An explorative study on perpetrators of child sexual exploitation convicted alongside others

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TONIC

An explorative study on perpetrators of child sexual exploitation convicted alongside others

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Disclaimer

This research report has been prepared at the request of the Inquiry's Chair and Panel. The views expressed are those of the authors alone. The research findings arising from the fieldwork do not constitute formal recommendations by the Inquiry's Chair and Panel and are separate from legal evidence obtained in investigations and hearings.

The report contains direct accounts and quotes from perpetrators of child sexual abuse and exploitation. Reading the report can have an emotional impact. There are some support organisations that it may be helpful to contact if you have been affected by any of the content in the report: https://www.iicsa.org.uk/help-and-support.

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Introduction

The Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse ('the Inquiry') was set up in March 2015 and aims to consider the extent to which state and non-state institutions in England and Wales have failed in their duty of care to protect children from sexual abuse and exploitation, and to make meaningful recommendations for change.

The Inquiry's investigation on Child Sexual Exploitation by Organised Networks assesses the extent to which a wide range of relevant authorities have learnt lessons, implemented recommendations, and put in place effective strategies to prevent child sexual exploitation in future.

The Inquiry also has a research programme to gather together what is already known about child sexual abuse and exploitation, and undertake primary research to fill knowledge gaps. This research has been commissioned to support the Child Sexual Exploitation by Organised Networks investigation, to better understand perpetrators' motivations and behaviours, particularly in regard to informing preventative practice.

Task

TONIC was commissioned by the Inquiry to interview perpetrators of child sexual exploitation in organised networks. This was in recognition of a relative lack of primary research on this emerging topic. Historically, work has tended to focus on perpetrators of sexual offending (not child sexual exploitation). Where child sexual exploitation was the focus, work has centred around lone perpetrators and online offending (for example Walker, Pillinger and Brown, 2018). There have recently been a small number of studies looking at groups of child sexual exploitation perpetrators (for example Cockbain, 2018; Pancholi and Palmer, forthcoming), but the topic still warrants further research.

The aims of the current research were to:

- further an understanding of the motivations and modus operandi of perpetrators of child sexual exploitation who operate in organised networks; and

- identify interventions and approaches that could prevent or disrupt perpetrators of child sexual exploitation who operate in organised networks.

Using the definition from *Working Together to Safeguard Children* (HM Government, 2018), the Inquiry defines child sexual exploitation as:

> *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 perpetrator or facilitator. The victim may have been sexually exploited even if the sexual activity appears consensual. Child sexual exploitation does not always involve physical contact; it can also occur through the use of technology.*

The team started the project by conducting a background literature review, which indicated the following:

- There remains a lack of research on child sexual exploitation perpetrators who operate in groups, especially in contrast to research on lone perpetrators or online perpetrators.

- Seemingly, a variety of people engage in child sexual exploitation: young and old, and from different ethnic backgrounds. Most commonly, however, they appear to be young (under 25) and white. Recent work challenges the view that they are less likely to have previous convictions compared to other perpetrators.

- Victims can be male or female. There are several proposed models to understand methods of child sexual exploitation (for example the boyfriend model, and the hook, coordinator or predator), some of which have considerable overlap with other offence types, including domestic violence, county lines and human trafficking.

Methods, sample and limitations

The research was qualitative in nature, undertaking first-hand interviews with individuals who were identified by gatekeepers as meeting some or all of the criteria (see Figure 1).

The eligibility criteria were sent to over 40 prisons across England and Wales, as well as regional National Probation Service offices and third-sector organisations. As a result, 27 individuals were interviewed, across nine prisons, in January and February 2019. One individual subsequently withdrew their data, meaning there were 26 interviews to analyse and consider. This makes this project the largest primary research study on this topic in the UK.

Figure 1: Eligibility criteria for participant inclusion

Eligibility criteria

- Any sex
- Any ethnicity or race
- Currently over 18 (but could have been under 18 at the time of the offence)
- Offence to have taken place in the last decade
- Sentenced or unsentenced
- Residing in either prison or community at the time of interview
- The same victim across multiple perpetrators in the network
- Contact offences or conveyance, conspiracy or trafficking offences
- Can maintain their innocence over their conviction (can deny the offence)

The sample comprised 24 males and two females. The age range of participants was 22–66 years. The average age of participants at the time of interview was 38 years. Fourteen participants identified as white British, four identified as any other white background, two identified as any other Asian background, one identified as Indian, one identified as white and Asian, two identified as black African, and two preferred not to say.

Participants had the following range of index offences, which are all contained within the Sexual Offences Act (2003).

- Rape of a child under 13

- Rape

- Attempted rape

- Penetrative sexual activity with a child

- Sexual assault

- Taking indecent photograph or pseudo-photograph of child

- Sharing indecent photograph/pseudo-photograph of a child

- Trafficking for sexual exploitation

- Meeting a girl under 16 following grooming

- Arranging/facilitating child sex offence

- Conspiracy to rape

- Engaging in sexual activity in the presence of a child 13–15

- Arranging/facilitating prostitution/involvement in pornography of a child aged 13–15.

The mean sentence length currently being served for the index offence was 13.7 years, with a range of 6–24 years. The age range of victims was broad, with the youngest victim four months old. The majority of participants were convicted of offences which involved female victims (n = 18), including the female participants in our sample. No participants had been convicted of offences against both males *and* females.

Interviews were transcribed verbatim. NVivo 12 was used to assist in the thematic approach to data analysis. The six-step analysis procedure was utilised, as advocated by Braun and Clarke (2006).

There were some limitations which are worth highlighting. The sample size of 26, while considerable for qualitative work, means it cannot be assumed that research findings presented here are applicable to other perpetrators that have been convicted of child sexual exploitation alongside others. There could be different characteristics that were not observed in this sample. Despite those perpetrators who were being managed in the community under probation supervision being eligible to take part, the sample consisted only of those who had been convicted and who were currently in prison.

Ethics and expert advice

The project was scrutinised by the Inquiry's own Research Ethics Committee and received ethical approval in September 2018. The Committee stipulated that participants had to be over 18 at the time of interview. Subsequently, Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS) National Research Committee (NRC), which governs research undertaken with those in prisons or under probation, gave approval for the work in November 2018.

An expert group, made up of individuals from different agencies with expertise in either child sexual exploitation or organised crime, was formed to support the project and act as a critical friend to the researchers.

Key findings from the research

This report presents what was heard and what participants reported in relation to perpetrators, networks, victims, and prevention and disruption. It does not attribute truth to these accounts, but reports on how the perpetrators discussed and understand their behaviour and convictions. There are four key findings from the research. The research findings do not constitute formal recommendations by the Inquiry's Chair and Panel and are separate from legal evidence obtained in investigations and hearings.

1. Participants interviewed for this research study were diverse and came from a range of backgrounds.
The participants interviewed for this research study represented a diverse group. The age range was 22–66 years old at the time of interview, with an average age of 38. Over two-thirds of the sample (n = 18) were white British/white other, but participants also identified as Asian, black African, other Asian, Indian, and white and Asian. Participants came from a range of employment backgrounds. Victims ranged from 4 months old to 15 years old and were both male and female. No participant offended against both males and females.*
2. Perpetrators could be loosely clustered around three groups (A, B and C) according to their lifestyle, motivation, sexual interest and attitude towards conviction.
Despite perpetrators' varied backgrounds, they could be loosely clustered around three groups, noting differences in their lifestyle, motivation, sexual interest and attitude towards conviction. This emerged as an observation of the aggregate data, and was not an intended or deliberate purpose of the research. Hence this is not a tried and tested typology, more an observation of our own sample.†

- Group A: participants admitted their offence and discussed a historical sexual attraction to children or young people. Participants described living a double life and spent an excessive amount of time online.
- Group B: participants denied or partially denied their offence and did not disclose attraction to children and young people. They reversed the narrative and suggested they were vulnerable rather than the victims, and described a hedonistic lifestyle.
- Group C: participants either denied, partially denied or admitted their offence. They presented as vulnerable and seemed to have been exploited or groomed by co-defendants.

3. Networks were described by participants as loose associations rather than organised networks.
Participants said the groups they had been convicted as part of lacked a ringleader or hierarchy. Participants said they only knew one or two other individuals convicted of offences arising from the same or similar set of circumstances, claiming to be linked to these individuals via a number of different relationships: family members, romantic connections, people they knew of, and friends or work colleagues.

▶

◄ **4. Participants acknowledged their behaviour to varying extents, with some using minimisation and justification to explain their motivations and offending behaviours.**

Some participants did not take ownership of their behaviour, diffused responsibility and minimised harm.

a   Participants in group A said that an anonymous supportive space in which to discuss sexually harmful thoughts may have prevented them from offending.

Participants from group A recognised and acknowledged work they could have done to prevent them offending. They stated they would have liked a place they could go or person they could speak to about their sexual preoccupations and inappropriate thoughts before their offence was commissioned. Some had accessed charities after arrest but reported this experience as negative and judgemental. Participants in group A likened their thoughts to an addiction and stated that, compared to other addictions, they felt there was nowhere they could access help before things escalated.

b   Where denial was prevalent, so too was diffusion of responsibility.

Participants, mainly those in group B, displaced their responsibility onto others, including parents, police and social services, and rejected the identity of 'sex offender', refusing to take part in treatment programmes and rejecting any suggestion that the problem lied within their behaviour. They also rejected the idea that their victims were chosen purposefully or targeted due to their vulnerability.

c   Across the groups, several participants claimed a lack of understanding of what constituted an offence.

Participants often asserted that they did not know that what they were doing constituted an offence. This was most common where offences were trafficking or conspiracy offences (rather than contact offences). Several participants advocated a need for education around this to prevent offending.

* Due to the explorative nature of the research, these characteristics pertain to the current sample and may not be applicable to other perpetrators.

† The research does not claim that every perpetrator of child sexual exploitation necessarily falls into one of these groups, and acknowledges there could be different characteristics that were not observed in this sample.

Perpetrators

The analysis of the interviews was entirely exploratory, and the research team had no preconceived ideas about who would engage under the umbrella term of 'perpetrators of child sexual exploitation in organised networks'. The aim and intention was not to categorise participants, nor to create or seek a replicable typology. Three groups of perpetrators naturally emerged from the sample (A, B and C; please see Tables 1–3). The groups are characterised by what the perpetrators detailed was going on in their lives at the time of the offence, their motivation for offending, their sexual interest and victim profile, and their attitude towards their conviction.

Table 1: Characteristics of perpetrators in group A

Group A
Seven participants in total (one of these was also in group B) ● Average age: 45 years ● All male ● All white British
Lifestyle Participants often described that, at the time of their offence, they were living a double life. Outwardly, they may have been working and, sometimes, were in a long-term relationship. In their free or private time, they would spend an excessive amount of time online, chatting to those with similar sexual interests. Online is where they reported starting their offence-related behaviour, accessing indecent images and then potentially progressing to a contact offence. Three participants discussed alcohol and drugs as a central feature of their life during this period; one described himself as an alcoholic.
Motivation Participants discussed their offence motivation as largely being characterised by seeking approval, validation and sexual gratification from the online community. They reported online chats as a type of escapism, and described them as 'addictive'. They stated they were sexually aroused by the thought of a contact offence and said they felt disappointed or did not get the pleasure they were anticipating afterwards. As a result, they reported it was unlikely for them to contact-offend again after the first occasion.
Victim profile and sexual interest Participants reported a longstanding, although not exclusive, sexual attraction to children, or a preoccupation with sex. Several participants discussed excessive masturbation. Participants described being aroused by the 'power imbalance' in child–adult sexual images. Six participants reported male victims who were much younger than victims from groups B and C. Three participants described having to hide their identity as a 'gay man' from friends and family.
Attitude towards conviction Five of the participants totally admitted their offence, and one participant partially accepted his offence. The individual who was categorised as being in both groups A and B categorically denied his offence. Participants discussed their offence in more detail, with more insight and more remorse than those in groups B and C. This was enhanced if they had attended a treatment programme. They detailed they would have liked an anonymous safe space in which to talk about inappropriate sexual thoughts before they offended.
Network Participant networks were orientated online, which meant participants stated they did not recognise many co-defendants during trial. On occasion, however, online contact had sometimes progressed to an in-person meet-up, where an offence occurred. Five had contact offences. Online networks for group A therefore provided access to victims, and participants talked about 'co-offending' (at the same time and in the same place), unlike participants in other groups.

