends to suggest that a disproportionate number of Asian, Muslim and Pakistani-heritage men are generally involved in the organised grooming and abuse of White British girls (Cockbain and Tufail, 2020), and pays less attention to the other forms of CSE that occur (Eaton and Holmes, 2017).

Indeed, it has been noted that over the past decade, the 'Muslim grooming gangs' narrative has become entrenched in public discourse (Cockbain and Tufail, 2020). It has been suggested that this can result in a stereotyping of what this type of abuse looks like, which can be harmful as offenders and victims who do not fit the image drawn out in the media may be under-identified or dismissed (Eaton and Holmes, 2017) and attention may not be paid to tackling the diverse forms of offending. For example, the Drew review reported one police superintendent describing the challenge in his local area as being characterised by 'White European males, in their mid-40s, making extensive use of the internet for initial grooming, often of boys, and not operating as gangs at all' (Drew, 2016), which is a drastically different picture to that commonly portrayed in the media.

As well as the media, political discourse around CSE has also tended to focus on the 'grooming gangs' narrative. Arguments commonly refer to whether issues of political correctness and cultural sensitivity have been said to have prevented thorough and robust investigations (Colley, 2019).

Despite the media and public attention that this issue receives, the evidence around what this kind of offending looks like, who the offenders are, how they target, groom and abuse their victims, and who their victims are, remains limited. This is exacerbated by issues around professionals' understanding of:

- what group-based CSE is;
- how it can be identified;
- victim reluctance to report CSE (and CSA in general); and
- a lack of data on group-based CSE (and again, CSA in general).

The Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse (IICSA) is conducting an inquiry into CSE by organised networks, to investigate the nature and extent of, and institutional responses to, CSE. It is hoped that this will develop understanding of this type of CSA (Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse, 2019). This review hopes to add to this increased awareness and understanding.

2.1. Purpose and aims of this review

This review sets out what is known about group-based CSE in the community, examining evidence relating to offenders, offending behaviours, and the victims of such offences. Its purpose is to assess the available evidence and provide some insight about the characteristics of this type of offending. It also highlights some of the limitations of work in this area. This review will summarise the evidence to assist policy professionals to set out the Government's position on tackling group-based CSE and develop a programme of further work in this area.

This is not intended to be a systematic review. Timescales and resource availability necessitated certain constraints on the review's comprehensiveness. In order to assess the current evidence base (as at October 2020), the search for literature was based on publicly available sources and draws largely on recent research relating to the UK, such as published academic research, official statistics and grey literature. The available data and evidence about this type of offending was then assessed along with the challenges and evidence gaps in this area.

Much of the literature available on the issue of CSE conflates groups and gangs or does not adequately distinguish between the two. **This paper concentrates on research that specifically and explicitly focuses on group-based CSE in the community.** It is worth noting that just as not all CSE is perpetrated by groups, not all abuse perpetrated by groups will be CSE. The Centre of expertise on CSA (The CSA Centre) recently published a typology of abuse and notes as a type *"CSA through groups and networks",* which can involve abuse where the concept of any form of 'exchange' is absent (The CSA Centre, 2020). This review focuses on CSE as a subset of abuse by groups.

Because this review focuses on group-based CSE that takes place in the community it does not include CSE that occurs within institutions or organisations, such as schools and care homes, which have statutory lines of responsibility. Nor does it include non-British children who are trafficked into the UK for sexual exploitation, or offending wherein British offenders travel overseas to commit offences. Whilst sometimes considered a community, this review has also chosen not to focus on abuse that is primarily instigated or takes place online. This is because whilst there are definite overlaps between offending that takes place on- and offline, and the use of online technologies has been seen to facilitate this type of offending, there is also a distinction between networks and groups who mainly operate online and the groups involved in the type of localised offending that this review sets out to examine.

2.2. Defining group-based child sexual exploitation

When referring to the type of group-based CSE that this review aims to examine, the media uses a variety of terms to describe this type of abuse, referring to different forms and manifestations of group-based CSE. For example, the term 'grooming gang' is used widely in the media (*Yorkshire Evening Post*, 2017; *The Independent*, 2019; *The Telegraph*, 2020), with some authors suggesting that it is often a more racialised term (Cockbain and Tufail, 2020). Other terms used include 'sex gangs' (Cockbain, 2013; Eaton and Holmes, 2017), 'internal child sex trafficking' (Cockbain & Wortley, 2015), and 'localised grooming' (CEOP, 2011; House of Commons Home Affairs Committee, 2013). IICSA refers to *"CSE by organised networks",* which is defined as follows: "*An organised network is characterised by two or more individuals (whether identified or not) who are known to (or associated with) one another and are known to be involved in or to facilitate the sexual exploitation of children. Being involved in the sexual exploitation of children includes introducing them to other individuals for the purpose of exploitation, trafficking a child for the purpose of sexual exploitation, taking payment for sexual activities with a child or allowing their*

property to be used for sexual activities with a child" (Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse, 2019).

Definitions of CSE have been varied and developing for some time (Eaton and Holmes, 2017) and agencies and research studies still use a variety of definitions (Kelly and Karsna, 2018; Walker *et al.,* 2018). Research into public perceptions of CSE in Scotland has highlighted that there are many, sometimes contradictory, conceptions of CSE that do not often match the formal definition (Friskney, 2019). The most recent definition of CSE in England, considered now to be the main definition and thus the one used for the purposes of this review, was set out by the Department of Education in 2017 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) for the financial advantage or increased status of the offender 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)

As well as the need to define 'CSE', the 'group-based' aspect of these crimes is contentious. Although the term 'grooming gangs' is used in the media as well as in some literature, it is important to distinguish between gangs and other types of groups. The two types of association can be distinguished as follows:

"Gangs are relatively durable, predominantly street-based social groups of children, young people and, not infrequently, young adults who see themselves, and are seen by others, as affiliates of a discrete, named group who (1) engage in a range of criminal activity and violence; (2) identify or lay claim to territory; (3) have some form of identifying structural feature; and (4) are in conflict with similar groups. Groups are two or more people of any age, connected through formal or informal associations or networks, including, but not exclusive to, friendship groups." (Berelowitz *et al.,* 2013).

As noted by the Children's Commissioner for England, whilst gangs are a type of 'group', they exist independently of involvment in CSE and may instead be involved in other behaviours or criminality, of which CSE may be an incidental feature (Berelowitz *et al.,* 2012). Whilst some members of networks will engage in co-offending (described in some research as co-involvement in specific criminal events [Cockbain, 2018]), this review will also examine other features of these networks, such as the members' social bonds and the enabling of each others' offending behaviour. It is noted that those who offend in groups are not necessarily a distinct population from those who offend alone, and offenders have been seen to engage in both types of offending (*ibid.*)

Whilst the use of these definitions and parameters can be justified, they do still pose their own issues when examining group-based CSE. For example, the definition of CSE is general enough to refer to a large proportion of CSA, as it encompasses a large range of behaviours (Eaton and Holmes, 2017).

It has been highlighted that CSE should be clearly distinguished from CSA in order to allow for accurate measurement (Kelly and Karsna, 2018). In practice, it has been noted that the definition is often used in relation to a much more specific subset of CSE crimes, particularly those involving older children (Cockbain *et al.,* 2017), whilst CSE in younger children may be under-identified (Eaton and Holmes, 2017). Indeed, the Drew review of CSE in South Yorkshire noted that practice in some areas has been hampered by a limited view of what CSE looks like, and that this was common on a wider level (Drew, 2016). The definition of groups encompasses a wide variety of associations between offenders, including groups with their own specific dynamics, such as gangs or those who network online but do not know each other. There is also variation when talking about

groups as to whether they refer to offenders who specifically commit offences together, or those who are associated but may offend alone.

3. Understanding the prevalence of group-based child sexual exploitation

As with other types of child sexual abuse (CSA), child sexual exploitation (CSE) is frequently under-reported and under-identified, making it very difficult to offer any reliable prevalence data. Prevalence estimates for all types of CSA vary largely, depending on the framing of different surveys and the context in which they are completed. Few studies have attempted to identify CSE prevalence due to the increased complexity involved in defining it, and adding questions about numbers of perpetrators to identify group-based CSE would only add to the challenges (Kelly and Karsna, 2018). In the UK there has never been a prevalence study of group-based CSE or even CSE more generally (*ibid.*). Prevalence estimates for CSE therefore tend to rely on agency data from various organisations such as statutory or support services, which brings its own challenges.

These partly relate to the definitional issues set out above. Concerns around how CSE is defined and interpreted pose issues for identifying victims (Eaton and Holmes, 2017; Kelly and Karsna, 2018). The overlaps between CSA and CSE also raise issues for how the two can be differentiated in studies and agency data (Kelly and Karsna, 2018; Christie and Karsna, 2019), and changing definitions over time limit the comparability of available data, making prevalence estimates in particular hard to track (Parke and Karsna, 2019).

3.1. Reporting and identification

Other issues relate to the challenges for agencies and organisations in identifying where group-based CSE has occurred. Victims sometimes cannot or will not report, often fearing the consequences of disclosing, or if they do disclose may be dismissed and not believed or taken seriously (Turnbull *et al.,* 2012; Gohir, 2013; Coffey, 2014; McNaughton Nicholls *et al.,* 2014; Franklin *et al.,* 2015; Cockbain *et al.,* 2017; The Children's Society, 2018; Allnock *et al.,* 2019).

Victims of CSA in general rarely report their experiences of abuse (Office for National Statistics, 2020) and identification by professionals varies across the country meaning the number of known cases is not an accurate representation of levels of offending and victimisation (Beckett *et al.,* 2017). The Children's Commissioner for England's Inquiry into CSE in gangs and groups estimated that there were 16,500 children at high risk of CSE from April 2010 to March 2011, based on local authorities observing three or more types of behaviour indicating that they were at risk (Berelowitz *et al.,* 2012).[1] However, these indicators are not always substantiated (Eaton and Holmes, 2017), meaning that even this estimate is unlikely to be accurate. Despite the likelihood that CSE is prevalent across the country, as with all forms of CSA, under-reporting and inability to identify cases is common. The Children's Commissioner for England assessed that many victims of child sexual abuse in the family environment do not tell the police it has occurred, with some waiting until adulthood before disclosing the sexual abuse (Longfield, 2015). This is likely to be true for all types of CSA, including group-based CSE.

Some victims may fear not being believed, with the Crime Survey for England and Wales conducted by the Office for National Statistics finding that between 33% and 45% of victims of any contact CSA did not disclose their abuse at the time for this reason (Office for National Statistics,

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[1] Based on data returned from professionals working in the area, victims of sexual exploitation, police forces, local authority children's services and services in primary care trusts.

2020). Others may fear being blamed for their abuse (Beckett and Warrington, 2015) or fear repercussions if they had been involved in illegal activity (Eaton and Holmes, 2017). Victims may fear threats of violence, or feel some sense of loyalty towards the perpetrator (The Children's Society, 2018).