Table 2: Characteristics of perpetrators in group B

Group B
Thirteen participants in total (one of these was also in group A, two were also in group C)   • Average age: 36 years   • All male   • Three white British, 10 ethnic minority
Lifestyle   Group B was the most heterogeneous of the three identified groups. Participants described 'partying' or living a hedonistic lifestyle at the time of their offence. However, individuals in this group also may have had wives, children and full-time jobs alongside this hedonism. Infidelity was common, and some participants detailed that they had fathered children with their victims. Participants suggested they had notoriety in their area through other activities such as sports achievements, their employment (owning a local business) or being financially stable (evident to others through their clothes or cars). Several had previous offences for drug dealing or violence. These participants detailed being involved in the sale of drugs rather than drug use.
Motivation   For those who partially accepted their offence, they suggested that the motivation was hedonistic, bundled up in the somewhat chaotic nature of their lives, in which sex was one part of a bigger picture of partying, 'chilling' and 'hanging out'. For some who had a wife and children at home, they explained that their motivation was a 'buzz' and a 'thrill' of escaping normal, mundane life, and they relished the attention that they described from young females.
Victim profile and sexual interest   Victims were predominantly teenage females. Group B participants were characterised by either one monogamous relationship or multiple casual sexual relationships (including those with their victims). They suggested they only slept with young girls because they were readily available, denying it was fuelled by a sexual attraction to young people and, rather, was more opportunistic.
Attitude towards conviction   Five participants in group B categorically denied their offence and maintained their innocence. Eight participants partially accepted their offence. No one accepted their conviction outright. Participants frequently cited a 'lack of evidence' in their case and stated they felt disappointed in the justice system. Several suggested they had been convicted unfairly or racially stereotyped. Four participants from this group categorised themselves more as violent offenders and vehemently rejected the label of 'sex offender'.
Network   Largely, participants denied knowing all members of the network. They sometimes reported they knew only one or two co-defendants through being family, friends, work colleagues or loose associates.

Table 3: Characteristics of perpetrators in group C

Group C
Eight (two of these were also in group B) • Average age: 35 years • Six male, two female • Six white British, two ethnic minority
Lifestyle Participants were generally living a less stable lifestyle than groups A or B. They often were not working at the time of the offence. Three participants described that they would drink most days, and one declared he was an alcoholic at the time of the offence. Two said they did not use drugs or alcohol, and two participants described their use as recreational. The two females in this group were single parents at the time of the offence, and their children were suspected victims of exploitation or of featuring in indecent images.
Motivation Six participants had seemingly been implicated in the offence as a result of being groomed by their co-defendants. They suggested they had been motivated by a desire to be loved or accepted by their co-defendant. Some articulated they had been emotionally blackmailed and told they were already implicated in the offence, and were fearful of repercussions if they did not comply.
Victim profile and sexual interest Participants were unlikely to discuss their offence in the context of sexual activity or preference. Two participants had male victims, and six participants had female victims. The victims ranged in age from 3 to 15 years. Four participants had non-contact offences (conspiracy, facilitation or indecent image offences). For the other four who had rape convictions, two categorically denied rape – one said the offence occurred in the broader context of having sex with the victim and other co-defendants for money (using the term 'rent-boy' in interview), and one stated he had a casual sexual relationship with the victim.
Attitude towards conviction Two participants categorically denied their offence. Both these participants said they never had sex with the victim. Five participants partially accepted their offence and understood how they had come to be convicted, although disagreed with how it was outlined in court or the media. One participant fully accepted her offence, although she maintained that she was groomed and blackmailed by her co-defendant. Some participants stated they needed help before the offence took place to help them see they were being exploited.
Network Four individuals had been convicted alongside only one or two others, and described co-defendants as romantic connections or family members. Other cases knew of their co-defendants and discussed how they had been exploited by a larger criminal gang, of which they had only met a small number of members.

Networks

Based on perpetrators' accounts, networks were found to be far from organised, lacking a ringleader or hierarchy. An organised approach with a ringleader or hierarchy was only discussed when talking about other crime types, such as supply of drugs. Rather, participants described their connections with co-defendants as loose associations or connections with a small number of people. Participants rejected the labels of 'network' or 'gang', which they felt had been imposed on them erroneously by the criminal justice system.

How networks were connected

Most participants refuted knowing the whole network or its size. Four people stated they did not know a single other person they had been convicted with. For those who did admit to knowing a co-defendant, they described the person as a family member, a friend, a partner, a colleague or someone they knew of.

Those in group A, whose networks were online, seemed to have more of a clear configuration that they could articulate, and face-to-face meet-ups only progressed between small numbers of an otherwise sprawling, unseen online network.

Influence of network

For some participants, across all groups, the network provided access to victims. Some participants did blame their co-defendants for their behaviour, expressing regret at meeting them. The influence of the network also seemed to extend to court and prison, with some participants describing that they were fearful of co-defendants.

Communication methods

Five participants (across the groups) stated that they had met the network or their co-defendant online, either through social media, an online dating website or chat rooms where they shared or discussed indecent images of children. Participants in group A stated that being online permitted a degree of anonymity and remained a popular way of communicating. Those in group B described their communication and interactions with co-defendants occurring in person, with them seeing each other around in the local area, working together or 'hanging out'. Their communication methods seemed far more casual and spontaneous than those in groups A or C.

Evading detection

Group A stated they sometimes used code words, used video calls instead of sending images, and used techniques to convince other perpetrators they were genuinely aroused by children before meeting face to face. One member of group B said he avoided using smart phones. However, on the whole, there was little evidence to suggest participants tried deliberately to hide their behaviour from people outside the network, especially for group B. This was largely because they stated they didn't think they were doing anything wrong.

Victims

Relationship between victims and perpetrators

Participants described a range of 'relationships' or connections with the victims in their cases. Three participants (across groups B and C) categorically denied ever seeing, meeting or knowing the victim. Others stated they knew of the victim and had seen them around or knew of them from the local area, but still maintained they had not had sexual contact with this person.

Those in group A, although admitting to seeking indecent images, stated they were not seeking a victim for a contact offence. They said that this offence was opportunistic and the option was presented to them by a co-defendant. Six participants, one within group A and the rest in group B, described that they had casual sex with the victim (a teenager). For some participants it was blurred as to whether they considered or defined this as a relationship due to its casual nature. One participant, however, said he was 'deeply in love' with his victim, and two participants had fathered children with the victims.

Victim vulnerability

Participants acknowledged the vulnerability of their victims (for example, they had come from care or had a history of abuse), but they talked about opportunistic contact rather than purposefully targeting vulnerable young people. On the whole, those participants from groups B and C suggested that the background of the victims encouraged the victims to seek attention or attempt to escape their difficult lives and, in turn, this made the perpetrators vulnerable. In this sense, participants (especially those in group B) suggested that they were preyed upon by the victims, and not the other way around.

Minimisation and justification

Participants in group B regularly asserted that victims had deliberately lied about their age or dressed in a way that made them appear more adult. Participants, predominantly those in group B, also suggested that some victims' motivations for reporting sexual exploitation was to gain financial compensation or revenge after a relationship ended. These features did not appear in participant narratives where victims were under 13.

Alleged choice and consent of victims

Participants in group B implied that victims had volition in the sexual activity that had occurred, suggesting they had willingly taken part, denying harm, injury or coercion. Participants (except those exclusively in group A) denied there was a lack of consent, even if the victim was underage. Participants also strongly denied the concept of grooming, with many stating they had never heard of this term before they were convicted.

Prevention and disruption

Perceived responsibility of parents, police and social services

For those in groups B and C, attempts to discuss possible prevention and disruption strategies were largely hindered by a diffusion and displacement of responsibility. As is more common among people convicted of sexual offences (compared to other crimes), participants in group B engaged in defensive externalisation, attributing responsibility to the victim, parents and caregivers, schools and local authorities, police and other statutory agencies.

Seeking help confidentially

Participants, largely those in group A, who admitted a sexual attraction to children, acknowledged their obligation to prevent children and young people being harmed. They stated that at the time of their offence, they did not feel there was anywhere or anyone to turn to, to speak to about the thoughts, urges and fantasies they were experiencing. Participants stated they would have valued being able to access support before committing a crime. Some reported negative experiences with charities after they had been arrested, saying they felt judged.

Perceived positive impact of the justice system

Some participants felt they had benefited from treatment and therapy in prison, but they tended to be in groups A and C. One participant from group A, who admitted his offence, described he had benefited from the peer support he had got while in prison. There were other benefits to the justice system, such as access to education or help coming off substances, that were noted. Several participants (largely those in groups A and C) discussed the restrictions they would have on them on release as beneficial. Those who rejected the label of 'sex offender' found it difficult to be in prisons for those solely convicted of sexual offences.

Limited understanding about offences

Many of the participants across the groups proclaimed a lack of knowledge about their behaviour constituting a criminal offence (especially those with conspiracy and trafficking offences), which highlighted a potential need for education as a prevention mechanism.

CHAPTER 1: Introduction

The Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse (hereafter referred to as 'the Inquiry') commissioned primary research with perpetrators of child sexual exploitation in England and Wales who were part of organised networks. This introductory chapter provides the contextual information surrounding the research, including a short background to the Inquiry, its investigations and the rationale for this piece of research specifically.

1.1 Background to the Inquiry and investigation

The Inquiry was set up in March 2015 to consider the extent to which state and non-state institutions in England and Wales have failed in their duty of care to protect children from sexual abuse and exploitation, to consider the extent to which those failings have since been addressed, to identify further action needed to address any failings identified, and to make meaningful recommendations in order to protect children from such abuse in future.

The Inquiry's investigation on Child Sexual Exploitation by Organised Networks assesses the extent to which a wide range of relevant authorities have learnt lessons, implemented recommendations, and put in place effective strategies to prevent child sexual exploitation in future.

1.2 Background to the research

The Inquiry also has a research programme to gather together what is already known about child sexual abuse and exploitation, and undertake primary research to fill knowledge gaps. This research has been commissioned to support the Child Sexual Exploitation by Organised Networks investigation, to better understand perpetrators' motivations and behaviours, particularly in regard to informing preventative practice (Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse, 2016).

Currently, there is limited knowledge and a lack of primary research about how child sexual exploitation manifests itself within groups or networks, which can impact on the ability of agencies to intervene appropriately and effectively. By talking directly to this group of perpetrators, the research intended to provide information about how this offence type can be prevented and disrupted by the community, police and other statutory agencies (which has clear implications for public protection), but also how this group can be effectively managed, treated and supported within the criminal justice system to reduce the risk of future offending.

The stated aims of the research were to:

- further an understanding of the motivations and modus operandi of perpetrators of child sexual exploitation who operate in organised networks; and

- identify interventions and approaches that could prevent or disrupt perpetrators of child sexual exploitation who operate in organised networks.

Following competitive tender in June 2018, TONIC was commissioned to undertake this primary research on behalf of the Inquiry. TONIC is a social research organisation with over a decade of experience, specialising in crime and public health.

1.3 Definitions used

The Inquiry defines child sexual exploitation as:

> *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 perpetrator or facilitator. The victim may have been sexually exploited even if the sexual activity appears consensual. Child sexual exploitation does not always involve physical contact; it can also occur through the use of technology.*

The Inquiry defines an organised network as:

> *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.*

1.4 Report structure

The report is structured in the following way.

Chapter 2 summarises literature in this subject area. The literature review aimed to understand more about what is known about child sexual exploitation and offending in groups, but also where the gaps lie. It also considered parallels with other offence types such as human trafficking, county lines[1] and gang behaviour.

Chapter 3 outlines the methodology of the primary research, including the overall design and approach of the project; research ethics; site selection; recruitment of participants and summary of the final sample; analysis and limitations.

Chapter 4 uses participant narratives to explore the lifestyle, motivation, victim profile and sexual interests, and attitude towards conviction of individuals convicted of child sexual exploitation in organised networks. This chapter also includes reference to the way in which our research findings align with or differ from previous work.

Chapter 5 outlines the ways in which participants discussed the networks they had been convicted in, and includes reference to the way in which our research findings align with or differ from previous work.

Chapter 6 outlines the ways in which participants discussed victims of child sexual exploitation, and includes reference to the way in which our research findings align with or differ from previous work.

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1   The National Crime Agency defines county lines as a term used when drug gangs from big cities expand their operations to smaller towns, often using violence to drive out local dealers and exploiting children and vulnerable people to sell drugs. Dealers use dedicated mobile phone lines, 'deal lines', to take orders.

Chapter 7 outlines the ways in which participants discussed potential avenues for prevention and disruption of child sexual exploitation in organised networks, and includes reference to the way in which our research findings align with or differ from previous work.

Chapter 8 highlights the key research findings and prominent messages from the primary research project, including opportunities for future research.

CHAPTER 2: Literature review

In November 2018, and ahead of data collection, a literature review was conducted to further understanding of the topic, gain insight into the most recent research in the area, inform the ethics application, and shape the interview schedule.

2.1 Methodology and approach to literature review

To identify relevant and suitable literature for this review, the overarching questions for the literature review were defined. It was important to develop an understanding of what child sexual exploitation constitutes, define what is known about it already, and identify what gaps remain. Parallels between techniques, methods and motives that were being discussed in relation to organised crime and child sexual exploitation literature were explored, as well as sex offending more generally.

The review was informed by a variety of methods: by talking to over 20 stakeholders within the field of child sexual exploitation, including the expert group (see section 3.2); studying videos from universities and law enforcement bodies; reading and consulting peer-reviewed literature (commentary pieces as well as primary research); considering policy pieces and work by government bodies (for example Child Exploitation and Online Protection (CEOP) command and the National Working Group (NWG) Exploitation Response Unit); as well as reading some grey literature.

Peer-reviewed literature included was, where possible, recent (within the last five years). However, landmark research in social psychology and risk factors for sexual offending and recidivism, which covered a longer period, was also included.

Each section of the literature review was generally focused on specific topics; this helped define search terms for each area. Academic databases, university library databases and Google Scholar were also used. The literature review was led by open-mindedness and curiosity in the first instance, later considering the literature against the following parameters.

- Relevance and parallels to current research project

- How recently the papers were published

- The quality of the papers' methodologies (such as their sample size and makeup of the sample, for example whether it related to people who had committed contact or online offences)

- The country of origin, with a focus on Western Europe, USA or Australia, but prioritising UK-based studies wherever possible and especially on those collating primary or secondary data on perpetrators

- The number of times the literature had been cited by others and how recently it had been cited.

2.2 Defining child sexual exploitation

Child sexual exploitation is a significant child protection, crime prevention and public health issue in England and Wales. Child sexual exploitation is categorised under the Sexual Offences Act (2003) and is a form of child sexual abuse. The Act, which covers England, Wales and Northern Ireland, includes behaviour associated with child sexual exploitation, including the arrangement and facilitation of child sexual offences, meeting a child following grooming, paying for sex with a child, and causing or inciting commercial sexual exploitation. Human trafficking is now covered under the Modern Slavery Act (2015).

However, CEOP found that many frontline services "*needed clarification on the difference between child sexual exploitation and other forms of sexual abuse*" (CEOP, 2011). As well as a lack of clarity on the definition, disclosure is also considerably low. Allnock and Miller (2013) found that more than a third of children who endure sexual abuse do not tell anyone.

An important point for the current work is the significant issues regarding how child sexual exploitation is being defined, reported, recorded and categorised across and within different organisations (local authorities, police forces, academia). A lack of a cohesive or universal approach to recording and reporting seriously impacts on the ability to gain accurate data, a clear understanding of the scale and prevalence of child sexual exploitation, and, subsequently, accuracy in the profiles of perpetrators and victims. Datasets that exist are generally incomplete (although may be indicative) (Walker, Pillinger and Brown, 2018). This has been highlighted, where applicable, throughout.

Crucially, the element of an 'exchange' and the imbalance of power appears in the *Working Together to Safeguard Children* (HM Government, 2018) definition of exploitation that the Inquiry has adopted. Young people are perceived to receive something in return for some form of sexual activity or behaviour, which might include affection, material goods or money. Child sexual exploitation can be perpetrated by an individual much older than the victim, or it could be perpetrated by someone of the same or similar age (peer to peer). Child sexual exploitation can be perpetrated by lone individuals, peer groups or gangs, or could be the focus of more organised networks of perpetrators (Barnardo's, 2011).

Victims can be of any ethnicity and any gender. Although female victims are higher in number, the media almost exclusively focuses on white female victims of child sexual exploitation (Gohir, 2013). Yet research on just over 9,000 survivors using child sexual exploitation support services in the UK indicated that one third of the sample were boys and a fifth were from an ethnic minority background (Cockbain, Ashby and Brayley, 2017).

2.3 What is known about who perpetrates child sexual exploitation in groups

Research into perpetrators of sexual offending has focused largely on people who offend alone. For those who have committed exploitation-related offences, it tends to centre around online non-contact offending (Walker, Pillinger and Brown, 2018). For example, in one study looking to explore the characteristics of perpetrators of child sexual exploitation, the authors used secondary data of 50 studies and reports where the offences met the definition of child sexual exploitation. Of these 50 cases, 37 pertained to online-only perpetrators (Walker, Pillinger and Brown, 2018).

Group-based contact child sexual exploitation *is* a significant problem. Berelowitz et al. (2012) reported that 2,409 children were confirmed[2] as victims of sexual exploitation in gangs and groups during the 14-month period from August 2010 to October 2011. *The Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Exploitation in Rotherham* estimated that 1,400 children were sexually exploited in Rotherham between 1997 and 2013 by group-based perpetrators (Jay, 2014).

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2   The authors of this report state *"evidence on known victimisation is based on 115 submissions to the call for evidence request, 14 site visits, oral evidence from 68 professionals and interviews with 20 sexually exploited children across the United Kingdom".*

There have been some more recent studies on people who have committed contact child sexual exploitation offences. Cockbain (2018) undertook a 'micro-level exploration' of six child trafficking investigations in the UK. She considered police operational files, court records and prosecution case files. She undertook seven interviews with convicted traffickers (not exclusively from the six chosen cases) as well as interviews with police investigators and prosecutors. Pancholi and Palmer's work (forthcoming) more closely mirrored the current project, with the researchers interviewing 16 perpetrators of child sexual exploitation who had been convicted alongside others (15 men and 1 woman) across UK prisons.

Despite this recent work, this group (people who have committed contact child sexual exploitation offences alongside other people) still warrants further attention, not least to see whether previous findings are replicated or strengthened.

2.3.1 Age

One large-scale study by CEOP, published in 2011, gathered data on 1,217 people engaged in 'localised grooming' or 'on-street grooming' (which excluded online grooming, trafficking of children into the UK, peer-on-peer abuse, or other forms of sexual exploitation). The sample included not only those convicted of offences, but also those *suspected* of being involved. In addition, the sample may have included people who offended on their own, and not just those operating in a group. Early indications suggest that perpetrators of 'localised' or 'on-street' grooming, which is a feature of child sexual exploitation, are disproportionately young (under 25) (CEOP, 2011), although people up to the age of 75 have been implicated in this type of child sexual exploitation (Berelowitz et al., 2012).

2.3.2 Previous offending

The CEOP study (2011) stated that compared to other (non-child sexual exploitation) perpetrators, child sexual exploitation perpetrators were *less* likely to have previous convictions than other perpetrators. Yet in their work, Pancholi and Palmer (forthcoming) found that only three of their sample had no previous convictions.[3] Cockbain (2018) looked at conviction records for 55 perpetrators, and the rate of prior convictions was higher than average for the general population.

2.3.3 Ethnicity

Following high-profile cases in Rotherham (perpetrators convicted in 2010) and Rochdale (perpetrators convicted in 2012), and indeed elsewhere, for example Derby, Oxford, Telford and Newcastle, there has been much conjecture and debate about the ethnicity of perpetrators of child sexual exploitation in organised networks or, colloquially, 'grooming gangs' (for example Rafiq and Adil, 2017). In her work, which charts this rhetoric and the "*tendency to homogenise victims and perpetrators ethnically*", Cockbain states that "*grooming has been overwhelmingly associated with Asians of Pakistani heritage, although the terms 'Asian', 'Pakistani' and 'Muslim' have often been conflated*" (Cockbain, 2013: 23).

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3   This may be because CEOP used much broader inclusion criteria for their assessment. Pancholi and Palmer's work used inclusion criteria similar to those of the current research study and only spoke to people already in prison, which may have skewed evidence around previous convictions.

However, the diversity of ethnicity of child sexual exploitation perpetrators is actually less clear, largely due to poor recording (without a consistent way to delineate child sexual exploitation from other forms of child sexual abuse) and the conflation of nationality with ethnicity (CEOP, 2011). Of the CEOP sample, the ethnicity of 38 percent of the offenders was unknown, 30 percent were white, 28 percent Asian, 3 percent black, and 0.2 percent Chinese.

While these data are imperfect, the demographics do challenge the view that perpetrators, especially those operating in a network or gang, are solely or predominantly of one ethnicity.

Similarly, work from the Office of the Children's Commissioner for England (Berelowitz et al., 2012) considered perpetrator demographics for group-based child sexual exploitation. They also reported difficulties with the reliability of their statistics, as only 3 percent of calls for evidence included full perpetrator data. However, of 1,514 cases, 36 percent were white (including Turkish, Hispanic, British), 27 percent were Asian (an umbrella term encompassing a range of nationalities and ethnicities including Pakistani, Sri Lankan, Vietnamese, Chinese and Indian), 16.6 percent were black, 3.2 percent were mixed, 0.9 percent were other, and 16.3 percent were undisclosed. In response to these statistics, Cockbain (2013: 28) states that "*these studies clearly demonstrate that, contrary to popular opinion, child sexual exploitation is not a uniquely Asian threat: in both cases the single largest ethnic group among suspects was White*".

2.4 How perpetrators commit child sexual exploitation

Previous research has come up with various models of how perpetrators commit child sexual exploitation. Again, it is important to note that the samples and methods in these studies may not have included perpetrators offending in groups (for example Barefoot Research, 2018), nor interviewed perpetrators or victims directly (for example Barefoot Research, 2016). The 'boyfriend model' is one proposed type of child sexual exploitation, whereby the victims believe they are in a relationship with an older male (Barefoot Research, 2016). Methods such as 'love bombing' can occur, where the victims are shown persistent attention and affection to make them feel safe (Hayes and Jeffries, 2016).

In his work for the London Metropolitan Police, Hill (2015) applied behavioural-analysis techniques to the classifications from the Barnardo's (2011) work on child sexual exploitation and found three further roles played by perpetrators in on-street grooming: the 'hook', the 'predator' and the 'coordinator'. The 'hook' is a covert exploiter, usually posing as a 'boyfriend' to his potential victims, may be subordinate to older, more senior males within the group, may not have a sexual attraction to children, is concerned with presenting a certain lifestyle to attract young people (cash, clothes and expensive cars), and may be in a position of trust or 'fame' in the area. The 'predator' is a covert and overt exploiter, highly likely to have a sexual attraction to children. There will be a significant and inappropriate age gap between the perpetrator and the victim, as well as an obvious power imbalance. The younger 'hook' may introduce victims to the 'predator'. The 'coordinator' is a covert exploiter who manages and directs the exploitation of victims and may have a financial interest in the exploitation of victims. The 'coordinator' may be involved in transportation of victims and could have a sexual interest in children. Perpetrators can play multiple roles within the group or network (often interchangeably).

CEOP (2013) also distinguishes between those who have a sexual attraction to children and those who are attracted to a victim based on the victim's vulnerability – they coin this as a type 1 (vulnerability) or type 2 (sexual attraction to children) perpetrator.