Some victims will have been isolated from friends and family as part of the grooming and abuse that they have suffered, and therefore may feel they have nowhere to turn to for support (The Children's Society, 2018). For some victims, there is not always an understanding that they have been abused, and some may feel responsible for their abuse (Drew, 2016; Beckett *et al.,* 2017). This is seen to be particularly common in children with learning disabilities (Franklin *et al.,* 2015). Boys in particular are also less likely to feel able to disclose abuse (Smeaton, 2013; McNaughton Nicholls *et al.,* 2014) and victims from ethnic minority backgrounds also face extra barriers to disclosure for many reasons (Gohir, 2013; Fox, 2016; The Children's Society, 2018; Allnock *et al.,* 2019). Language barriers, cultural or religious expectations, community pressures, and a lack of understanding or distrust of support services are examples of some of these issues (Gohir, 2013; The Children's Society, 2018), and shame and stigma were commonly mentioned as barriers to disclosure by ethnic minority participants in research commissioned by IICSA (Rodger *et al.,* 2020).

The Drew review on the response of South Yorkshire Police to CSE noted that police officers often face difficulties engaging with victims who do not realise that they are being exploited, and some will require *"months, and in some cases years"* of work before they can acknowledge their abuse (Drew, 2016, p 18). It has been recommended that young people are not pressured to disclose before they are ready, as this can have significant negative impacts (Beckett *et al.,* 2017).

3.2. Data availability

The issues of data availability and sharing are a major impediment to identifying cases of CSA for research and intervention generally, including subsets such as group-based CSE. Recording of CSE cases is a relatively recent development, meaning that there are still inconsistencies in the way that these data are recorded and collected (Kelly and Karsna, 2018). Proactive engagement and information sharing between agencies is essential to identify child victims of sexual abuse and exploitation (Smeaton, 2013; Radford *et al.,* 2017).

Even where CSE offending is reported or identified and data are collected on the suspects, locations and victims, it is still often inconsistently recorded, due to a lack of systematic processes in place (Skidmore *et al.,* 2016) as well as issues around how CSE is conceptualised and interpreted (Cockbain *et al.,* 2017; Kelly and Karsna, 2018; Cockbain and Tufail, 2020). Data relating to CSE remain scattered (both within police systems and across agencies) making it hard to gain an accurate picture of the scale of the problem or the effectiveness of responses (Kelly and Karsna, 2018).

There are currently (as at October 2020) no studies of the prevalence of CSE and this, combined with the lack of good quality official data, results in difficulties in understanding the true picture of group-based CSE. As a result, it is extremely difficult to draw robust conclusions about the victims and offenders involved from official data.

3.2.1. Police recorded crime

Police recorded crime data can give an idea of the scale of CSE, although these are accepted to be an underestimate as it is known that only a minority of victims of CSA more widely will approach the police directly (Longfield, 2015; Parke and Karsna, 2019; Office for National Statistics, 2020). Therefore, the available data will exclude what has been called the 'dark figure' of offences – offenders and victims who are not identified or do not report, and therefore are not captured in official data (Cockbain *et al.,* 2020). Further, whilst the Sexual Offences Act 2003 was amended by the Serious Crime Act 2015 to include reference to the sexual exploitation of a child and there is now a criminal offence of 'abuse of children through sexual exploitation', in practice this does not capture all CSE offending. Research by The CSA Centre examined two crime types that they suggest can be looked at as a proxy for CSE due to incorporating behaviours seen in sexual exploitation terminology and definitions; both of these offences have seen a large increase in recent years. 'Abuse of children through sexual exploitation' saw an increase of 110% from 617 offences to 1,295 offences and 'sexual grooming' increased by 266% from 1,191 offences to 4,356 offences between 2016/17 and 2017/18 (Parke and Karsna, 2019). These increases could be due to an increase in offending but are also likely to be the result of better recording practices (*ibid.*)

However, these numbers still remain low compared with overall CSA offences. In the year to March 2020, there were 57,888 police recorded child sexual abuse offences (excluding those that related to indecent images of children).[2] Looking at the crimes that seem to relate most closely to CSE is likely to paint an inaccurate picture, as there are a huge range of crimes beyond these crimes that can involve CSE; the precise proportions of these cannot be assessed. This range of charges that can be brought make it difficult to look specifically at CSE, and more so group-based offences (Barnardo's, 2011; House of Commons Home Affairs Committee, 2013). For example, one study of perpetrators of CSE convicted alongside others found that offenders had been convicted of offences including, but not limited to, rape, attempted rape, penetrative sexual activity with a child, sexual assault, conspiracy to rape, trafficking for sexual exploitation, meeting a girl under 16 following grooming, and engaging in sexual activity in the presence of a child aged between 13 and 15 (Senker *et al.,* 2020).

With the large number of offences that can be and are recorded, at present the main way of identifying which police recorded crimes are CSE is through the use of flags,[3] although there is no way to look more closely at group-based CSE.

The CSE flag can be applied to any sexual offence if it involved any form of CSE. In the year to March 2020, 12,569 police recorded offences were flagged as CSE.[4] Group-based CSE will make up a subset of these offences, the size of which cannot be readily quantified.

Implementation issues have resulted in substantially fewer CSA and CSE flagged crimes than expected when compared with the total number of recorded crimes, so this is not yet a reliable data source (Parke and Karsna, 2019), and recording practices remain inconsistent both within and across forces (Allnock *et al.,* 2017; Christie and Karsna, 2019). Although it has been suggested that the CSE flag is better used than the CSA flag (Christie and Karsna, 2019), limited instances of CSE are currently visible in police data, although this may change when CSE flags are fully and correctly used (Kelly and Karsna, 2018). Implementing the CSE flags also relies on a consistent application of a definition of CSE which, as discussed earlier, is difficult to achieve. Whilst a more

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[2] Police recorded crime, year ending March 2020. Available online at:
https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/bulletins/crimeinenglandandwales/yearendingmarch2020
[3] The CSE flag became a formal requirement in police recorded crime data in April 2016.
[4] Flag data can be found at:
https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/datasets/crimeinenglandandwalesotherrelatedtables -
Table F11: *Number of crimes flagged as child sexual abuse and (as a subset) crimes flagged as CSE, and incidents flagged as CSE recorded by the police in England and Wales, by police force area, year ending March 2019 and 2020 (Experimental Statistics)*

consistent use of the CSE flag may give a clearer picture of the number of police recorded CSE crimes, it is not sufficiently granular to give a sense of the scale of group-based CSE, which will be an even smaller subset.

Police data particularly suffer from a lack of consistency in recording, in part because systems are not set up to capture much of the information from various agencies that would signify that a child is at risk of CSE. Additionally, it has been seen that there remains confusion amongst practitioners around how to classify a group involved with organised CSE, with only limited numbers of groups being entered by local police forces into the organised crime group mapping system (Skidmore *et al.,* 2016). This inconsistency in recording is another example of disparate data relating to these crimes. Institutional bias is an issue that can affect official data, and impact on how much the findings can be generalised to the whole population, but it is often difficult even to estimate the extent of such bias (Cockbain *et al.,* 2020). It has also been noted that law enforcement data in particular are shaped by goals, processes and pressures, as well as human error (*ibid.).* Allnock *et al.* (2017) found that police officers who took part in their study into CSE policing felt strongly that there were data-recording issues and the resulting absence of quality information was seen to be detrimental to each force's response to CSE, due to the subsequent difficulty of evaluating different policing strategies.

3.2.2. Other data sources

A number of other sources can give a sense of the scale of CSA or CSE more generally, but similarly cannot look more closely at group-based CSE. The Children's Commissioner for England's inquiry identified approximately 50,000 victims of CSA who were known to statutory services over the period from April 2012 to March 2014. Statistical modelling[5] estimates that only one in eight victims of all types of CSA are known by the authorities. However, this is based on data of variable quality and should not be taken as a definitive figure (Longfield, 2015). The Office for National Statistics also found that only 8% to 10% of victims of any type of contact CSA disclosed their abuse to someone in an official position[6] at the time (Office for National Statistics, 2020). As CSE is a subset of CSA more generally, it is almost certain that a significant number of group-based CSE victims are also not known to the authorities.

Looking at CSE, Childline reported that in 2018/19 it delivered 4,500 counselling sessions regarding CSE, an increase of 16% on the year before (NSPCC, 2019). The CSA Centre found that for every 10,000 children in the population, 16.9 children were assessed as being at risk of CSE by their local authorities in 2017/18, an increase from 15.6 in the previous year (Parke and Karsna, 2019). However, as children can be assessed multiple times in a year, this may be an overestimate due to double-counting.

Relating more specifically to group-based CSE, it has been noted that it is not possible to establish an accurate estimate of the volume of CSE that is being perpetuated by groups, due to a lack of studies into this type of offending (Walker *et al.,* 2018). Barnardo's found evidence that coordinated organised abuse by groups of offenders has been increasing since 2009, but this could be the result of more awareness rather than an actual increase in crime (Paskell, 2013). They reported in 2013 that the number of children and young people using their CSE services increased by 22% since 2010–11 (from 1,190 to 1,452) and by 37% since 2008/09 (*ibid.*). More recent figures are not available for the number of children and young people using their services, but more recent impact

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[5] Multiple systems estimation has been previously used to estimate the number of victims of modern slavery in the UK. See: **Silverman, B.** (2014) *Modern slavery: an application of Multiple Systems Estimations.*
[6] 'Someone in an official position' includes the police, teachers, doctors and health care workers.

reports demonstrate a year-on-year increase in the numbers of people (including family members of victims, for example) accessing their CSE services (Barnardo's, 2017).

3.2.3. Data sharing

It has been suggested by the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) that a review of police local multi-agency intelligence collection processes could allow information to be used to profile local risk and pre-emptively identify potential victims. Local authorities, the police, health and other key agencies like probation and youth offending could then share information and intelligence to fully understand the local patterns of CSE, disrupt offenders and protect vulnerable children (Ofsted, 2016). The CSA Centre piloted a new data collection template in four areas with the aim of improving records and sharing data between agencies. Although this was only completed in a small number of areas due to limited time constraints, the subsequent interviews and feedback on the template made it clear that although agencies do collect a large amount of data, at present:

- not enough information was able to be reported consistently across areas about victims and offenders; and
- different agencies were focusing on different aspects when reporting information.

However, professionals have reported that information about CSE was being collected more consistently and completely than that about CSA (Christie and Karsna, 2019) perhaps due to the increased awareness of CSE in recent years (Eaton and Holmes, 2017). Barnardo's reported evidence that victims and practitioners felt that a local police investigation into CSE improves how agencies work together, by encouraging information sharing and collaborative working. This can also work in reverse, with information shared between agencies resulting in better police intelligence (Smeaton, 2013). However, this brings up issues of trust and ethics – some victims will only feel comfortable disclosing to someone in an official position if they believe that they can share information in confidentiality, which can be in conflict with obligations to share information between agencies (Scott *et al.,* 2019).

4. Offender modus operandi

While the available evidence suggests that those involved in group-based child sexual exploitation (CSE) are not a homogenous group (CEOP, 2013) the lack of detailed information about CSE offenders, either in authority data or other sources, limits the conclusions that can be drawn regarding the way that different groups operate (Christie and Karsna, 2019). The Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse (IICSA) commissioned research looking at perpetrators of CSE who were convicted alongside others and found that there was a wide variety of behaviours present amongst offenders (Senker *et al.,* 2020). Drawing together different sources, The CSA Centre has published a typology of offending, with one of the types being *"CSA through groups and networks"* (The CSA Centre, 2020). It highlights the variety of ways in which groups target their victims, the locations in which abuse can take place and the nature and process of the abuse. Much of this variation is also seen more specifically in the way that groups engage in CSE.

4.1. Targeting and grooming victims

Initial contact between victims and offenders and the eventual location of abuse is often in the shared local area of the victims and offenders and has been described by some researchers as 'circumstantial' (Senker *et al.,* 2020). It has been noted that, like all types of CSA offenders, offenders of group-based CSE operate in cities, towns and rural areas all over the country (Beckett *et al*, 2017) and they have been seen to operate in a wide range of locations including schools, neighbourhoods and parks, houses, takeaway restaurants, retail and entertainment outlets (CEOP, 2011).

Brayley *et al.* (2011) looked at two internal child sex trafficking[7] operations and found that offenders commonly adopted a 'cruise' tactic to target victims, by driving around environments where there would be lots of potential victims, such as shopping centres, schools and parks. Research by Cockbain and Wortley looking at 6 of the earliest, most high profile and largest cases of internal child sex trafficking in the North West and Midlands region from 2008 to 2012 involving 43 victims and 55 offenders found that the offenders' access to potential victims was facilitated by their normal daily activities, such as driving a taxi, or working in a takeaway restaurant. They also found in their analysis of these 6 major cases that the unemployment rate of offenders was 35%, which is higher than comparable national rates. They suggest that this can result in less formal surveillance and more free time to offend (Cockbain and Wortley, 2015). In a further exploration of these cases, Cockbain found that for over half of the 55 offenders examined who were employed, there was clear concentration in jobs that provided access to victims – typically in low-skill and low-pay jobs such as taxi drivers, shop assistants, counter-staff in takeaways or food delivery drivers (Cockbain, 2018).

Research by Taylor looking at seven case studies[8] of group-associated CSE in England found that individuals commonly generated or took advantage of situations in which they could sexually exploit victims. Through their placement in jobs such as taxi drivers or shop workers they were able to use their access to resources to attract and exert power over a victim (Taylor, 2019). Senker *et al.* (2020) conducted interviews between January and February 2019 with 26 offenders in custody

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[7] Internal child sex trafficking can be defined similarly to CSE, but involves an element of the victim being moved around as part of the abuse (Brayley and Cockbain, 2014)

[8] The case studies were built using non-police witness statements, transcribed witness and suspect records of recorded and video interviews, police officer reports, intelligence reports and profiles relating to offenders and victims, network charts, and interviews with police officers and an analyst.

who were convicted of CSE offences alongside others. The offenders who targeted victims opportunistically suggested that their perceived status in the local area (such as from owning a local business) attracted young people to them (Senker *et al.,* 2020). The Police Foundation conducted case file analysis of 192 suspected, alleged or convicted offenders in 43 groups in the Bristol area over a 2-year period (2013 and 2014), finding that the majority of groups lived in the same communities as the victims and were also linked to multiple victims. Only 4 out of 43 offenders in the study groomed victims outside of the police force area (Skidmore *et al.,* 2016).[9] Similarly, Taylor's research found that in every case, the offenders and victims lived in the same town or city (Taylor, 2019).

Beyond chance encounters, offenders may target victims that they or a co-offender already know (Brayley *et al.,* 2011). Offenders may also use one victim to gain access to another (CEOP, 2011). For example, offenders may ask victims about their friends and convince them to bring their friends along to meetings (CEOP, 2011; Brayley *et al.,* 2011; Cockbain *et al.,* 2011).

Cockbain found that victims came into contact with offenders in one of three ways:

- a direct meeting;
- an introduction by another victim; and
- an introduction by another offender.

Although this study was based on a small number of cases (n=6) and is therefore not representative of all group-based sexual exploitation, it found that the majority of victims (38 out of 43) were connected to another victim. Furthermore, 29 of the 43 victims came into contact with an offender via an existing victim (Cockbain, 2018), demonstrating the role that social networks can play in this type of offending. This model of victim recruitment was also seen in the cases examined by Taylor, who found that victims often had pre-existing friendships or were linked through school or college (Taylor, 2019). Similarly, in one earlier study of two internal child sex trafficking operations, recruitment of new victims was often instigated by an existing victim who believed themselves to be in a relationship with an offender (Brayley *et al.,* 2011). In another study based on the same operations, one victim who was a 'girlfriend' figure was connected to 80% of victims of that network (Cockbain *et al.,* 2011). This highlights how victims can be targeted in multiple ways by groups, and how victims can play a role themselves in the recruitment of further victims. It also demonstrates how social networks play a large part in the initialisation and continuation of offending, as seen in other studies (Brayley *et al.,* 2011; Cockbain *et al.,* 2011; Cockbain, 2018; Taylor, 2019).

There is also evidence regarding the different ways that offenders facilitate one another's access to victims. For example, it has been suggested that younger members of an offending group may be responsible for meeting with and grooming victims, before sharing them with a network of older offenders (CEOP, 2011), although the basis for this assertion is unclear. The National Crime Agency (NCA) report increasing levels of repeat victimisation across all types of CSA (National Crime Agency, 2018). Similarly, the Police Foundation found that victims were subject to repeated exploitation over long periods of time. Each of the 43 groups of offenders they identified were linked to an average of 5 victims, although one group was linked to as many as 54 victims (Skidmore *et al.,* 2016). Research looking specifically at 35 victims of group-based CSE from Asian backgrounds found that of the victims who were exploited, 30 (86%) of the cases involved offenders operating in groups who would often pass the victim around between themselves.[10] Some victims were related to one offender, who would then introduce them to other members of

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[9] This work was based on groups of offenders operating in Bristol, using Avon and Somerset police crime and intelligence records, where children and young people had been flagged as victims or had a concern raised about them regarding group-based CSE.

[10] Their sample was drawn by speaking to 73 people from a variety of professional backgrounds, such as social services, the police, youth workers, health care and education professionals, and voluntary organisations, as well as friends and relatives of victims.

the group (Gohir, 2013). Together this suggests that once a victim is known to a group, their risk of being targeted by different members of the group or even different groups can increase.

In some cases, it is suspected that offenders used Facebook and other social networking sites to identify and target other children and young people within the peer group of the victim (CEOP, 2011). The Children's Commissioner for England's inquiry also identified that most cases of CSE involved some use of technology, and the use of mobile phone and social networks was mentioned in all of the 14 site visits undertaken. This included mention of the use of social media to target new victims randomly or a current victim's friends and peers. Even in cases where initial contact was offline, grooming may continue in online environments. In addition, there was evidence that some offenders would purchase mobile phones for victims and then share their telephone numbers amongst group members (Berelowitz *et al.,* 2012). Similar results were also reported by Taylor, who found that offenders were seen to use social media (in particular Facebook and Whatsapp) to befriend and communicate with victims (Taylor, 2019). Cockbain also found that mobile phones were commonly used as a key communication channel between offenders and victims, compared with a much lower proportion using the internet (Cockbain, 2018). The Police Foundation found in their case analysis some evidence that groups commonly used online communications in order to coordinate the exploitation (Skidmore *et al.,* 2016).

Once victims have been targeted, they are frequently groomed prior to and during the abuse. Grooming strategies are intended to enable further abuse as well as to reduce the likelihood of disclosure (Gill and Harrison, 2015). Grooming is not always linear and can involve many different methods (Brayley *et al.,* 2011; Eaton and Holmes, 2017). As expected from the definition of CSE, much research highlights that the different tactics used by offenders to facilitate the exploitation of victims commonly included the exchange of commodities. Common commodities include drugs, alcohol, money, gifts, accommodation and transport (Turnbull *et al.,* 2012; Berelowitz *et al.,* 2013; Cockbain and Wortley, 2015; Skidmore *et al.,* 2016). It has been noted that where abuse takes place in areas of heightened socio-economic deprivation, these exchanges take on greater value and can yield more control over a victim (Taylor, 2019). Drugs and alcohol in particular serve multiple purposes – attracting victims to locations/offenders in the first place, making the victim feel more grown up, lowering their inhibitions to allow the sexual abuse to take place, reducing resistance, and suppressing recall (CEOP, 2011; Turnbull *et al.,* 2012; Skidmore *et al.,* 2016; Cockbain, 2018). Such commodities and 'gifts', including drugs and alcohol, can also play a role in impeding disclosure (*ibid*). It has been noted that receipt of such commodities can leave the victim feeling too guilty to ask for help, feeling to blame for the events (Turnbull *et al.,* 2012).

4.2. Location and methods of abuse and control

After the victim has been targeted and groomed by the offender(s), some research demonstrates that offences often take place in certain private and commercial locations, and commonly involve residents/employees of these premises or their friends. The Children's Commissioner for England found evidence that abuse occurred in a wide range of different locations including transportation vehicles, private houses (including at parties) and transport hubs (Berelowitz *et al.,* 2012). Barnardo's also found that offences have been seen to occur in semi-public areas such as parks and cafes (Barnardo's, 2012), with some of their services aware of groups of offenders using legitimate businesses as locations to groom and traffic children and young people (Barnardo's, 2011). An example of this is taxi firms, the employees of which have been seen to use their transportation vehicles initially to target victims, and then to provide a location for the abuse to take place (CEOP, 2011). Similarly, the three most prevalent location types in Cockbain and Wortley's study were cars or taxis (used by 43% offenders), offenders' homes (used by 35%) and other

private properties such as a co-offender's home (used by 46%) (Cockbain and Wortley, 2015). In Taylor's research abuse took place in residential properties, parks, woodland, car parks, cars, taxis, takeaway restaurants and hotels (Taylor, 2019). There is evidence of some residences designated as 'party' houses, which are often minimally furnished and used primarily for abuse (CEOP, 2011).

Different models of offending have been discussed in literature and practice, however there is limited evidence for these (Eaton and Holmes, 2017). Two models through which offenders maintain their control and abuse of the victims in group contexts that have previously been discussed are the 'party' model, and the 'boyfriend' model. However, there may be other models and offending behaviours that have not yet come to light; undue focus on a single or few models may lead to a lack of attention paid to other forms of offending. Taylor suggests that clearly delineated models of offending may not be a useful way of categorising complex relationships and events and may fail to capture the fluid and dynamic nature of this type of offending (Taylor, 2019).

Barnardo's (2011) identified the boyfriend model as a situation where the offender befriends and grooms the victim into believing that they are in a relationship, before coercing them into having sex with other offenders in their network. The Child Exploitation and Online Protection (CEOP) command of the National Crime Agency also found that offenders often groomed victims into believing that they are their boyfriend, often preying on the victim's vulnerability and desire for attention and affection. This is often accompanied by an exchange of commodities, such as drugs, alcohol, cigarettes and food, making this relationship appear legitimate to the victim, who is then exploited sexually by the offender (CEOP, 2011).