'Grooming' is a term often used in the context of child sexual exploitation (although something not solely perpetrated by those operating in organised networks). Section 67 of the Serious Crime Act (2015) inserted a new section, 15A, into the Sexual Offences Act (2003) and created an offence of 'engaging in sexual communication with a child', which applies to online and offline communication. Physical abuse is not a requirement for the offence of grooming to be invoked. Grooming has been conceptualised as a range of techniques, methods and actions that a perpetrator uses throughout sexual abuse or exploitation, operating at first between the initial targeting of the victim and the 'offence' phase as a method of preparation (Elliott, 2017). Grooming methods are intended to secure further opportunities for sexual abuse, while reducing the likelihood of disclosure, often by establishing trust with the child or the child's carer (Gill and Harrison, 2015). Similarly, Gillespie (2004) argues that grooming is the process by which a child is befriended by a would-be abuser in an attempt to gain the child's confidence and trust, enabling the abuser to engage the child in abusive activity. McAlinden (2006: 348) reflects that during the grooming stage, perpetrators will "*ingratiate themselves with children and infiltrate themselves into unsuspecting families, communities and organizations*". She discusses how grooming can occur not only on a personal level but also at the institutional level, with perpetrators utilising social standing or employment as a way to manipulate and access victims, convincing others around them that they are not a danger or a risk, perhaps acting in plain sight.

Grooming for sexual abuse can involve both psychological and physical measures. Perpetrators are said to use psychological grooming as a precursor to physical grooming, developing an initial relationship with the child, building trust, making them feel good, offering compliments and gifts and then slowly beginning to breach boundaries. Psychological grooming also encourages the child not to disclose the abuse, through tactics like isolating the child, making her or him feel responsible for the abuse, issuing bribes, or making threats (Craven, Brown and Gilchrist, 2006).

In more recent work, Cockbain (2018) states that grooming is still poorly understood and the existing literature mistakes it as fixed, predictable and clearly identifiable. In reality, she suggests grooming sometimes includes behaviours seen in normal adult–child interactions or can sometimes appear like "*adult courtship*" (Cockbain, 2018: 84).[4] Winder (2019, personal communication) also argues that grooming is a form of conditioning which is not unique to perpetrators of crime.

2.5 Risk factors for sexual offending and recidivism

Numerous plausible factors to explain general sexual offending have been put forward. These include adverse childhood experiences (see Beech and Ward, 2004); personality characteristics and traits, such as deficits in empathy and antisocial personality disorder (Thornton, 2002); acute contextual factors, such as stress or intoxication with alcohol or drugs (Hanson and Harris, 2001); chronic contextual factors, such as childhood sexual abuse (Cossins, 2002); and atypical sexual urges and behaviour, such as sexual preferences for children or sexual preoccupation (Quinsey et al., 1995). While some factors are associated with the onset of sexual offending, they may not be present as risk factors in studies of sexual reoffending (see Widom and Massey, 2015; Hanson and Bussiere, 1998). A review of the evidence regarding a range of risk factors for sexual recidivism was conducted by Mann, Hanson and

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4   It is important to note that some behaviours are also clearly inappropriate.

Thornton (2010). Factors for which there was robust empirical evidence included offence-supportive beliefs,[5] emotional congruence with children, sexual preoccupation and a lack of emotionally intimate relationships with adults. Factors such as hostile beliefs about women, Machiavellianism[6] and callousness are noted as 'promising' risk factors associated with sexual recidivism. Depression, poor social skills or a lack of victim empathy were *not* found to be associated with sexual recidivism.

Thus, it is important to make a distinction between the onset of sexual offending and the persistence of sexual offending (Seto, 2019), with the latter evidenced by a robust evidence base. In terms of the former, there are strong theoretical explanations for the onset of sexual offending (see Seto, 2019; Ward and Beech, 2006; Ward and Siegert 2002; Finkelhor, 1984), but far less evidence to underpin these theoretical explanations of the commission of a further sexual offence by an individual. It is important to differentiate between the two when determining the optimal course of action in terms of disruption of the first offence and the treatment of people convicted for sexual offending.

It is also important to note that the literature is based on the reoffending rates of perpetrators of all types of sexual offences; the reoffending rates do not refer specifically to perpetrators of child sexual exploitation from organised networks. In the limited previous research on perpetrators of group child sexual exploitation, the perpetrators appear to be characterised by a range of different motivators: a sexual interest in children, and seeing children as capable of consenting to, and unharmed by, sexual activity with adults. The perpetrators display poor problem solving, using child sexual exploitation to make them feel better about themselves and to provide status, and as part of an antisocial network who support and facilitate child sexual abuse. All such factors are in line with what is known about the established risk factors for sexual recidivism generally (Seto, 2019; Hanson and Morton-Bourgon, 2005).

Of note, perpetrators of general sexual offences are less likely to reoffend than perpetrators of other offences such as robbery, theft or violence (Ministry of Justice, 2016). Indeed, sexual reoffending rates of below 10 percent have been evidenced in a number of robust studies (Mews, Di Bella and Purver, 2017). It is not known whether this is replicated for perpetrators of child sexual exploitation from organised networks. The evidence on denial of sexual offending or aspects of offending behaviour is mixed, indicating that for some denial is an important protective factor, enabling them to develop or maintain a prosocial identity that can support desistance from crime, while for others denial can facilitate continued engagement in crime (Mann, Hanson and Thornton, 2010).

2.6 Group offending

A critical and defining feature of this research is that participants must have perpetrated child sexual exploitation in the context of a network or group. It is important to consider, therefore, the proposed benefits that are conferred by being in a group context, as well as how people are recruited into groups in the first place and how the groups come to exist.

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5   These are beliefs or attitudes that rationalise or justify offending behaviour and are a dynamic risk factor (amenable to change) linked to reoffending.

6   Machiavellianism combines a view of others as weak and easily manipulated and an interpersonal strategy in which it is appropriate to take advantage of others (Christie and Geis, 1970).

First, it is important to consider the concept of a group in itself. There are a variety of synonyms used interchangeably within the literature: 'group', 'network', 'gang', 'co-perpetrators' (although the latter may refer to offending in the same time and place together with another). In their report, Berelowitz et al. (2012: 19) delineate between the terms 'group' and 'gang' in the following way:

> *Gang: A relatively durable, predominantly street-based, social group 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.*
>
> *Group: Two or more people of any age, connected through formal or informal associations or networks, including, but not exclusive to, friendship groups.*

Yet, in their work about co-offending more generally, Cockbain, Brayley and Sullivan (2014: 158) state that "*most co-offending groups are more like loose federations rather than popular stereotypes of stable, fixed, hierarchical groups*" and acknowledge that *any* 'group' acts as a situational influence, beyond an individual disposition, conferring several mechanisms that have been explored in social psychology for decades:

- conformity (Sherif, 1935)
- obedience (Milgram, 1963)
- imitation (Bandura, Ross and Ross, 1961)
- deindividuation (loss of self awareness in a group; Festinger, Pepitone and Newcomb, 1952)
- diffusion of responsibility (Bandura, Underwood and Fromson, 1975).

Despite these perceived mechanisms and benefits, acting with others may also *increase* the risk of detection, as is claimed by the 'group hazard hypothesis' (Feyerherm, 1980).[7] Although this argument is contested by more recent work in the child sexual exploitation arena (Cockbain, Brayley and Sullivan, 2014), others have found evidence to support the hypothesis that individuals make riskier decisions when in a group compared to when acting alone, and that this becomes more significant as the group size increases (McGloin and Thomas 2016). It has been suggested that this phenomenon arises not least because being in a group can normalise and socialise specific beliefs, making certain behaviour seem more acceptable. Rewards may also be conferred, or expected to be conferred, to those who comply and converge with overall group activities, which also influences behaviour (McGloin and Thomas, 2016).

After consulting the literature as well as relevant stakeholders and members of the expert group, there is a consensus that the methods used in child sexual exploitation (the boyfriend model, grooming techniques, coercive control, victim blaming) are not unique. In fact, they are observed in domestic violence, human trafficking and the commission of county lines behaviour (Huddlestone, personal communication, 2018; Home Office, 2017), two of which are attended to briefly below.

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7   This theory argues that young offenders who commit offences with others are more likely to be detected than when acting alone.

2.6.1 Trafficking

In their study in the Netherlands, Serie et al. (2018) interviewed 12 male perpetrators of sex trafficking (two were on remand, and 10 had been convicted; mean age 33 years old). They reported on the nature and range of the relationships developed with victims which enabled the offences to take place. They classified these as follows: 'helping relationship' (the perpetrator posed as someone who could help the victim with work or a place to stay), 'emotional bond' (the perpetrator and victim had a friendship or intimate relationship, possibly as a result of the helping relationship), 'agreement relationship' (a business arrangement between victim and perpetrator with the view to making money) and 'controlling relationship'. The same perpetrator could have different relationships with different victims.

With the exception of the controlling relationship, perpetrators in the study by Serie et al. (2018) viewed victims as voluntary participants in the relationships. The controlling relationship was said to differ, as the perpetrators used specific means and methods (emotional and physical manipulation) to control and use the victim as a commodity. Serie et al. (2018) did not refer to blackmail or rape as a means of control as has been noted in other work (for example Verwijs et al., 2011). Perpetrators did not refer to the controlling relationship as often as the other types of relationships; it was unclear whether this was a purposeful way of justifying their controlling behaviour by replacing it with another label. Emotional manipulation as it was described by the perpetrators in the study has parallels with the previously mentioned 'love bombing', as perpetrators described showing initial love and affection to the victim 'to make her feel safe'.

Cockbain and Brayley-Morris (2017) considered means and methods in forced labour cases. They found, through their analysis of three UK cases perpetrated by Irish traveller groups (which covered multiple perpetrators and victims), that victims were largely chosen on the basis of perceived vulnerability (alcohol or drug dependence, unstable housing). Victims were not taken forcibly but lured by the promise of employment. Compliance was then maintained through a mixture of violence, threats, psychological coercion and emotional manipulation. Other techniques noted were isolation from other victims, providing a consistent supply of tobacco and alcohol, and telling victims they were 'part of the family' (Cockbain and Brayley-Morris, 2017: 136). Although the sample size was small, what the study found demonstrates overlap in recruitment, exploitation and control with child sexual exploitation literature (for example CEOP, 2011).

2.6.2 Gang behaviour

In October 2011, the Government published its strategy to end gang and youth violence (HM Government, 2011). The document clearly identified the issue of sexual violence and exploitation within street gangs. Similarly, literature on county lines behaviour from The Children's Society (2017: 6) notes that:

> *County Lines are illegal business models managed and operated by serious organised crime gangs who use their power and position within the gangs to groom, recruit and exploit young people for the purpose of criminal gain. This often involves high levels of violence, threat and force, and it is important to understand the grooming process as this is evident within the recruitment of young people for criminal exploitation.*

It is clear that much of the language and methods that are cited by The Children's Society (2017) in the conduct of county lines has overlap with child sexual exploitation.

Pitts (2013: 31) explores child sexual exploitation specifically within youth gangs. He suggests that gang-related sexual behaviours are neither freely chosen nor totally coerced, and that this oversimplifies the exchange and one should "*consider the socio cultural context and existential conditions in which such choices are made*". He also contends that the rise in gang culture, particularly in London, has been accompanied by the use of "*sexualisation*" and "*group sexual assault*" as means of demonstrating an exaggerated masculinity, and that overtly sexualised behaviour has become normalised in the gang context.

Again, similar to the 'love bombing' and grooming methods discussed above, Pitts (2013: 29) writes that "*joining the gang tends to be a process of seduction rather than coercion*".

Cepeda and Valdez (2003) undertook primary research with female adolescent members of gangs in San Antonio, Texas. Their work indicates that sexual abuse and exploitation is used as a threat to encourage girls to undertake other criminal activities (for example drug running or holding weapons) for other male members of the gang. Whether girls are subjected to this abuse is dependent on how they are classified by the gang. Using grounded theory, following focus groups and life-history interviews, Cepeda and Valdez (2003) highlight that parties are a common method and opportunity to sexually abuse and exploit young women, with the gang luring them to events with the promise of drugs and alcohol.