Affectionate exchanges were commonly reported in Cockbain's study, with a number of victims reporting that they felt that they were in a genuine relationship with an offender and that this was used to manipulate them into being abused by other offenders (Cockbain, 2018). Senker *et al.* (2020) also found that many offenders who were categorised as targeting victim vulnerability reported being 'nice' or 'loving' to their victims. Whilst their denial of the use of any violence or coercion may be a product of not wanting to admit to socially unacceptable behaviour, the use of affection as a means of control appears to align with that seen elsewhere in the literature (Senker *et al.,* 2020).

The Police Foundation found evidence of a boyfriend model being employed by offenders in their study, finding that 16 out of 43 offenders appeared to be in a 'relationship' with their victims (Skidmore *et al.,* 2016). In cases such as these, the 'boyfriend' offender is able to provide a wider network of offenders with access to the victim (CEOP, 2011). Research commissioned for Barnardo's also found evidence of some victims running away from home in order to be with someone they thought was their boyfriend, only to end up being sexually exploited (Smeaton, 2013). Gohir's study into the experiences of victims from an Asian background found the 'boyfriend' model was common, and that this often involved the promise of marriage, which allows for the exploitation of girls seeking escape from a conservative and controlling environment (Gohir, 2013). There are, however, issues with this heteronormative conceptualisation, which can be said to erase the experiences of male victims and assumes a male offender (Eaton and Holmes, 2017).

During their inquiry, the Children's Commissioner for England found that in half of their 14 site visits with local authorities, the police, professionals, children and young people, reference was made to abuse taking place at parties (Berelowitz *et al.,* 2012). Other research also finds evidence of this model, with CEOP finding that some victims report being taken to a 'party' where they are sexually exploited by a group of offenders (CEOP, 2011). CEOP suggests that the access to these parties can be seen by victims as an escape from problems in other areas of their life (*ibid.*). This 'party' model can be seen in research commissioned by Barnardo's, which found evidence of victims invited to parties and then expected to have sex with anyone who was there often in exchange for the alcohol or drugs that they were provided with (Smeaton, 2013). Victims were also

pressured to bring their peers, thus widening the pool of victims. In some instances, it is reported that offenders at these 'parties' would pay for sex with the victims (Berelowitz *et al.,* 2012). Cockbain also found evidence of payment for abuse, but not necessarily in the context of parties (Cockbain, 2018) highlighting that abuse may demonstrate features of different models, but not neatly align with any suggested model. Other research has also noted the role of peer recruitment in similar contexts (Cockbain *et al.,* 2011; Cockbain, 2018). For example, the Health Working Group has also pointed to a specific peer exploitation model, typified by victims being coerced by friends or peers to be involved in abuse (Health Working Group, 2014).

Beyond specific models, Cockbain found that other traditional grooming tactics were used to maintain and exert control over victims. As well as the exchange of commodities, these included affectionate exchanges, bullying and emotional abuse, threats and violence and sexualised communications. Each technique was found in all 6 of the internal child sex trafficking cases examined, and experienced by 65% to 100% of the sample of 43 victims (Cockbain, 2018). Within various models of group-based CSE, much like non-group-based CSE, control is exerted and maintained over victims in many different ways including coercion, threats of reprisals, violence, corrupting, isolating and being led to believe that they will not be believed if they report what is happening to them (Berelowitz *et al.,* 2013). This suggests that various models of grooming are likely to intersect and be part of a more varied, dynamic, non-linear process (Cockbain, 2018).

Many types of offending can also involve slowly pulling the victim away from positive relationships and influences, such as parents and teachers (Coffey, 2014). In relation to isolation, a study of two internal child sex trafficking operations found that offenders employed a variety of physical and non-physical tactics of control in order to isolate the victim – these included physical restraint, taking their phones, taking them to unfamiliar locations, and instilling a fear of repercussions (Brayley *et al.,* 2011). Cases examined by Taylor also indicated varied methods of control, from creating physical or emotional dependency, to violence (Taylor, 2019). The Children's Commissioner for England's inquiry found evidence that offenders would sometimes blackmail victims by threatening to share images of their abuse online, as a means to coerce victims into compliance (Berelowitz *et al.,* 2012). Gohir also found similar methods of control but also noted the use of blackmail due to Asian (and mostly Muslim) victims' specific culture – shame and dishonour were often used as tools to control the victims (Gohir, 2013).

In sum, models of offending behaviour are not always distinct and can overlap with each other, and with other models of offending, such as gang-associated, peer-on-peer or highly organised offending (Eaton and Holmes, 2017). Indeed, Taylor's research noted that in some of the cases looked at there was more than one model present and considerable overlap between different types (Taylor, 2019). For example, the boyfriend model and the party model can interact, with some victims being coerced by an offender who they believe is their boyfriend into attending a 'party' where they are then passed around the offender's friends or associates (Berelowitz *et al.,* 2012). All of these findings are based on small samples due to the challenges in research in this area and there are likely to be other models and approaches still that have not yet come to light.

5. Offender characteristics

The literature is limited in what conclusions can be drawn about group-based offenders. When examining the characteristics and motivations of child sexual exploitation (CSE) perpetrators on behalf of The CSA Centre, Walker *et al.* (2018) found only five reports providing any insight into those who offended in gangs or groups. Difficulties in defining and identifying cases of group-based CSE, along with poor data collection even when cases are known to the authorities, are part of the reason why it is hard to get a clear picture of offender characteristics. As discussed in Section 1, a focus in the media of specific instances of group-based CSE, often those that fit within a narrow and frequently racialised model of abuse (Cockbain, 2013; Cockbain and Tufail, 2020) means that professionals may be quicker to designate some offenders as group-based CSE offenders than others (Berelowitz *et al.,* 2012).

Information recording by agencies regarding offenders is often poor, and victims are often are not able to provide full details (Christie and Karsna, 2019). For example, the Child Exploitation and Online Protection (CEOP) command of the National Crime Agency requested information from police forces and Local Children's Safeguarding Boards for their 2011 report, but only 13 responded to this request and the data were often incomplete. Many police forces and local agencies reported no data at all on CSE offenders at the time, which could in part be due to the relatively recent focus on CSE (Eaton and Holmes, 2017) and the known variation in the information collected by agencies (Christie and Karsna, 2019). Of the 2,379 individuals reported to CEOP as being possible offenders of the type of 'localised' CSE commonly covered in the media, 1,162 were excluded from the analysis due to a lack of any basic information about them (CEOP, 2011).

The Children's Commissioner for England also requested data from police forces, local authorities and primary care trusts about CSE offenders and received submissions from only 30 agencies. Of the 1,514 offenders they received data on, 48% were identified by police forces, 26% were identified by local authorities and only 0.4% were identified by health services. Of these submissions, offender data were provided in full for only 3% of these perpetrators and none at all were returned for 68% of perpetrators (Berelowitz *et al.,* 2012). In the evidence that is available, there is a great deal of variation in the characteristics of those who commit group-based CSE due to different data sources, time periods and sampling methods and so the following findings are not directly comparable, and highly unlikely to be definitive.

5.1. Demographics

5.1.1. Gender

When considering all types of child sexual abuse (CSA), offenders are predominantly male (Kelly and Karsna, 2018; Parke and Karsna, 2019). For example, the Crime Survey for England and Wales found that 92% of adults who reported experiencing sexual abuse in childhood said that the perpetrator was male (Office for National Statistics, 2020). Ministry of Justice data for 2017 show that 98% (6,915) of convictions for CSA offences were male (Parke and Karsna, 2019). The National Police Chiefs' Council (NPCC) problem profiles[11] of CSE in general found that 94% of

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[11] The Home Office has invested in regional analysts who are responsible for producing problem profiles for the NPCC to improve understanding of the nature of the threat from CSE.

offenders were male (NPCC, 2015) and The CSA Centre also found that the majority of CSE perpetrators in studies that they examined were male (Walker *et al.,* 2018). It is more difficult to look directly at perpetrators of group-based CSE as a subset of CSA but the limited data available on offenders of this type of crime suggest that, like all types of CSA offenders, they are also predominantly male (CEOP, 2011; Berelowitz *et al.,* 2012; Taylor, 2019). For example, CEOP found that for 1,217 offenders for which there was information, 87% were male, 4% were female and 9% were unknown (CEOP, 2011). However, a further 1,162 individuals were excluded from this analysis meaning that these figures are almost certainly skewed.

5.1.2.   Age

Ministry of Justice data demonstrate that for all types of contact CSA offending, the most common age range of offenders at conviction is 30 to 39, with just over a quarter being 29 or younger at conviction.[12] The NPCC looked at the age of 6,107 suspects of all forms of CSE in their regional CSE problem profiles for England and Wales from November 2014 to October 2015, finding that the average age across the 6,107 offenders was 26.5 years (NPCC, 2015). The Drew review of CSE in South Yorkshire between 1997 and 2016 found that nearly half of the 574 CSE suspects identified between January 2014 and January 2016 were aged between 15 and 24 (Drew, 2016). However, again limited data on the characteristics of those who offend in groups make it difficult to draw conclusions about the age of group-based CSE offenders.

The limited available research on group-based CSE suggests that whilst some groups of offenders do have some older members, many offenders acting in groups are younger than other types of sexual offenders, such as those who act alone or those who primarily commit online offences. For example, Cockbain's research looking at six internal child sex trafficking police investigations from the period 2008 to 2012, which involved 55 offenders, observed that offenders were aged between 17 and 56 years, demonstrating that there are some older offenders of this type. However, it was also noted that almost three-quarters of the 55 offenders (73%, n=40) were aged 31 years or younger at the start of their offending (Cockbain, 2018). Whilst the small sample is not generalisable, Cockbain notes that sexual offending does not normally follow the age-crime curve (wherein offending becomes less prevalent with increased age), and so the predominance of younger offenders in this form of CSE appears to demonstrate that this form of offending may be quite different (*ibid.*). Research looking at 7 cases of group-associated CSE in England found that the ages of the 39 offenders ranged from 14 to 66 years of age, but that the average age was 22 and 77% (n=30) of the offenders were under the age of 25 (Taylor, 2019).

CEOP looked at 2,379 individuals reported to them by police forces, children's services and Local Safeguarding Children Boards between January 2008 and March 2011 as being possible offenders in relation to 'localised grooming'. Of these 1,162 individuals (49%) were excluded from the analysis due to a lack of any basic information about them. For the remaining 1,217, they found that most CSE group-based offenders were in the 18 to 24 age range, with almost half being under 25 in 639 cases, although a further 578 cases had no age specified (CEOP, 2011). Given the high proportion of individuals for which age is unknown, it is unwise to draw firm conclusions from these data. CEOP's further work in 2013 found that 53% of those who were classed as group offenders who target victim vulnerability were aged between 20 and 30, with under 20-year-olds accounting for another 24%. In contrast, they found that the offenders they categorised as offending based on a sexual interest in children and who predominantly network online were older, with only 17% aged

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[12] Ministry of Justice outcomes by offence data tool, year ending December 2019. Available online at:
   https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/criminal-justice-system-statistics-quarterly-december-2019

between 20 and 30 and 8% aged under 20 (CEOP, 2013). However, the basis for CEOP's development of these distinct typologies is unclear.