2.7 Summary

The key messages from the literature are that there remains a lack of research on perpetrators of child sexual exploitation who operate in groups, especially in contrast to research on lone perpetrators or online perpetrators. A variety of people seemingly engage in child sexual exploitation: young, old and from different ethnic backgrounds. Most commonly, however, they appear to be younger (under 25) and white. Recent work challenges the view that perpetrators who operate in groups are less likely to have previous convictions than other perpetrators. Victims can be male or female (although females are more represented in victim samples). There are several proposed models and methods of child sexual exploitation (for example the boyfriend model, and the hook, coordinator or predator), some of which have considerable overlap with other offence types including domestic violence, county lines and trafficking. Again, these existing models focus predominantly on female victims.

CHAPTER 3: Methodology

3.1 Research aims and design

The aims of the current research were to:

1   further an understanding of the motivations and modus operandi of perpetrators of child sexual exploitation who operate in organised networks; and

2   identify interventions and approaches that could prevent or disrupt perpetrators of child sexual exploitation who operate in organised networks.

It is important to note that one of the aims of this research study was to understand how perpetrators discuss and portray their offences. The research purposefully did not seek to verify participants' accounts through triangulation with other data (for example police, Crown Prosecution Service or court records). This allowed interviewers to assure participants that they neither knew the details of their case nor had preconceived ideas about them before the interview. Where participants expressed narratives or accounts that seemed contradictory, this could be gently challenged through curious inquisition, but their statements were not challenged with contrary evidence (this was not accessed). This report presents what was heard and what participants told interviewers. The report does not attribute truth to these accounts, but reports on how the perpetrators discussed and understood their behaviour and convictions.

The design of the project was qualitative in order to gain rich, in-depth perspectives that quantitative data does not permit. The research used individual semi-structured interviews.

The sample was made up of individuals who had been convicted alongside other people for offences that relate to child sexual exploitation.

3.2 Ethics and expert group

The project was scrutinised by the Inquiry's own Research Ethics Committee and received ethical approval in September 2018. The Research Ethics Committee stipulated that participants had to be over 18 at the time of interview. Subsequently, Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS) National Research Committee, which governs research undertaken with those in prisons or under probation, gave approval in November 2018.

Informed consent was taken at the start of each interview. The consent form reiterated that all participation was voluntary and the participant's decision to take part would not affect his or her care or sentence plan. All participants were given the name of a nominated individual within their prison who they could contact for support following the interview.

To maintain confidentiality, the number of people in each prison who knew about the research was minimised. Each participant was made aware of the bounds of confidentiality and when this would have to be breached. There were no safeguarding concerns that needed to be shared throughout the lifetime of the project.

To support the project and act as a critical friend, an expert group was formed. The expert group was made up of individuals[8] from different agencies with expertise in either child sexual exploitation or organised crime. This included representatives from the police force, HMPPS, third-sector providers, academia, the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse, and a survivor of child sexual exploitation.

The role of the group was to use collective expertise to provide support and advice throughout the life of the project, helping to problem-solve and overcome any barriers. As such, the expert group advised on the direction, methodology and progress of the project. Tools such as the recruitment letter and information, debriefing and consent forms, as well as the interview schedule, were shared with the group. The group met four times at important junctures of the project. This included after data collection, when emerging research findings were 'sense checked', including the clustering of perpetrator groups A, B and C.

3.3 Data collection and analysis

Data collection templates were shared with a service user group in HMP Whatton[9] to ensure the wording was appropriate, before being finalised and disseminated. Consent and participant information sheets stressed independence from the justice system and described what would happen if someone consented to an interview, including regarding anonymity and confidentiality.

All interviews took place between January and March 2019 and were conducted between two people. The shortest interview was 29 minutes and the longest was 1 hour, 38 minutes. The mean length of interview was one hour.

Interviews were conducted in private rooms at each prison away from the presence of others, so that research participants could speak freely and confidentially. In one interview, however, the interviewee requested that his Offender Manager be present, as he felt apprehensive about speaking about his offence to people he had not met. The Offender Manager stayed in the interview room throughout, but did not contribute to the discussion.

Due to the number of people maintaining their innocence in the cohort, two interview schedules were created, one for those maintaining their innocence and one for those who admitted their offence. The focus of the 'denial' interview schedule was to first establish what the person disputed about his or her conviction and to understand how the person's version varied from that of the Crown Prosecution Service. The aim was also to find out how individuals had found themselves convicted of these offences and what was alleged about other members of the network. It was found that even if individuals denied all or part of their offence, they could still provide highly useful and insightful information.

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8   We have kept membership private to ensure confidentiality and anonymity.

9   HMP Whatton is a category C (medium secure) prison which exclusively holds men convicted of sexual offences.

Interview schedules were used to guide conversations. Interviews were designed to be an informal 'conversation with a purpose' (Burgess, 1984), as this supports meaningful engagement and elicits rich data. This was especially important with this cohort, which included those who were distrustful and suspicious of the intentions behind the research. The interview schedules enabled a level of consistency between interviews, but there were instances where the interviewers deviated from the guide so as to be responsive to individual participants and follow up on pertinent points. With permission from the prison and participants, interviews were audio recorded. Only one participant declined to have the interview recorded. He requested for notes to be taken instead of a recording. His quotes were recorded verbatim.

All interviews were transcribed verbatim by the research team. The interviews were then subject to thematic analysis using NVivo 12 software and the six-step analysis procedure as advocated by Braun and Clarke (2006). Thematic analysis was 'bottom up', informed by the information gathered in interviews and not affected by preconceived ideas or hypotheses. Once themes had been identified, these were considered in relation to what is already in the literature to see whether new or conflicting research findings had emerged. The team worked with the expert group and the research project lead in the Inquiry to sense-check key messages and think through what they may mean for a range of stakeholders and future research.

3.4 Recruitment

3.4.1 Eligibility and method for recruitment

The aim was to interview 25 participants[10] across England and Wales.[11] Eligibility criteria were created in consultation with the Inquiry, stakeholders and the expert group, and were intended to make it as clear as possible who was eligible for the study (see Figure 3.1).

Identification of suitable participants was reliant on 'gatekeepers'. A recruitment letter was developed to disseminate to a range of stakeholders working in the field who might have contact with relevant perpetrators, including those working in the community as well as in secure settings. Such people included lead psychologists, police and probation officers, prison governors, heads of offender management units and offender managers, treatment and programme managers in prisons, and third-sector providers supporting perpetrators in the community.

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10   The sample size was stipulated by the Inquiry and was chosen in line with sample sizes conducive to qualitative research to reach data saturation while achieving rich and meaningful qualitative accounts. It was felt to be a large enough sample size to ensure that a breadth of geographical areas and types of networks were covered.

11   One of the participants was Welsh, but all prisons visited were in England.

Figure 3.1: Eligibility criteria for participant inclusion

Eligibility criteria

- Any sex
- Any ethnicity or race
- Currently over 18 (but could have been under 18 at the time of the offence)
- Offence to have taken place in the last decade
- Sentenced or unsentenced
- Residing in either prison or community at the time of interview
- The same victim across multiple perpetrators in the network
- Contact offences or conveyance, conspiracy or trafficking offences
- Can maintain their innocence over their conviction (can deny the offence)

3.4.2 Barriers to recruitment

The initial method for recruitment involved eligible participants being approached by a member of the offender management team or psychology team within their prison. The research team would then attend once an individual or multiple individuals had consented to be interviewed. However, in some prisons this recruitment method did not yield a high level of engagement (for example, in one prison, 10 of 11 eligible participants declined). The approach was therefore adapted so that, where there were a high number of eligible participants in one prison, a member of the TONIC research team (escorted by a key-holder) would distribute the information sheets and explain the research. No identifiable information about a participant (for example, their name or prison number) was received until they had consented to take part. In order to engage with individuals maintaining their innocence, it was important to adapt language accordingly to distinguish between 'committing an offence' and being 'convicted of an offence', which improved potential participants' response to taking part in the research.

Participants were more inclined to consent to take part once they understood that the research was an opportunity to have their perspective put forward. The research team observed a 'contagion' effect, whereby some prisons had a large number of willing participants and others had extremely low uptake. This effect was exacerbated if co-defendants were on the same wings and one individual said no; this seemed to influence the choice of others. The reasons given for *not* taking part included a distrust in the criminal justice system and the motive of the research, people having taken part in a similar project previously (Pancholi and Palmer, forthcoming), and people not wanting to talk about their offence or thinking their contribution would not help them as individuals.

3.5 Participants

A total of 27 interviews, within nine prisons across England, were conducted in January and February 2019. As mentioned, one participant subsequently asked for their data to be withdrawn, which meant a total of 26 interviews to proceed to analysis (see Table 3.1). All participants were in custody at the time of the interviews. The 26 interviewees were from 20 networks. (Some participants were co-defendants or had been convicted as part of the same network. Where this occurred, they were usually in separate prisons or did not mix. They were also not informed their co-defendants had taken part.)

Table 3.1: Characteristics of research participants

Gender
• Twenty-four participants were male. • Two participants were women. Previous research suggests a higher prevalence of men who perpetrate child sexual exploitation compared to women.
Age
• Six were aged 20–29. • Ten were aged 30–39. • Four were aged 40–49. • Five were aged 50–59. • One was over 60. The age range of participants at the time of interview was 22–66 years. The average age was 38.
Ethnicity
• Fourteen were white British. • Four were white other. • Two were black African. • Two were any other Asian background. • One was Asian Indian. • One was white and Asian. • Two did not disclose this information. The code systems used within the Metropolitan Police Service were used to formally record participants' self-reported ethnicity.
Employment background
• Some were unemployed. • Some worked in businesses such as takeaways and taxi services. • Some described that they worked in the commercial sex trade (using the term 'rent boy'). • Others worked in charities, ran their own businesses and had other professional roles.

3.5.1 Offence type and sentence length

Individuals with a range of sexual convictions, including both contact and non-contact, that involved child sexual exploitation in some way were interviewed. Nine participants had been convicted of contact offences (for example rape), nine participants had been convicted of non-contact offences (for example trafficking, conspiracy, facilitation, indecent images[12]), and eight participants had been convicted of both contact and non-contact offences.

Following interview, and with the participants' consent, the Prison National Offender Management Information System (PNOMIS) was accessed to acquire the official offence record. Participants had the following range of index offences, which are all contained within the Sexual Offences Act (2003):

- Rape of a child under 13

- Rape

- Attempted rape

- Penetrative sexual activity with a child

- Sexual assault

- Taking indecent photograph or pseudo-photograph of child

- Sharing indecent photograph/pseudo-photograph of a child

- Trafficking for sexual exploitation

- Meeting a girl under 16 following grooming

- Arranging/facilitating child sex offence

- Conspiracy to rape

- Engaging in sexual activity in the presence of a child 13–15

- Arranging/facilitating prostitution/involvement in pornography of a child aged 13–15.

While most participants exclusively had sexual offences listed on PNOMIS, five participants in the sample also had concurrent offences from the following list:

- Robbery (n = 2)

- Supply a controlled drug of class B (n = 2)

- Non-sexual violence (n = 2)

- Criminal damage (n = 1).

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12   Although the team did not intend to speak to perpetrators with online offences, some participants had this as part of their index offence. No one solely had an online or image offence.

Six of the 26 participants accepted full responsibility for the offences they had been convicted of; this included one of the females. Eight categorically maintained their innocence, and the remaining 12 partially accepted[13] their offence (including the other female). Partial acceptance meant they admitted to some element of the offence, for example sexual activity, knowing the victim, being at the site of the offence, but disputed another part (for example that the sex was non-consensual, or that they intended to carry out the offence being discussed).

Within the sample, three participants had indeterminate sentences, one of which was a life sentence.

For those with a determinate sentence, over half had a sentence of more than 10 years. The mean sentence length of determinate sentences (n = 23) was 13.7 years, with a range of 6–24 years.

3.5.2 Victim profiles

The majority of participants were convicted of offences against female victims (n = 18), leaving eight with convictions against male victims. None of the participants had offended against both male and female victims. Victims of the female perpetrators were also female.[14]

The reported age range of victims was broad, with the youngest victim four months old. Eight participants had convictions relating to children under 13 years old. This age category is significant, as in the UK the law stipulates that sexual intercourse with a child under 13 is statutory rape. Once the victim is over 13, a perpetrator could be charged with a lesser offence of 'sexual activity with a child' (Wallace, personal communication, 2019).