The Children's Commissioner for England's 2012 report found that most offenders in groups and gangs combined were under 29 years old, and older perpetrators tended to be seen only in groups, whilst those in gangs were often younger. They note that it is hard to draw any firm demographical conclusions due to the paucity of the data on offenders and the non-random sampling method, which is therefore not representative (Berelowitz *et al.,* 2012). Their further work in 2013 found that group-based sexual offending is committed more often by offenders in their teens and early twenties, compared with those who offend alone (Berelowitz *et al.,* 2013).

5.1.3. Ethnicity

Based on the literature it is not possible to draw any conclusions as to whether some ethnicities have a greater involvement in group-based offending compared with others. Looking at CSA offending more generally, The CSA Centre compared the ethnicity of convicted defendants with the proportions of different ethnic groups in the population and found that whilst 14% of the population of England and Wales were from a Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) background according to the 2011 Census, only 8.4% of convicted defendants were from BAME backgrounds, where ethnicity was known (Parke and Karsna, 2019). Whilst they did not look specifically at certain ethnic minority groups, this would appear to suggest that those from an ethnic minority background more generally are not over-represented in CSA offending. However, the media has given much attention to the model of offending involving an Asian perpetrator and White victim (The Children's Society, 2018; Cockbain and Tufail, 2020) and it is important to examine the evidence underlying such perceptions.

Various studies highlight the limitations on what can be said on the ethnicity of group-based offenders. For example, the Children's Commissioner for England's report into child exploitation in gangs and groups found that key data about perpetrators were missing in 90% of submissions to their inquiry, and that victims are not always able to provide detailed information about offenders (Berelowitz *et al.,* 2012). This issue is not specific to group-based CSE and has been seen in CSE, and CSA more broadly (Christie and Karsna, 2019). For example, the NPCC found that of 6,107 identified offenders of all types of police recorded crimes designated as CSE across England and Wales in 2014–2015, 18% were of 'unknown/not recorded' ethnicity (NPCC, 2015). Ethnicity is sometimes conflated with nationality, resulting in an incorrect picture of the characteristics of offenders (CEOP, 2011). There is also evidence of bias in the recording of ethnicity (Berelowitz *et al.,* 2012), and this is a recognised issue in the criminal justice system, across many different crime types. The lack of robust data, then, limits the generalisability of findings in this area.

Despite poor quality data some studies have presented findings on ethnicity and offending. The Children's Commissioner for England's Inquiry took submissions from 30 different agencies including local authorities, police departments and voluntary sector organisations regarding 1,514 individuals known to be exploiting children. Of these, 21% had no ethnicity recorded. Of the offenders for whom ethnicity was recorded, White formed the largest group of offender ethnicity in both gangs and groups. The Children's Commissioner for England's partial data collection means that it is hard to assess the validity or bias of the data. The authors themselves noted that findings related to ethnicity are largely a result of how data are collected by organisations, and which cases are more visible to professionals (*ibid.*). There is evidence that some agencies focus on the specific model and patterns of abuse seen in high-profile cases involving Asian offenders, leading to greater attention being paid to these types of offenders and cases being more readily identified and recorded. For example, site visits and evidence hearings led the Children's Commissioner for

England to conclude that data were more proactively collected on men and boys of Pakistani and Kurdish origin and that this selection bias likely skews the available data, meaning no conclusive inference on ethnicity can be made. They also observed cases of offenders of other backgrounds (such as White-British or Afghan) being initially classed as 'Asian' (*ibid.*). This resonates with the idea discussed earlier that the conceptualisation of this crime type as a racial issue may result in biased data collection, which thus skews law enforcement data to exaggerate a certain model of offending (Cockbain and Tufail, 2020).

The Children's Commissioner for England then gathered police data on offenders of CSE collected over the period April 2013 to March 2014, including ethnicity data. From data provided by 19 police forces nearly 4,000 offenders were identified, 1,200 of whom were involved in group-based CSE. These data found that 42% were White or White British, 17% were Black or Black British, 14% were Asian or Asian British, and 4% had another ethnicity. No data on ethnicity were recorded in 22% of cases (Berelowitz *et al.,* 2015).

Whilst the Children's Commissioner for England did not make a distinction between groups and gangs, it described Asian and Black offenders as being seen as perpetrators of group-based CSE in proportions greater than expected from their proportions of the general population, and in greater proportions than when looking at all forms of CSE (*ibid.*). Combined with the fact that ethnicity was frequently unknown or unrecorded and that a large number of police forces did not make a return, this dataset is therefore only partial and unsuitable for generalisation. Additionally, it is worth noting that law enforcement data are particularly vulnerable to bias, in terms of which cases come to the attention of authorities, and this can impact the generalisability of such data (Cockbain *et al.,* 2020).

CEOP analysed 2,379 people referred for alleged involvement in 'localised grooming'; some of these will have been CSE. Of these, 1,162 people had to be excluded from the analysis due to a lack of basic information about them, showing the lack of consistent and detailed recording in some areas. When ethnicity was examined for the remaining 1,217 individuals, it was found that 30% were White and 28% were Asian. However, with a further 38% of alleged offenders being of unknown ethnicity, it is not possible to draw any firm conclusions from these figures (CEOP, 2011).

Both CEOP and the Children's Commissioner for England's studies demonstrate that offending is not solely an Asian problem, but problems with the data make them unsuitable for drawing further conclusions. The Drew review found that 65.1% of CSE suspects identified between January 2014 and January 2016 were White North European (with a further 2.4% being White South European), 19.1% were Asian, 3.7% were Black and 4.3% were 'Other'. However, ethnicity was not known or recorded in 5.3% of cases and these proportions were not compared with local populations (Drew, 2016). Regardless, these numbers further dispute the idea of offending being unique to one ethnic group.

Research by Quilliam asserted that 84% of 264 offenders convicted for grooming gang offences between 2005 and 2017 were Asian, 8% were Black, 7% were White and 1% were of unknown ethnicity (Rafiq and Adil, 2017). This figure of 84% has been widely repeated as academic evidence for an extreme over-representation of Asian offenders despite a lack of clarity about sampling and data analysis methods (Cockbain and Tufail, 2020). For example, the authors identify 264 offenders, but do not specify how they were found, or how their ethnicity was categorised. These findings are therefore not suitable for drawing conclusions about ethnicity of group-based CSE offenders.

Some smaller studies also suggest there could be an over-representation of ethnic minority CSE offenders. Research by Taylor into 7 cases of group-based CSE involving 39 offenders found that Black and Asian offenders were over-represented compared with the general population, and that there was a degree of ethnic homogeneity in 4 of the 7 groups (Taylor, 2019). However, this could

be a function of how police forces define and identify cases of group-based CSE. The Police Foundation's research in Bristol in 2016 also found that those from ethnic minority backgrounds were over-represented in their sample of group-based CSE offenders, but note this is likely magnified by skewed and incomplete data recording in relation to ethnicity (Skidmore *et al.,* 2016).

In 2013 CEOP found that of the 52 groups they examined that provided useable ethnicity data, 26 (50%) comprised all Asian offenders, 11 (21%) all White offenders, 4 (8%) all Black offenders, 2 (4%) exclusively Arab offenders, and 9 (17%) were mixed groups. Of the 306 offenders in total, 75% were Asian (CEOP, 2013). As discussed earlier, there are many potential reasons for an over-representation in the data and CEOP notes that ethnicity descriptors are imprecise and not all police forces responded to their request for information, meaning that these figures are unsuitable for generalisation.

Senker *et al.* (2020) found that of the 13 offenders interviewed who operated in groups that were said to target vulnerability in predominantly teenage victims, 10 were of various ethnic minorities and 3 were White British. Whilst this cannot be taken as illustrative due to the small sample size and the way in which the sample was drawn, it differs from the other types of groups of offenders identified by the researchers, who were predominantly White British. The authors note that six of the ethnic minority offenders suggested a belief that racial stereotyping was a factor in their conviction (Senker *et al.,* 2020). However, these assertions cannot easily be assessed, and may be a result of denial and minimisation tactics employed by the offenders, as has been seen elsewhere in the research (Cockbain, 2018).

Overall, while some studies identify disproportionate levels of offending amongst certain ethnic minority groups, small samples, the quality of the data, potential for biased collection and the way in which cases have been selected make it impossible to make definitive conclusions about this issue. Many of these studies were not robustly designed to address the ethnicity of offenders and so it is unwise to generalise from them. Further, due to the differences in methodology and definitions, these data cannot be adequately compared.

5.2.   Size and nature of group associations

The size and type of groups that commit CSE varies, with different numbers of offenders and levels of association. There has been seen to be no single typology of a group involved in CSE, and networks have their own structures and associations (Taylor, 2019). Organised exploitation varies from spontaneous or informal groups of offenders to more highly organised crime where young people are effectively sold (Barnardo's, 2011; Paskell, 2013). It has been observed that multiple perpetrator sexual offending may be influenced by group dynamics and the normalisation of abusive behaviour, and that the evasion of law enforcement can encourage further criminal behaviour (CEOP, 2011; Bamford *et al.,* 2016; Cockbain, 2018). More specifically, group dynamics and peer reinforcement have been seen to facilitate and spread offence-supportive beliefs that can normalise the abuse within a group (Cockbain, 2018). Taylor found evidence to suggest that younger members of a network may be influenced by older members (Taylor, 2019). However, in Cockbain's study, a total of 49 offenders in these cases were found to have co-offended with one or more of their co-offenders, but half also offended alone (Cockbain, 2018). This is an important point to note, as it disputes the idea that group-based CSE offenders are a population distinct from those who offend alone and suggests that rigidly typifying offenders into certain groups may not be beneficial for intervention and prevention.

Study of networks can be difficult, and it has been noted that the full range of links and offenders involved in a network may rarely be uncovered (Cockbain *et al.,* 2011). Research by Taylor

examining seven case studies of group-associated CSE from six police forces in England found that the numbers of prosecuted offenders ranged from three to seven offenders (Taylor, 2019). However, it was also found that the wider shared networks of the offenders ranged from 66 to 215 people. Whilst obviously these links are not all due to involvement in criminal behaviour, Taylor suggests that they could lead to an expansion of the criminal network. The Police Foundation's research in Bristol into group-based CSE identified 371 CSE offenders for whom they had information over a two-year period (2013 and 2014) of whom 192 were linked to CSE that involved at least 1 other offender. They were able to identify 43 groups, with an average of 5 offenders (Skidmore *et al.,* 2016). CEOP conducted research into cases of group-based CSE finding that of the 2,379 individuals reported as being potential group-based CSE offenders, networks ranged in size from 2 offenders to larger groups of over 8 members. In some instances, the full extent of the group remained unknown (CEOP, 2011).

Individuals within networks had different levels of association with the core offending group, with some being much more peripheral than others (*ibid.*). This has also been seen in other research – a study of the links involved in two internal child sex trafficking networks found that the groups were often fairly decentralised, but there were occasionally more connected members who may have had more power within the network (Cockbain *et al.,* 2011). Taylor found that all seven networks examined featured some central and highly visible members, but that there were also peripheral individuals (Taylor, 2019). Networks observed in CEOP's study generally consisted of a core group of offenders who shared victims with associates on the periphery of the network. Younger members of a group in particular may have been responsible for meeting with and grooming victims, before sharing them with a network of older offenders. Some of those on the periphery of a group were loosely associated, and in other cases peripheral members had clearly defined roles relating to the initial targeting or grooming of victims (CEOP, 2011). Taylor found that those offenders occupying central or leadership positions in networks sometimes had increased access to things that could enable offending, such as property, vehicles, goods or people (Taylor, 2019).

To help to understand the types of group associations involved in this type of crime, CEOP undertook a data collection exercise with 43 police forces in England and Wales for contact child sexual offences known or suspected in 2012. Out of these, 31 police forces responded, reporting a total of 65 group and gang offences. CEOP categorised offenders into two types of offenders that operate in groups with the aim of sexually exploiting children. One type was seen to target vulnerabilities in their victims, rather than being a result of specific sexual interest in children. These group networks can often involve multiple victims and range from formal networks to looser associations, ranging from business associations to friendship groups. These groups ranged in size from pairs to groups of 25 individuals, although groups of 4 or less made up 67% of the groups they analysed. In contrast, groups whose motive appeared to be a real sexual interest in children, and predominantly networked online, typically ranged from two to five individuals (CEOP, 2013).

Some research disputes the idea of highly organised networks, and some evidence points towards pre-existing social ties between offending. Research by Cockbain looking at six large networks of offenders found that often the groups lacked a hierarchy or structured organisation and were relatively decentralised (Cockbain, 2018). Bamford *et al.* (2016) note that those who are likely to commit multiple perpetrator offences are likely to socialise with each other and form a group based on their shared beliefs and attitudes towards sexual offending. Networks have been seen in some cases to comprise friends, associates and relatives joined by pre-existing social bonds, as opposed to a shared sexual interest in young children (Cockbain *et al.,* 2011; CEOP, 2011). Senker *et al.* found that Group B offenders (those categorised as opportunistically targeting victim vulnerability) frequently denied knowing some members of the network and claimed to know only a few members through pre-existing social connections, such as being work colleagues, friends, or

family members. Participants rejected the labels of 'network' or 'gang' and minimised the criminal purpose of the network, suggesting that it was primarily social group (Senker *et al.,* 2020). Indeed, in many of the cases examined by Taylor, the links between offenders were commonly social and the result of shared locality, with offenders being shown as having ties from school, college, family, employment, sports clubs or places of worship (Taylor, 2019). Cockbain's review of 6 internal child sex trafficking police investigations in the UK found that out of 55 offenders, 53 offenders were linked to at least one other offender. These also generally took the form of pre-existing social bonds – including relatives, friends, neighbours and colleagues. Qualitative analysis found that 62% of the linked pairs had social bonds predating co-involvement in the abuse. Co-offenders often provided commodities to each other in order to enable each other's offending (Cockbain, 2018).

As a result of networks reflecting social groups it has been suggested that the demographics of those in the network should be largely similar (Cockbain, 2018). This has been seen in research, with Taylor finding that in the seven cases examined, offenders often demonstrated ethnic homogeneity, similar ages and similar socio-economic status (Taylor, 2019), and Skidmore *et al.* (2016) finding that of all the groups they analysed the members were often from similar ethnic backgrounds.

Overall, whilst the size of groups is seen to vary greatly, a commonality in the research is that the associations are often based on pre-existing social bonds. Cockbain *et al.* (2014) note that a better understanding of how groups form and function, as well as knowledge about the situational processes underlying their offending behaviour, is also necessary in order to effectively prevent this type of crime.

5.3. Motives

The motive to commit CSE is likely to differ between groups as well as between members of the same group. An assessment of research into the motivations of perpetrators of CSE more generally found that the two main motivations were financial and sexual (Walker *et al.,* 2018). However, this research looked predominantly at those who offended online, and so this may not be generalisable to CSE, or group-based CSE.

Research into motives can be challenging as some offenders deny their crimes and can therefore offer limited insight into the reason behind their behaviour. For example, research by Cockbain (2018) demonstrated that the offenders in that sample did not view their behaviour as criminal and often employed neutralisation techniques with regards to their behaviour, such as denial of harm or injury. Research commissioned by the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse (IICSA) conducted qualitative interviews with perpetrators of CSE who had been convicted alongside others. Many of them rejected the identity of 'sex offender' and maintained that they had not committed a crime. They also disputed the idea that they had targeted their victims based on vulnerability. Many failed to take responsibility for their crimes and placed the blame on others (such as parents, the police, and social services) for failing to protect young people, or for failing to provide the perpetrators with support. Some expressed a lack of understanding that their behaviour was a criminal offence and suggested that education around what constituted CSE could have prevented their offending (Senker *et al.,* 2020). As such, the perpetrators in this study were often less able to clarify a motive for their offending. Of those who accepted some responsibility, a hedonistic motive was suggested, with offending taking place in the context of partying and chaotic lifestyles. Some participants mentioned the 'buzz' or 'thrill' of escaping normal life, and suggested

that they enjoyed the attention (*ibid.*). However, offenders may be unlikely to admit the real motive for their offending behaviour, even if they accept the behaviour was criminal.

The Police Foundation found that 9 out of the 43 groups they examined in their study were sexually exploiting children for financial gain, whilst also committing abuse themselves (Skidmore *et al.,* 2016) suggesting that this may have been a motive to become involved in CSE as well as an outcome of the abuse. When examining cases with Asian victims and mainly Asian offenders, financial gain was sometimes seen as a motive, due to certain groups having lower educational attainment and therefore perhaps more limited employment prospects (Gohir, 2013). However, the Children's Commissioner for England found that looser networks exist that make minimal or no financial gain, in contrast with other more organised groups that do make some profit (Berelowitz *et al.,* 2012). It is often hard to ascertain whether financial gain is a motive, as victims may not always be aware of any of exchange of money between offenders in relation to their exploitation and offenders are unlikely to disclose to law enforcement that their crimes were motivated by financial gain (CEOP, 2011; Gohir, 2013). Indeed, in interviews with perpetrators of CSE convicted alongside others, participants did not admit to financial gain themselves, but some pointed to it as a motive for other offenders they knew (Senker *et al.,* 2020). This may suggest that financial gain is a more significant motive than is currently thought, but that there is lack of readiness to admit to it.

Based on the behavioural characteristics of the offenders in their sample, CEOP suggests that many offenders seemed to derive satisfaction from coercive and manipulative behaviour (CEOP, 2011). Gohir also suggested several potential factors driving CSE offenders in the cases that they examined (which mostly involved offenders from Asian and Muslim backgrounds). These included societal influence as part of a culture of misogyny and objectification, cultural patriarchal issues, lack of challenge in the community and a lack of sex education (Gohir, 2013). Cockbain's research found that offenders in the sample often displayed disdainful and misogynistic attitudes towards their victims (Cockbain, 2018). Research by Taylor discussed the imbalance of power between offenders and victims, as a result of age, gender, status and access to resources, but also as a result of the grooming and exploitation process (Taylor, 2019). This echoes the exertion of power and control being suggested as a motive by professionals in research undertaken by the Children's Commissioner for England, along with entitlement, sexual gratification and a desire to humiliate (Berelowitz *et al.,* 2012).

It was also found that some group-based offenders engaged in other forms of criminality, but that this was inconsistent and often incidental (*ibid.*). The Police Foundation found that there was an overlap between groups engaging in CSE and other serious crime, such as criminal exploitation and involvement in drugs supply (Skidmore *et al.,* 2016). Cockbain and Wortley, in their study of 55 offenders involved in 6 large cases, found that half of the offenders aged between 17 and 56 had a previous conviction, which is higher than the comparable national baseline of 28% of 18- to 52-year-old males. They also found that 29% had 3 or more convictions compared with 11% of males nationally. Only two had prior sexual convictions. The authors therefore suggest that these offenders may be driven by a readiness to seize criminal opportunities and a lack of self-control (Cockbain and Wortley, 2015; Cockbain, 2018), which differs from the common conceptualisation of a distinct type of sexual offender. Other research has made similar findings, with Taylor reporting that 46% (n=18) of the 39 offenders examined had a previous conviction, but of those, 66% (n=12) had convictions or had been reported for sexual offences (Taylor, 2019). It has been suggested that perpetrators commit a range of offences because they believe they can do so with impunity, and that local authorities and police services need to maintain a stronger presence in order to prevent offending (Casey, 2015; Cockbain, 2018).

6. Victims of child sexual exploitation

Knowledge about victims is a considerable gap in the understanding of child sexual exploitation (CSE). Many victims will not approach the police regarding their victimisation in relation to CSE, but may be identified by authorities for other reasons, such as by going missing (Coy *et al.,* 2017; Radford *et al.,* 2017). It is then up to the professionals involved to identify that these children and young people are victims of sexual exploitation (see Section 3 for more on the challenges of understanding the prevalence of group-based CSE). Additionally, victims from certain communities or groups may be systematically less likely to be identified by the authorities (CEOP, 2014; National Crime Agency, 2018; The Children's Society, 2018; Allnock *et al.,* 2019; Parke and Karsna, 2019; Cockbain *et al.,* 2020). Therefore, the understanding of the number of victims, as well as their characteristics based on official and agency data is limited.

Other research such as surveys can offer a broader picture, but are rarely specific about experiences of CSE (Kelly and Karsna, 2018). Indeed, as mentioned previously, there are no prevalence studies specifically measuring experiences of CSE in the UK. As is the case when looking at offender characteristics, the existing research on victims of group-based CSE does not always use consistent definitions due to examining different aspects of CSE. Some research will apply the definition of CSE more narrowly or broadly than others, leading to difficulty comparing sources. Different agencies may also collect different data on different aspects of offending, including characteristics of victims (Christie and Karsna, 2019), thus limiting the comparability of sources. Much of the research presented here examines CSE more widely and as such cannot be used to draw any conclusions about specific characteristics of victims of group-based CSE.

6.1. Demographics

6.1.1. Gender

In line with all forms of child sexual abuse (CSA), known victims of group-based CSE, and CSE more widely, are typically female. For example, the NPCC's problem profiles of CSE found that in 2014–2015, 88% of a total of 8,995 victims were female, and 12% were male (NPCC, 2015). A similar picture was seen in research by the Children's Commissioner for England, finding that 72% of the 2,409 victims identified were female and 9% were male. However, information on gender was not recorded in 19% of cases and it was suggested that it is likely that these were also female victims, as that is seen as the default victim profile (Berelowitz *et al.,* 2012). An earlier report by the Child Exploitation and Online Protection (CEOP) command of the National Crime Agency found that 31% of known victims were of unknown gender, potentially because of the assumption that a victim of this type of crime is female, and therefore it is not recorded (CEOP, 2011).