For the majority of the sample, participants disclosed and discussed offences against victims aged 13 or over. In UK law, although the age of consent is 16 years old, protection is given up to the age of 18 against certain sexual offences, including those found within the sample:

- To take, show or distribute indecent photographs of a child

- To pay for or arrange sexual services of a child

- For a person in a position of trust to engage in sexual activity with anyone under the age of 18 who is in the care of their organisation.

In 12 of 26 cases, perpetrators mentioned that the same victim had been exploited by multiple perpetrators in their case. In four cases, there was no evidence of this. For the remainder, the evidence was either unclear, not explicitly discussed or disputed. Although, initially, the same victim being exploited by multiple perpetrators was an eligibility criterion for participation, the onus was on gatekeepers to verify this information (it was often unclear from PNOMIS notes or index offences) and often a participant met all other criteria, so the interview went ahead. The team also only had access to Offender Assessment system (OASys) with the participant's permission, which made it hard to verify case details pre interview.

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13 Researchers used three categories: acceptance, partial acceptance and categorical denial. Acceptance means participants fully admitted to the offence and acknowledged a lack of consent. Partial acceptance means participants admitted to some element of the offence, for example sexual activity, knowing the victim, or being at the site of the offence, but disputed another part (for example that the sex was non-consensual). Categorical denial means participants stated they were not there, they did not know the victim or there had been a case of mistaken identity.

14 The females in the sample had not been convicted of contact offences.

3.5.3 Participants' networks

Participant networks were established directly from perpetrator accounts. The size of participants' networks varied, with a range of 2–21 (which includes the participant). The mean was six, but the network size that was most frequently reported was three.

It is pertinent to note that in 21 of the cases, the participant either disputed the size of the network in some way or refuted knowing all members, despite being convicted alongside them. Two participants stated they knew no one they were convicted with, but these were both cases where the participants claimed there had been mistaken identity. On average, participants reported they knew just two members of the network.

3.6 Limitations

There are some limitations which are worth highlighting, not least because reflexivity in qualitative work forms best practice (Yardley, 2000). Although the sample size of 26 is a good size for a piece of in-depth qualitative research, it is accepted that the research findings are not generalisable. This is why current research findings have been considered in relation to previous literature where possible. In addition, it is acknowledged that only two participants were female. Given that their accounts did feel somewhat distinct from those of the male participants, and both fell in group C, this group warrants specific research, particularly in terms of how *they* were exploited or groomed by co-defendants.

In any primary research, there remains a 'hidden group' who decline to take part. The demographics of those who said no were not formally recorded for analysis or consideration, but of those met in person who declined, there were a high number of individuals from Asian backgrounds who discussed concerns that taking part would disadvantage them. They often stated they did not trust that the research was independent from 'the system', which they perceived had convicted them unfairly. Those who contributed did offer a breadth of experiences and attitudes towards their offence, but, of course, interviews were only with those motivated to engage. All of the sample were convicted and in prison at the time of interview, so it is also not known how accounts from participants under probation supervision in the community[15] may have differed. Age at interview was recorded, but not age at the time of the offence.

As mentioned, the aim of this research was not to establish or qualify the 'truth', but to uncover how individuals viewed their offending and conviction. However, it cannot be overlooked that the data reported here are self-reported – a cognitive construction of participants' reality (Davies, 1997). To this end, concepts such as impression management and the functions of an individual's discourse must be considered. A non-judgemental stance was adopted from the outset of meeting participants. Yet because child sexual exploitation in organised networks is a highly sensitive topic and elicits much debate, it cannot be ignored that participants may have wanted to present a prosocial image in the context of broader stigma, as they described it. The version and presentation they gave to researchers may have been quite different if they were talking to a peer. In 22 interviews, both interviewers were female; for 4 interviews, one interviewer was male and the other female. This may have also influenced participant narratives.

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15   Although the National Probation Service was sent recruitment letters and informed of the study, and some relevant participants were identified, this did not proceed to interviews.

CHAPTER 4: Perpetrators

The aim of this chapter is to present participant narratives around what they described was going on in their life at the time of the offence, and the ways they discussed their conviction alongside their proposed motivations for their behaviour. Chapters 4–7 include quotes from participants that were selected on the basis that they represented the theme being discussed most accurately. The use of quotes helps to ground the research findings within participant narratives.

4.1 Diverse characteristics of perpetrators

It is important to stress that the research approach was entirely exploratory. The research team had no preconceived ideas about who would engage under the umbrella term of 'perpetrators of child sexual exploitation in organised networks'. The aim and intention was not to create or seek a typology but researchers found that three groupings emerged, speaking to the diversity of the sample. All participants were categorised into these three groups (one participant who claimed to be the victim of mistaken identity was not categorised). A small number of participants fell into more than one category.[16] The characteristics of the groups will be explored in detail, but a summary is provided in Table 4.1.

Table 4.1: Characteristics of research participants, categorised into three groups (A–C)

	Group A	Group B	Group C
Characteristics • Participants • Average age • Gender • Ethnicity	• Seven (one of these also in B) • 45 years • All male • All white British	• Thirteen (one also in A, two also in C) • 36 years • All male • Three white British, ten ethnic minority	• Eight (two also in B) • 35 years • Six male, two female • Six white British, two ethnic minority
Lifestyle at time of offence	Disclosed an outward-facing stable life, usually working in a legitimate, well-regarded job, and some with a partner, yet also using online chat rooms or phone apps in secret. Three disclosed using drugs or alcohol to excess during period of offending behaviour.	Hedonistic; characterised by partying, although some still had wives, families and jobs; infidelity was common. Some participants had previous offences for violence or supply of drugs. Therefore involved in sale rather than use of drugs. Described a level of infamy or notoriety in their local area due to jobs, hobbies or nice cars.	Many were unemployed at time of offence. Both females were single parents at the time of the offence, and their children were suspected of being exploited.

16   This was because the perpetrator had characteristics that related to more than one group.

	Group A	Group B	Group C
Motivation for offence	Stated they were seeking approval, validation and sexual gratification from engaging with the online community. Reported online activity as a type of escapism, and described it as 'addictive'. Reported that the thought of the contact offence was more satisfying than the actual commission of it.	Described as a type of escape from 'usual' life. Enjoyed the 'buzz' of the activities and attention.	Participants' narratives suggested they had been groomed or coerced into the offence and wanted to please their co-defendant, or were fearful of the repercussions if they did not comply.
Victim profiles and sexual interests	Reported longstanding, but not exclusive, sexual attraction to, usually, pre-pubescent children, or a preoccupation with sex (for example excessive masturbation), with the main source of arousal being a power imbalance. Six reported male victims who were much younger than victims seen in other groups. Three described having to hide their sexual identity as 'gay men' from family and friends.	Discussed casual sex with multiple partners (even though some also had wives). Victims were often teenage females. Perpetrators did not admit sexual attraction to children. Discussed victims as coming to them and rejected the idea victims were sought deliberately. Instead described that they 'relented' to consistent attention from victims.	Often did not discuss their offence in the context of sexual interest. Two had male victims, six had female victims. Victims were aged 3–15.

	Group A	Group B	Group C
Attitude towards conviction	Five totally admitted their offence, one partially accepted his offence.	Five participants categorically denied their offence, eight partially accepted their offence.	Two categorically denied their offence, five partially accepted it and one fully accepted it.
	Overall, participants in this group demonstrated insight and displayed remorse.	Frequently reported they thought the victim was aged 16 or over. Strongly rejected 'sex offender' label.	Some stated they needed help before the offence – someone to talk to, to help them see they were being exploited or were vulnerable.
	Engaged in treatment programmes in prison.	Six discussed their belief that racial stereotyping played a factor in their conviction and that the trial was unfair.	They had engaged with and benefited from some support since being in custody, but this was usually therapeutic or counselling input, working on past trauma, rather than sex offender treatment programmes.
	Discussed that they would have liked an anonymous safe space in which to talk about inappropriate sexual preoccupations before they offended.	Displaced responsibility for prevention to statutory agencies, schools and parents. Did not articulate clear avenues for prevention and disruption, and articulated offence-supportive beliefs or reversed the narrative to imply they were vulnerable (as perpetrators).	
Network*	Network was discussed as starting online, which, in some instances, progressed to an in-person meet-up where an offence took place. Five had contact offences.	Denied knowing some members of the network (their co-defendants); may have reported knowing one or two members either because they were family, work colleagues, friends or loose associates.	Four individuals had been convicted with only one or two others. They described co-defendants as romantic connections or family members.
	As the network was largely online, they stated they often did not know or recognise co-defendants during trial.		Other cases knew of their co-defendants and discussed how they had been exploited by a larger criminal gang (involved in drug dealing and human trafficking) – of which they had only met a small number of other members.
	The network provided access to victims. Discussed co-offending, which did not occur as readily in narratives of groups B or C.		

* Networks are specifically considered, across all participants, in Chapter 5.

4.2 Group A

Six of the participants were exclusively categorised in group A, with one additional participant being categorised as both groups A and B. The average age of group A, at the time of interview, was 45 years old. They were all white British and male.

4.2.1 Lifestyle at time of offence

Participants categorised as being in group A reported starting their offence-related behaviour online, accessing indecent images and then potentially progressing to a contact offence (five of the seven participants in group A had a contact offence). Participants often described that, at the time of their offence, they were living a double life. They may have been working and, sometimes, were in a long-term relationship, but in their free or private time, they would spend an excessive amount of time online, chatting to those with similar sexual interests.

> *"At the time, I couldn't see any way out of that. I thought my life was going to be sitting alone in front of a computer watching porn for the rest of my life. And the more time I spent doing that and the more drugs I put into it, the more socially anxious I became. Social anxiety; my interpersonal skills started to disappear and I thought I'd be doing that until the day I was 80."*
>
> Participant, group A

Several participants also described that the time of their offence was a lonely and unhappy period in their life.

> *"I was in a long-term relationship with my partner. He has Asperger's. I was struggling, I will be honest with you, with his mood swings and everything like that. I was in debt … and everything like that and it was just a complete mess. I had no one, I thought I had no one to talk to … very unhappy."*
>
> Participant, group A

Three participants in group A discussed their use of drugs or alcohol around the time of the offence. One described himself as an alcoholic, one stated he was heavily dependent on cannabis and then 'spice', and the third said he was using a cocktail of drugs at the time of his offence.

> *"I was using pot, then I was using ketamine because I like the feeling and there's a certain amount of disassociation, mental disassociation with ketamine … . But because the ketamine gave me erectile dysfunction I would then take … Viagra … but because Viagra used to make me a bit drowsy I was then taking cocaine as well. So I ended up in this back forward, back forward … . I had a big disposable income. I was spending £500, £600 a week on drugs."*
>
> Participant, group A

4.2.2 Motivation for offence

As noted above, several participants in this group said that they felt quite isolated and lonely during the period around their offence. Their offence motivation was largely characterised by seeking approval, validation and sexual gratification from the online community.

> *"The kind of sexual gratification was all in the moment of talking to those people about what I wanted to do rather than actually going about it."*
>
> Participant, group A

One participant explained how he felt "*adored*" by other online users because of his ability to set up virtual rooms where sexual abuse could be shown to other members of the network. Participants in group A also noted that they were often sexually aroused by the thought of a contact offence, and said they felt disappointed or did not get the pleasure they were anticipating afterwards. As a result, they reported that it was unlikely for them to contact offend again after the first occasion.

> *"The act of doing it itself doesn't really, didn't live up to the hype."*
>
> Participant, group A

4.2.3 Victim profiles and sexual interests

Overall, group A was characterised by a reported longstanding sexual attraction to children or a general preoccupation with sex.

> *"I can't really say that there was like any, any kind of like major dramatic event that happened in that particular year that, that led to those offences happening. It's a mixture of something that's been a preoccupation since I've been very young."*
>
> Participant, group A

Generally, group A discussed a sense that sex was centre stage for their thinking and activity, albeit sometimes this was hidden from their friends, family and work colleagues.