Whilst CSE is most frequently documented in young females with mostly one fifth or less of cases relating to young males, this may be due to less disclosure or more cases being overlooked in boys (Beckett *et al.,* 2017). It is likely that boys and young men are less likely to report being victims of CSA, or to be identified as such (Longfield, 2015; Fox, 2016; Allnock *et al.,* 2019). However, in one study of over 9,000 users of Barnardo's CSE support services, nearly a third were found to be male (Cockbain *et al.,* 2017), suggesting that these issues around disclosure and identification may be contributing to the accepted idea that CSE only affects female victims.

Indeed, it has been noted that the majority of service provision focuses on girls and young women, and that boys and young men face unique barriers to disclosure and identification, such as:

- discriminatory social attitudes;
- internalisation of harmful stereotypes of masculinity;
- being presented with CSE education erasing males as victims; and
- gendered interpretation of potential CSE indicators.
  (McNaughton Nicholls *et al.,* 2014; Fox, 2016).

6.1.2. Age

The age ranges of victims of CSE varies between different studies, possibly based on differences in samples and methodology. Additionally, it is not always clear if the samples look at the age when exploitation started, or the age at which the victim came to the attention of the authorities or services that recorded the data. The CSA Centre report that the average age at which concerns are identified is 12 to 15 years old (Coy *et al.*, 2017). The National Police Chiefs' Council (NPCC) looked at 8,995 young people identified as at risk of CSE or as a victim of CSE and found that they were aged 14 on average (NPCC, 2015). Government guidance states that the children aged between 12 and 15 are most at risk of CSE, although it notes that victims as young as 8 have been identified (Department for Education, 2017). The Drew review of CSE operations in South Yorkshire between 1997 and 2016 found that victims identified between January 2013 and January 2016 were most commonly aged between 13 and 15 (Drew, 2016). The most commonly reported age of CSE victimisation in the research appears to be between 14 and 15 years (Berelowitz *et al.,* 2012; CEOP, 2013; Gohir, 2013; Cockbain *et al.,* 2017). Generally, research tends to put the victims of group-based CSE at a similar or slightly higher age, often ranging from 13 to 17 years (Cockbain, 2018; Taylor, 2019), although younger victims have been seen, and some studies have found that victims can be as young as 4 (CEOP, 2011; Berelowitz *et al.*, 2012), but there is less available evidence looking specifically at victims of group-based CSE compared with CSE more broadly. Additionally, it is worth considering that the definition of CSE has been seen to be applied more frequently to older children, risking skewing the picture of who experiences this type of abuse (Cockbain *et al.,* 2017).

6.1.3. Ethnicity

As with other characteristics, reporting issues make it hard to draw firm conclusions on ethnicities of victims, and most research focuses on CSE more widely. However, as the Jay report of the inquiry into child sexual exploitation in Rotherham highlighted, White girls are not the only victims of this type of offending (Jay, 2014). When looking at ethnicity, it is key to consider the large body of evidence of under-reporting and under-identification of victims from certain ethnic minority groups, which greatly impacts the understanding of victims of CSE due to their consequent under-representation in the data (Kelly and Karsna, 2018; Allnock *et al.,* 2019). The CSA Centre, CEOP and the National Crime Agency (NCA) have all noted this issue, suggesting that there are unique barriers to victims from ethnic minorities disclosing abuse as well as issues in the way that professionals recognise abuse and respond to disclosures (CEOP, 2014; National Crime Agency, 2018; Allnock *et al.,* 2019). In particular, research commissioned by the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse (IICSA) also noted that stereotypes about what is 'normal' for certain ethnic minority groups can result in professionals failing to recognise abuse, or not acting on concerns (Rodger *et al.,* 2020). Issues such as language barriers, lack of awareness and discrimination can

all have an impact on an ethnic minority victim's ability or willingness to disclose (The Children's Society, 2018). Cultural and religious views in a certain community may prevent victims from speaking out (Fox, 2016). For example, issues such as shame, dishonour and blackmail are thought to be major impediments to certain Asian victims coming forward (Gohir, 2013).

Disclosure is not the only issue. The Children's Commissioner for England found that children from ethnic minorities were less likely to be identified as victims in the same ways as children who were White British (Berelowitz *et al.,* 2012). The Children's Society, in collaboration with Victim Support and the NPCC, produced guidance in 2018 for supporting Black and ethnic minority victims of CSE. They note that professionals should be aware of specific difficulties caused by the intersection of multiple vulnerabilities to help them to recognise abuse in ethnic minority victims (The Children's Society, 2018). It has also been noted that specialist services are often lacking, and many mainstream CSE services are geared towards prototypical White female victims and may overlook the needs of other groups including ethnic minorities (Gohir, 2013; Cockbain and Tufail, 2020). It has also been noted that the media focus on the racial model of offending can risk the erasure of non-White victims of crime if victims from ethnic minority backgrounds remain overlooked (The Children's Society, 2018; Cockbain and Tufail, 2020).

This context of under-reporting and under-identification of certain groups is important to keep in mind when assessing the available evidence. Research suggests that the majority of known victims of CSE are White, with research suggesting that anywhere from 60% to 83% of victims fall into this category (CEOP, 2011; Berelowitz *et al.,* 2012; NPCC, 2015; Cockbain *et al.,* 2017). Additionally, the most recent Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW) on victims of CSA found that the proportion of White adults who reported that they had experienced any form of CSA during childhood was 8%, compared with 3.5% for Asian adults and 6% for Black adults (Office for National Statistics, 2020). The NPCC found in the problem profiles of all types of CSE that out of 8,995 individuals confirmed to be victims or at risk of CSE 70% were White, 5% were Black, 2% were Asian; 22% were of unknown or not recorded ethnicity (NPCC, 2015). The Drew review found that 73.3% of victims were White British, but a further 20.1% had no ethnicity stated (Drew, 2016). Whilst the Children's Commissioner for England found that 60% of victims were White, they also found that 28% were from ethnic minorities and highlighted that this contradicts the general perception that sexual exploitation by gangs and groups is committed primarily against White children (Berelowitz *et al.,* 2012). A further study looking at over 9,000 users of CSE services found ethnic minority victims made up around one fifth of the total number and were represented broadly in line with their proportions of the general population (Cockbain *et al.,* 2017), making up a substantial minority and disputing the widely held notion that the victims of CSE are always White (Cockbain and Tufail, 2020).

The Muslim Women's Network looked specifically at Asian victims of predominantly group-based CSE, which challenges the racial model of Asian gangs targeting White girls. They were able to identify Asian victims of group-based CSE through the professionals who had come into contact with them. Speaking to 73 people from social services, the police, youth work, health care, education, justice and voluntary organisations, as well as friends and relatives of victims and examining 35 case studies relating to victims, they found that the offenders in these cases were often Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Afghani and White, and were almost always from the same ethnic background as their victims – although this may be due to the relative ease of accessing victims in similar community groups or areas. The professionals interviewed in this research also noted that offending against a White victim by a White offender was perceived to be the most common type of sexual exploitation offending (Gohir, 2013). Other research has also suggested that offenders and victims are commonly ethnically homogeneous (Taylor, 2019).

6.2. Vulnerabilities and risk factors

Every child is vulnerable to abuse as a result of their age. It is worth clarifying that abuse does not occur because of a vulnerability, but rather because of an offender's desire to take advantage of this vulnerability (Beckett *et al.,* 2017). It is important to note that many children who are exploited do not have any additional vulnerabilities and some vulnerabilities can be observed as a result of the abuse that a victim has experienced (Eaton and Holmes, 2017).

The vulnerabilities and risk factors thought to be associated with CSE and commonly discussed in the literature include the following:

- being in care (Barnardo's, 2011; CEOP, 2013; Brown *et al.,* 2016; Beckett *et al.,* 2017);
- episodes of going missing (Barnardo's, 2011; CEOP, 2013; Cockbain *et al.,* 2017; Cockbain, 2018);
- drug and/or alcohol misuse (Barnardo's, 2011; CEOP, 2013);
- mental health issues (Barnardo's, 2011; CEOP, 2013; Cockbain, 2018);
- lack of a safe/stable home environment, now or in the past (domestic violence or parental substance misuse, mental health issues or criminality, for example; Health Working Group, 2014; Skidmore *et al.,* 2016);
- experience of previous abuse (Barnardo's, 2011; Health Working Group, 2014; Beckett *et al.,* 2017; Cockbain, 2018);
- learning disabilities and impairments (Health Working Group, 2014; Brown *et al.,* 2016; Fox, 2016; Cockbain *et al.,* 2017);
- disengagement or absence from education, training, employment (Beckett *et al.,* 2017);
- recent bereavement or loss (Health Working Group, 2014);
- connections with others being sexually exploited (Health Working Group, 2014; Cockbain, 2018);
- low self-esteem or confidence (Health Working Group, 2014);
- social isolation or social difficulties (Beckett *et al.,* 2017);
- economic vulnerability (Beckett *et al.,* 2017);
- homelessness or insecure accommodation status (Smeaton, 2013; Beckett *et al.,* 2017);
- being a young carer (Health Working Group, 2014; Beckett *et al.,* 2017); and
- youth offending (Cockbain and Brayley, 2012; Cockbain, 2018).

Some research points to the idea that vulnerabilities play a role in an offender targeting a victim (Smeaton, 2013). The Children's Commissioner for England's 2012 report states that whilst victims of CSE come from a range of demographics, those who have pre-existing vulnerabilities are more likely to be sexually exploited than those who do not (Berelowitz *et al.,* 2012). CEOP's further work in 2013 found that of 144 victims, 100 had at least one 'identifiable vulnerability' (CEOP, 2013), although this was based on a small and partial sample. Research by Senker *et al.* (2020) found that offenders who targeted victims opportunistically were often able to point to vulnerabilities present in their victims, despite denying that these factors led to them being targeted. In interviews with police officers and prosecutors, it was commonly voiced that a victim's vulnerabilities heightened their susceptibility to being targeted by offenders, which echoed the study's findings that 74% (n=32) of victims had a documented history of issues such as prior abuse, going missing or youth offending (Cockbain, 2018). It has been suggested that multiple vulnerabilities may intersect and combine in different ways (Beckett *et al.,* 2017).