> *"When I did SOTP [sex offender treatment programme],[17] one of the hardest things to try and get across, to just how ingrained sex was in my life. And obviously because of the legality of it all, all the focus is on that child thing, but if you looked at my whole sex life, I was doing a whole kind of array of different sexual behaviour. Going out cruising, cottaging, dogging – you know those kind of things."*
>
> Participant, group A

---

17   SOTP no longer runs across England and Wales and has been replaced by Horizon and Kaizen treatment programmes. Horizon is a nationally accredited groupwork programme designed for medium-risk male sexual offenders. Kaizen is for high-risk sexual offenders. They are intended to support the development of skills to strengthen prosocial identity and plan for an offence-free life.

Several participants in group A discussed how masturbation progressed over time to an excessive amount, often for multiple hours a day, resulting in them missing social events and family occasions. This pertained to narratives around addiction and compulsive behaviour, and a sense from group A that their sexual interests became all consuming.

> *"It came to such a point where I was perhaps using pornography and masturbating for 12 hours a day."*
>
> Participant, group A

Several participants suggested it was the 'power imbalance' or the 'taboo' nature of what they were looking at that they found arousing, rather than the age of the children.

> *"I'm ashamed to say because it was so wrong, it was exciting and it wouldn't have mattered what it was, if there was so much stigma attached to somebody sitting on a tractor having sex, if that was as wrong as child pornography, I think I probably would have, it was the rush and the excitement of it being really bad."*
>
> Participant, group A

Six participants categorised as being in group A reported having male victims. Victims of group A were younger than those of groups B or C. The youngest victim was 4 months old, but two individuals did have older victims of 15 years old. Three participants detailed they had struggled with their sexual identity as a 'gay man' (referring to their attraction to adult men) for many years and had either not been open about their sexual preferences with their family and friends, or had a negative response when they did discuss this.[18] Participants highlighted this when discussing the fact that they felt their sexuality, more generally, was secretive and their offending behaviour was another example of this.

> *"I'd hidden like my sexuality from, since I was like 12."*
>
> Participant, group A

Four of those in group A detailed that they had been victims of sexual abuse themselves when they were younger.[19]

> *"Some stuff happened to me when I was a kid and um I was very young and I don't really know who did that um, but um, it's been something that's been with me for all my life and that's a crazy way of um, when I got to a teenager and I was using that as a masturbatory aid and that's probably when my problems all started."*
>
> Participant, group A

---

18   Six of the seven detailed that they were attracted to men rather than women. It is not suggested that this is causal to offending behaviour, but was a feature of group A not seen in the other groups.

19   It is not suggested that this is causal to offending behaviour.

4.2.4 Attitude towards conviction

A higher proportion of those in group A accepted their conviction and guilt. Five of the participants in group A totally admitted their offence, and one participant partially accepted his offence. The individual who was categorised as being in both groups A and B categorically denied his offence. Participants in group A also discussed their offence in more detail, with greater articulation and reflection with regards to causality. This was enhanced if they had attended a treatment programme.

> *"Whilst those conversations were extremely distasteful … they were nothing more than fantasy to me … it was just a 'wank chat'. That was it. There was nothing, no intent there, but there was one person on there that said he's got a nephew, or something like that and I assumed he was in the same boat as me. That there was no intention behind it, that there was no real person; subsequently it turns out that there was."*
>
> Participant, group A

Several participants in group A did discuss the evidence available in their court case (this was contrary to those in group B, who repeatedly asserted a lack of evidence), which may have influenced their decision to plead guilty and subsequently accept their conviction.

> *"I actually assumed that once I deleted them, and most of the images I deleted after the conversation and also the conversations I deleted, I wasn't one of these people that kept bucketloads of images, the active images on my phone when I was arrested was probably only six or seven but obviously because they were all there, I think there were about 700 that were totally illegal."*
>
> Participant, group A

4.3 Group B

Ten participants were exclusively categorised in group B. One participant was also in group A, and two participants were in both groups B and C. The average age of those in group B was 36 at the time of interview. The ethnic makeup of group B was more diverse than that of group A. Three participants in group B were white British; the rest were from a variety of different minority backgrounds such as Asian, other white (for example European or Middle Eastern) or African.

4.3.1 Lifestyle at time of offence

Group B was the most diverse of the three identified groups. It was generally characterised by individuals who were partying, or living a hedonistic lifestyle, at the time of their offence.

> *"Before my offence, before I got convicted, to be honest I had bad influence around me, um I was hanging around with … elders, I was going clubbing at 14/15, private parties, I was doing drugs before that. Dealing and doing drugs. I was smoking weed, doing cocaine, smoking, drinking."*
>
> Participant, groups B and C

However, individuals in this group also may have had wives, children and full-time jobs alongside this hedonistic lifestyle.

> *"I had a missus, I'm still with my missus now, I've been with my missus six years. I had a good job."*
>
> Participant, groups B and C

This is similar to group A in the sense that they were living a somewhat double life. For these participants, infidelity was common, and some participants in group B detailed that they had fathered children with their victims.

> *"I told my wife … my son from girl A[20] and then she forgive me and then how that happened I have to explain that as well. When girl A was pregnant, when girl B turned 16 towards 17 she says she wants to have a baby and I looked at my life … it's fucked you know like, I can't see exit, girl A got a son from me and my wife never forgive me. No my life is done now."*
>
> Participant, group B

When asked by researchers why they had chosen to be unfaithful with such young girls rather than adult women, participants stated this was down to opportunity (with young girls approaching *them*), rather than sexual preference or deliberately seeking out young girls.

Participants in group B had been convicted of contact offences as well as trafficking and conspiracy offences. They had also been convicted of other offences such as violence or possession of drugs with intent to supply. This was not seen in the other groups.

> *"I got stabbed in, see, when I come in jail, yeah, see my head right there today yeah, I had the stitches when I come in jail … I got a bottle in my head but my rival, by one of my rival gangs, 'cos he thought that I snitched on him because he went to jail for drugs."*
>
> Participant, group B

Four participants from this group categorised themselves more as violent offenders and were happy to discuss their violence or drug-dealing behaviour but rejected the other charges against them relevant to this research. Three participants who were engaged in drug offences and violence articulated that, had they not been imprisoned, they felt they would have been killed.

> *"I'd always have something or a firearm on me or something and would be on drugs, I was riled up and I don't give a fuck, I'll take the world on do you know what I mean? I am probably glad I did come jail because I would probably be dead now."*
>
> Participant, group B

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20   Please note this is how this participant distinguished between and referred to his victims (as girl A and girl B) and has not been put in by the researchers; it is verbatim from the participant.

Several participants in this group stated they thought the police wanted them 'off the streets' because of their drug dealing, so 'went after' them on a more serious charge. To this end, they seemed to suggest they were known in their community and had some type of status associated with this lifestyle.

> *"There was a lot of drugs going on in the area and there was a lot of stuff going on in the area, stabbing and that and the police could not get a lot of people in jail, so the only way they could get them in jail was a rape and it's a long time in jail, you're not coming out."*
>
> Participant, group B

Other participants in this group suggested they had notoriety in their area through other activities such as sports achievements, their employment (owning a local business) or being financially stable (evident to others through their clothes or cars).

> *"I had too many girls around like posters they are more interested on the physique that you have. You box, you, they like to watch and all that because when you record your boxing bout you put on Facebook."*
>
> Participant, group B

Only three participants in group B said they took drugs recreationally. Participants in group B reported dealing drugs rather than taking drugs themselves.

4.3.2 Motivation for offence

Due to the prevalence of denial in this group, motivation was articulated with less clarity than in other groups. For those who partially accepted their offence, they suggested that the motivation was hedonistic, bundled up in the somewhat chaotic nature of their lives, of which sex was one part of a bigger picture of partying, 'chilling' and 'hanging out'.

> *"We always had fun, we all used to be happy you know. We used to be chilling in the house, drinking, smoking cannabis, drinking, you know, they used to come down whenever they want. No one ever pressured them."*
>
> Participant, group B

For some who had a wife and children at home, they explained that their motivation was a 'buzz' and a 'thrill' of escaping normal mundane life, and they relished the attention. Four participants who were also associated with drug dealing or violence at the time of their offence were able to comment on the motivation of other people in the group with regards to offences such as trafficking or facilitation. They asserted that while they were not party to these offences, they knew it was happening in the broader scene within which they were living, and stated those involved were largely doing so for financial gain (getting money for finding a girl for others to have sex with).

> *"The people who they sell it to, these people, like people are like, they don't speak like English and ... stuff like that so, erm, they will approach the guy and say 'Oh, I want to meet a girl and this and that,' so that's how they think these guys ... of approaching the girl first and say 'Oh will you do this?'"*
>
> Participant, group B

4.3.3 Victim profiles and sexual interests

Victims of group B were predominantly teenage females (only one participant had a male victim; this participant was also categorised as being in group A). Sexual preoccupation was not as defining a feature of group B as for group A. Those in group B did not report the hours of masturbation that those in group A often did. Group B was characterised by participants discussing either one monogamous relationship or multiple casual relationships (including those with their victims).

> *"I'm not a child sex offender. I'm not, I don't, I have a missus I have … do you know what I mean? I have a good family behind me. I don't watch pornography, I don't, I don't thrive on sexual nature, I don't."*
>
> Participant, groups B and C

However, there were certainly individual participants in group B, namely those who had multiple relationships, who seemed obsessed by sexual activity. Two participants discussed the relative ease with which one could have sex in the UK compared to their native country. They suggested the abundance of promiscuity made it difficult for them to remain faithful to their wives.

> *"In [country name], sexual activity is not easy, like you have to be married or 'buffalo' they call it, like a prostitute house, obviously you can't go there under 18, you have to be 18 to go there to a prostitute house, or if you can find a girlfriend that already had sex before then you may, if she lets you, otherwise you have to get married or if you do that you get killed by the dad or the brother. It is proper strict. So I moved over here. I don't want to sound really like … dickhead … but yes it was easy and I was doing it and doing it and doing it and doing it."*
>
> Participant, group B

Although the victims of group B were underage, participants in group B were unlikely to admit to having a sexual attraction to young people. They frequently stated that they thought victims were older than they actually were (for example 17 instead of 15), because of how they dressed, or because they alleged that victims had told them a different age. Participants did not acknowledge a large age gap between themselves and the victims.

4.3.4 Attitude towards conviction

Five participants in group B categorically denied their offence and maintained their innocence. Eight participants in group B partially accepted their offence. No one accepted their conviction outright. Those who partially accepted their offence may have admitted to having sexual relations with the victim, but denied that this was exploitative or constituted rape.

> *"They used to come to my house, we used to have fun together, everything, but she told the police that it was one time it wasn't consent but the rest was consent, but I didn't know nothing about that, me I told the police that it was consent everything."*
>
> Participant, group B

Participants in group B often expressed strong feelings towards the label 'sex offender' and rejected this identity. They explained this caused them difficulty when residing with others convicted of sexual crimes.

> *"I can't live round these people any longer. There's stuff I listen to every day. What I see. You can spot a sex offender a mile away, they're just so timid, they're just, they keep their head down, they do as they're told. That is the nature of a sexual offender. He is what you class as a predator. Any woman he sees, he's on it like a dog. Now that's a sexual offender. That's not what I'm like. I have a nice missus, I have a good family … ."*
>
> Participant, groups B and C

As a result, some participants in group B cited other cases that they believe had biased their trial, conviction or sentencing.

> *"There's been a lot going on you know, in my area, to do with this sort of stuff. And so, what the police … I think I explained to you, they've been like uh, looking for people to make accusations, almost like on an industrial scale … like all of these sort of trials, like, a format has been set up. It's almost as if the media are a part of it, because they put these sort of things out there, you know, that there's Asian guys and there's drink and alcohol and all this involved. And it's almost like a tick-box exercise, you know. Alcohol, tick. Asian guys, tick. Drugs, tick. You know, vulnerable girls, tick."*
>
> Participant, group B

Participants in group B also more often cited racial stereotyping as a factor in their conviction.

> *"What they are trying to do, they are trying to give the bad name to the Asian. Okay. I don't know, for example Oxford, Manchester, gangs this and that I don't know and this, it is my … my thinking they want to give the bad name to Asian. It doesn't matter where they come from, it doesn't matter, as long as they are Asian."*
>
> Participant, not categorised[21]

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21   This participant consistently asserted that his identity had been mistaken throughout the interview, and as such he could not be categorised accurately into one of the three groups.