CSE practitioners have been seen to use over 100 risk indicators to identify those at risk. However, there are clear issues with the use of these indicators. There is often little or no research to substantiate their use in risk assessment tools, and some of the risk factors or vulnerabilities could in fact be signs or impacts of abuse (Brown *et al.,* 2016). Although these factors are sometimes identified based on practice evidence, a robust evidence base for them is lacking. The way in which they have been identified and the ways in which they may increase vulnerability is not yet

fully understood (Beckett *et al.,* 2017). A main challenge in understanding vulnerabilities is the difficulty in establishing whether the vulnerability led to the experience of CSE, or if experiencing CSE resulted in the development of certain vulnerabilities. The CSA Centre conducted a survey of 42 professionals and interviewed a further 17 from a range of agencies and services mostly involved in child protection and safeguarding. They found that at least 19 different screening or assessment tools were in use, and that there was variation in application. They noted that the tools were not always suitable for certain groups, such as younger victims or those with disabilities (Brown *et al.,* 2017). Importantly, they found evidence that risk factors and indicators of harm were often conflated, highlighting how establishing a causal link between vulnerabilities and abuse is difficult (Brown *et al.,* 2017; Beckett *et al.,* 2017). It has been noted that a holistic approach should be taken when trying to understand risk and vulnerability, rather than focusing on any specific indicators (Beckett *et al.,* 2017).

Due to the limited evidence base in this area, it is not possible to ascertain whether there are specific vulnerabilities associated with group-based CSE in particular. It has been suggested that vulnerabilities and risk do not always manifest in clear or linear ways, and complex interactions can affect the likelihood of experiencing CSE (Eaton and Holmes, 2017). It has also been noted that sometimes both the risk factor and CSE can be linked to some other environmental factor (Cockbain and Brayley, 2012). As well as this, Gohir notes that there can sometimes be specific vulnerabilities associated with Asian and Muslim cultures, such as coming from a strict, conservative background or being at risk of forced marriage, from which they seek an escape. These, like the vulnerabilities faced by other groups, can be a two-pronged issue – they may make victims a target for exploitation and could also pose a barrier to disclosing (Gohir, 2013). Other issues exacerbating vulnerabilities for ethnic minority victims have been highlighted, such as faith or belief, the acceptance of honour-based abuse/violence, and forced marriage (Fox, 2016; The Children's Society, 2018). As mentioned, despite this long list of factors and vulnerabilities, only a few have been substantiated in the research. Out of all the factors and characteristics that are commonly cited as making children vulnerable to any form of CSE, it has been suggested that being in care or having disabilities are the only risk factors with robust evidence supporting their link with abuse (Brown *et al.,* 2016). As going missing is frequently discussed in the literature, it is considered here in more detail alongside the two factors identified by Brown *et al.*

6.2.1. Looked-after children

The NCA's National Strategic Assessment found a disproportionately high number of victims of CSE who are targeted by groups are looked-after children (National Crime Agency, 2018). The Children's Commissioner for England's inquiry also found that although the majority of victims are living at home when their abuse begins, a disproportionate number are living in care compared with the general population (Berelowitz *et al.,* 2012). Although reports of sexual abuse perpetrated by staff in residential care settings have declined over the years, there are still risks that looked-after children may be targeted by offenders outside the home who seek to exploit victim vulnerabilities (Evans, 2019). Barnardo's found that children in care were increasingly over-represented amongst people using their sexual exploitation services. They noted that this could in part be due to increased awareness, meaning that staff more readily recognise the vulnerability of children in their care (Paskell, 2013). More specifically, Cockbain *et al.* (2017) found that of over 9,000 CSE service users, 18% were 'looked-after children', compared with just 0.6% of the general English population. Although the exact reasons for this over-representation are unclear, the authors suggest that looked-after children are known to suffer in other ways that could increase their risk of exploitation. Similarly, Brown *et al.* (2016) considered that children in residential care could differ from the general population in ways that make them more vulnerable to exploitation, or the increased risk could be caused by the characteristics of residential care itself. CEOP found that

whilst some victims in their report were in local authority care before experiencing exploitation, some became looked-after after their abuse, as part of a social services intervention (CEOP, 2011).

6.2.2. Learning disabilities

Cockbain *et al.* (2017) found that when looking at over 9,000 CSE service users, 35% of male and 13% of female service users had a disability recorded on their files. The most common of these for both sexes were behavioural or learning disabilities, or autism spectrum disorders, and the latter two were seen more commonly in service users than the general population, suggesting that they may be a vulnerability for abuse (*ibid.*). This link needs to be explored in more depth, but when looking at the vulnerabilities of victims of CSE in research for Barnardo's, it was found that out of 41 children who were interviewed, 17 self-defined as having learning difficulties, which were thought potentially to act as a further vulnerability to abuse (Smeaton, 2013). In further research for Barnardo's, surveys were taken of local authorities and stakeholders, and interviews carried out with young victims or those at risk who also had learning disabilities. This research found a consensus that a learning disability could heighten the vulnerability of a child to CSE for a variety of reasons such as:

- being prone to impulsive behaviour;
- having difficulty in recognising exploitative behaviour; and
- issues surrounding the capacity of professionals to recognise signs of abuse and exploitation within this group (Franklin *et al.,* 2015).

There is some evidence that impairments relating to social interaction can make children more vulnerable to exploitation, perhaps in part due to having a different understanding of social cues, interaction and communication, which means that they could be more readily manipulated and exploited by offenders (Franklin *et al.,* 2015; Brown *et al.,* 2016). Some professionals have noted that children with learning difficulties are particularly vulnerable to being encouraged to run away so that they can be sexually exploited (Smeaton, 2013).

It has also been suggested that victims with learning disabilities may also be less likely to disclose abuse, or to be believed or listened to if they did disclose abuse (Franklin *et al.,* 2015). A factor that was raised was the fact that society often overprotects, disempowers and isolates young people with learning disabilities whilst also not recognising their sexual autonomy, thereby giving little attention to their sexual behaviour and vulnerability. This can mean that professionals do not deem them as being at risk of CSE and therefore do not adequately protect them (*ibid.*). Elsewhere it has been noted that expressions of distress by victims with disabilities may be seen to be related to their impairment, rather than being seriously considered as a reaction to abuse (Taylor *et al.,* 2015).

6.2.3. Missing children

It has been noted that many sexually exploited children have gone missing or run away from home (CEOP, 2011). When looking at data on over 9,000 CSE service users, Cockbain *et al.* (2017) found that going missing accounted for over half of all referrals.

The Children's Commissioner for England's inquiry found that 70% of the 23 victims of CSE who were interviewed had gone missing, and many of the site visits undertaken made mention of victims being identified due to frequently going missing (Berelowitz *et al.,* 2012). Whilst these findings are not generalisable, it suggests there may be a relationship between these experiences. CEOP's 2011 study found that of 2,083 victims, over half (n=842) had gone missing or run away, although a further 1,069 cases had no available data on this issue. Additionally, the CEOP dataset was not able to ascertain whether going missing or running away predated the experience of CSE, or came as a result (CEOP, 2011). Similarly, research conducted for Barnardo's examining the link between children running away and experiencing CSE interviewed 41 young people and 27 professionals working in projects in the voluntary sector (Smeaton, 2013). It found that participants often reported a link between running away and experiencing CSE, although both running away and experiencing CSE could be the result of other underlying vulnerabilities such as social issues. In particular, it was noted that children from Black and ethnic minority backgrounds who run away are often experiencing extra issues that in turn further increase their risk of CSE, such as inner-city deprivation and poverty. Professionals also noted that there is not one single link between running away and experiencing sexual exploitation, but a combination of factors that intersect in dynamic ways (*ibid.*).

This idea that there can be a complex intersection of factors that can lead to victimisation has been suggested elsewhere (CEOP, 2011; Sharp, 2012; Brown *et al.,* 2016). However, Smeaton also notes that sometimes running away can be a vulnerability to CSE and other times it may be as a consequence of already experiencing CSE (Smeaton, 2013) and this is an important consideration.

7.   Conclusion

Whilst this review has attempted to assess the evidence on one type of child sexual exploitation (CSE), the lack of a clear definition of group-based CSE makes it difficult to draw robust conclusions about this type of crime. Different agencies using different definitions means that much data cannot easily be compared. These different terms and definitions result in different practice, policies and data collection and therefore make it difficult to compare different studies and gain a clear understanding of this type of crime. Research in this area has highlighted the importance of consistent definitions and understanding of what group-based CSE is, both to ensure that victims can be identified, safeguarded and supported, and offenders apprehended, but also to gain an understanding of the scale and nature of group-based CSE (Beckett *et al.,* 2017; Kelly and Karsna, 2018; Christie and Karsna, 2019; Parke and Karsna, 2019). It has been noted that clear definitions are imperative for good practice, as well as quality data collection and analysis (Brayley and Cockbain, 2014). It is therefore important to be aware of the variations in interpretation and application of these terms when examining different datasets and research.

In addition, much of the available data are incomplete, collected in a biased way, incomparable with other sources of data or not intended to inform generalisations about group-based offending. There has been no formal prevalence study of CSE and added to this is the fact that CSE, like all forms of child sexual abuse (CSA), is under-reported and under-identified meaning that a true picture of the scale and nature of offending is hard to draw. Therefore, the available evidence is limited by virtue of being based on the small number of CSE instances that are reported or identified. Much of this research is based on small samples and was never intended to be generalised to inform wider conclusions.

Despite this, some findings about known cases of group-based CSE can be identified. Offenders have been seen to operate primarily in the shared locality of the network and the victims. Initial contact may be opportunistic but can develop into structured grooming, displaying many common features of grooming such as the provision of commodities, affectionate behaviour, and coercive control. Different models of offending behaviour have been demonstrated but are rarely substantiated by robust evidence. There are also likely to be more models that have not been explored. In reality, features of different models may intersect and overlap in dynamic ways.

The available research suggests that offenders are predominantly male. Limited evidence suggests that group-based CSE offenders may be younger than those who operate alone. Data on ethnicity are frequently of poor quality and the only robust inference that can be made is that offending is not unique to one ethnic group. Networks have been shown in various samples to commonly be based on pre-existing social connections and members have varying degrees of involvement with the group. The motives of groups are likely to differ, both between groups and between members of the same group. However, it is hard to ascertain motives with any real confidence, as data are not commonly available on this and many offenders deny and minimise their offences and can offer no insight into the reason for their offending.

As CSE is frequently under-reported and under-identified, the conclusions that can be drawn about victims are limited, and it is important to be aware of the large number of victims who will be absent from the data and research in this area. Specific groups such as boys, those with disabilities and those from ethnic minority communities are known to face increased barriers to disclosure and are therefore likely under-represented in the available data. Nonetheless, the evidence suggests that victims are predominantly female, teenage and come from a range of ethnic backgrounds. Certain vulnerabilities are thought to increase a victim's susceptibility to exploitation, but there is limited evidence for these, and it is often not possible to clearly distinguish vulnerabilities from indicators

that harm has already taken place. Additionally, vulnerabilities and risk factors may intersect in fluid and complex ways.

As is clear, there is still much that is unknown about group-based CSE. It is recognised that it is incredibly difficult to do research in this space, and therefore there are very limited conclusions that can be drawn. Many of the evidence gaps in the research in this area are not specific to group-based CSE and are issues more broadly in relation to CSE. For example, The CSA Centre noted in 2017 that in addition to the lack of data regarding prevalence, there are considerable gaps in the literature regarding the nature and characteristics of CSE (Sharp-Jeffs *et al.,* 2017), which have also been noted in much of the research explored for this review.

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