In addition, some participants from group B felt they were already condemned, prior to conviction, as a result of the stigmatisation of accusations of sexual offences.

> *Participant: "At court you're already convicted because that person on the jury, their mind is brainwashed straight away from the minute get go. As soon as they hear your offence being read out, the indictment, that's it."*
>
> *Interviewer: "You mean like once they hear what you've even been accused of?"*
>
> *Participant: "Yes, once that's even been brang to the light of the court the members of the jury straight away think 'Oh, what a dirty man,' d'you know what I mean? Without even knowing the story you've already been convicted."*
>
> Participant, groups B and C

Participants in group B frequently cited a 'lack of evidence' in their case and stated they felt disappointed in the British justice system.

> *"There was no witness, no evidence nothing apart from what she said."*
>
> Participant, group B

Participants in group B also frequently cited unused schedules of evidence in their case and perceived their trial to be biased and unfair. They reported that they were further disadvantaged by being tried as a group.

> *"That's the only way that my solicitor said they could see I was involved in it, because of my co-ds [co-defendants], like if it was a one-man trial, and I believe if it was only me and my trial I would have been going home but 'cos it was a lot of us all of us got done innit."*
>
> Participant, group B

4.4 Group C

Six participants were categorised exclusively in group C, with two additional participants appearing in groups B and C. The average age of those in group C, at the time of interview, was 35. Six participants were white British and two were from ethnic minority backgrounds. The two female participants were exclusively categorised in group C. This group was characterised by participants who, as well as being convicted perpetrators, also seemed to have been victimised or exploited themselves by their co-defendants. Three participants in this group had attended treatment programmes that were tailored for individuals with low IQs, and one other participant had a diagnosis of autism.

> *"My barrister said I was a sandwich short of a picnic ... meaning special needs."*
>
> Participant, group C

4.4.1 Lifestyle at time of offence

Participants in group C conveyed a relatively unstable lifestyle. They rarely reported working at the time of the offence. One stated he had been working as a 'rent boy' (stating he was being paid for sex) and was in the same circle as the victim of his offence.

> *"I had nowhere to go, I was sleeping underneath train … in train stations. And stuff like that. I was fearful um for my safety. So I started going prostitution. So I could get food. Get accommodation. Pay for hotels, whatever, just to get off that street … he said to my barrister, on cross-examination, that I was as much as the victim as he was."*
>
> Participant, group C

From their narratives, six participants in group C had seemingly been implicated in the offence as a result of being groomed by their co-defendants. Four of these participants said they had a 'romantic' relationship or connection with their co-defendant, and two had been groomed by bigger organised crime groups involved in drug dealing as well as trafficking young women for sexual exploitation.

> *"They approached me because I used to have my own house, so they used to deal and want to sell the drugs in my house, they want to sit down in my house. Cuckooing, yeah, do you want the use of my house innit and I'd just moved to the area, so when they said to me let us use your house we'll give you 100 pound, and once you're getting 100 pound, that was a lot to me 100 pound."*
>
> Participant, groups B and C

Describing his relationship with his co-defendant, one participant explained how he found his co-defendant's behaviour persistent and overwhelming. The participant liked to go out drinking and partying, and his co-defendant would supply him with money to do so.

> *"If I didn't feel in the mood, he would come down me mum's and say I've locked myself in the bathroom, he would wait outside of the bathroom until I come out. It was like he used to, when I used to go out and he used to come down, on some occasions I used to, when I hear him coming up my mum's stairs I used to pretend I'm still asleep but I am not. I felt on edge at most times."*
>
> Participant, group C

One participant explained that he had gone from violent relationship to violent relationship, and reported his self-esteem and confidence was extremely low at the time of the offence.

> *"At the time of my offence it was um, I was in uh, bad relationships and the … my ex-partner was punching, hitting me, hitting me about, violence towards me. Uh … she'd hit me with anything she could get her hands on. She broke my wrist. She tried hitting me in the head."*
>
> Participant, group C

One participant in group C (who was also in group B) admitted to dealing drugs. Three participants described that they would drink on most days, and one declared he was an alcoholic at the time of the offence. Two said they did not use drugs or alcohol, and two participants described their use as recreational.

4.4.2 Motivation for offence

Participants in group C suggested they had been motivated by a desire to be loved or accepted by their co-defendant.

> *"I've always craved wanting to be loved because failed marriages, failed relationships, 'cos all my partners ever did was cheat on me, I thought this bloke actually likes me. But he liked me for all the wrong reasons."*
>
> Participant, group C

Once the relationship had started, participants reported it was hard to stop it because of fear. Some participants in group C said they had been emotionally blackmailed and told they were already implicated in the offence. Commenting on the relationship between co-defendants in his network, one participant explained:

> *"What 20-year-old's going to have sex with a 70-year-old man? You know, let's be honest. He [co-defendant 3] was a victim in some aspects, he was scared of [co-defendant 4] you know he'd try and get away from him. These are people who are predatory in nature and that's what they want."*
>
> Participant, group C

Some participants also articulated a sense that they wanted to be accepted and seen as 'cool' by their co-defendants, seemingly getting swept up in their activities.

> *"The first four months, I said to myself I should not go out, what should I tell them? And they were ringing me and coming to my house and asking … 'Are you coming out?' And I was like 'Yeah' … but in my head I was thinking … 'I should say no' but it is just the thinking of like getting, like being cool around them, you know, so I said 'yes'. But when they were doing something, I couldn't just stand there and pretend … I have to be more active with them, whatever they do I have to do it, follow them."*
>
> Participant, groups B and C

Another participant explained that he had been approached by an organised crime group and was incentivised to be involved in human trafficking, as they promised him financial gain. He never received any money.

> *"So basically these guys said to me … they get your details, your sort code and your number off you, your account number, they put money into your bank as if I was paying you for wages from work how you'd get your pay cheque, and then when it bounces, because they've done it in a different area it takes longer to bounce, so it takes longer for the area it's been done in for it to be checked, so by the time you have received it the bank haven't noticed that it was dodgy money."*
>
> Participant, groups B and C

4.4.3 Victim profiles and sexual interests

Those in group C mostly did not discuss their offence in the context of sexual activity or preference. Two participants had male victims in their cases, and six participants had female victims in their cases (including the female participants). They ranged in age from 3 to 15 years. Four participants had non-contact offences (conspiracy, facilitation and indecent image offences). For the other four who had rape convictions, two categorically denied rape – one said the offence occurred in the broader context of him selling sex (he stated he had had sex with the victim and other co-defendants for money), and one stated he had a casual sexual relationship with the victim.

> *"I was around a lot of girls at that time. Er, first I started going out with a girl who was only turning 14 and I was over 16, er I got told that she was 16, so I was going out with her for three months, and there was no [sex] … at the end we decided to have sex. As soon as we had the sex, I find out she was under 16."*
> Participant, groups B and C

4.4.4 Attitude towards conviction

Two participants in group C categorically denied their offence. Both these participants said they never had sex with the victim.

> *"I swear on my parents' grave. I've never touched that girl in my life."*
> Participant, group C

Five participants in group C partially accepted their offence and understood how they had come to be convicted. They offered an independent explanation of events and disagreed with how the offence had been portrayed in court or in the media.

> *"They just said 'We are arresting you on suspicion of …' I don't know what. Trafficking or exploitation, I don't know. But I laughed … I did think it was a joke, because I didn't think I had done anything wrong … the police at first thought that I was the ringleader, and taking them to the hotels, because in the newspapers it said that I was drugging and plying them with alcohol. That's what the opening prosecution thing was. That killed me so much."*
> Participant, group C

One participant fully accepted her offence, although she maintained that she was groomed and blackmailed by her co-defendant.

> *"I had fallen completely in love with this bloke. I put my hands up, I let my heart rule my head and so in the end, I sort of like gave him what he wanted because I looked at it, I could protect my daughter because she was with me."*
> Participant, group C

Two participants in group C cited other cases as influencing their conviction.

> *"The whole connection was by the prosecution to make it a Rochdale case um, try and make it look like a Rochdale case but it was nowhere near."*
> Participant, group C

4.5 Discussion of research findings

Previous research in the field of child sexual exploitation has also found a high level of diversification among perpetrators (for example Walker, Pillinger and Brown, 2018) and has distinguished between at least two groups of perpetrators. Agencies such as CEOP (2013) have produced categorisations of perpetrators of child sexual exploitation, although they only distinguish between those who have a sexual attraction to children (they call this a type 2 perpetrator) and those who are attracted to a victim based on their vulnerability (they call this a type 1 perpetrator). Pancholi and Palmer (forthcoming) also note a similar distinction. The current work confirms the diverse nature of this type of perpetrator but also extends and expands on the differences between the groups, affording specific consideration to their lifestyles, motivations and attitudes towards convictions, moving beyond their sexual interests. The current work also explores an additional type of perpetrator (group C) in more depth than in previous research on child sexual exploitation.

For participants in group A, their accounts indicate a desire for 'connection' as an important driver in their offending behaviour. This concurs with literature on general sexual offending against children as well as other important psychological theories of human behaviour. Relationships and connectedness are said to be one of a triad of fundamental human needs, which together drive motivation and action (Ryan and Deci, 2000).

Self-determination theory is concerned with the motivation behind choices people make without external influence and interference. It is central to the widely respected Good Lives Model of Offender Rehabilitation (Ward, 2002), which adopts the underlying assumption that all individuals have similar basic needs and aspirations that they strive to meet and realise in their lives. Perpetrators are viewed as seeking to achieve their personal priorities or values through whatever means are available to them, but their approaches may be maladaptive, counterproductive and harmful to others. There is evidence that participants in group A were using online networks to try and feel 'connected' or to manage their compulsive sexual preoccupations in the absence of legitimate support routes, but this often meant they were accessing worse and worse images, propelling rather than quelling their 'addiction'. This offers a good example of the biological-psychological phenomenon of the Coolidge effect (Dewsbury, 1981). The Coolidge effect says that human males (females are less affected) seek sexual novelty until exhaustion, since with each new experience there will be a spike in dopamine, which can become addictive. With online pornography and communities, a viewer can anonymously access unlimited novel images; more and more extreme images are accessible with the proliferation of technology and apps.

Group B aligned with CEOP's type 1 perpetrator, described as a person who denies a sexual attraction to children. However, unlike CEOP's classification, participants denied deliberately seeking victims due to vulnerability, rather citing opportunity. Previous work by Barnardo's (2011: 6) used the term 'boyfriend model' to describe a situation which involves the perpetrator befriending and grooming a young person into a 'relationship' and then coercing or forcing that person to have sex with friends or associates. However, within interviews there was resistance to the idea of deceiving the girls. Participants in group B discussed their behaviour using terms such as 'chilling', which was raised in Cockbain's (2018) work. The current research did not find evidence of a 'hook' like that outlined in work by Hill (2015). A 'hook' is someone who poses as a boyfriend before passing the victims on to older, more senior males within the group. Contrary to Hill's work, there was also denial of purposeful enticement in the current sample. Participants in group B denied using wealth or notoriety to attract young girls, suggesting their interaction was more circumstantial.

The maintaining of their innocence that was characteristic of participants in group B has been found in other work on general sex offending (against both adults and children). It was more prevalent in this group compared to groups A and C. It remains unclear whether denial and minimisation increase the chances of recidivism (Ware and Mann, 2012), since they occur after the offence. Blagden et al. (2011) argue denial is a 'normal' response to a shameful action and the focus should shift from taking responsibility for the past to taking responsibility for the future. However, offence-supportive attitudes can be a psychologically meaningful risk factor for perpetrators of all sexual offences (Helmus et al., 2013). It is therefore important to distinguish between risks associated with initial offending rather than reoffending.

The participants interviewed for this study did not use derogatory terms to describe victims, unlike what has been seen in other studies (Cockbain, 2018). There was, however, evidence of using neutralisation techniques (Sykes and Matza, 1957),[22] because participants in group B denied injury, denied responsibility, denied that the victims were victims, denied exploiting the vulnerabilities of victims, and accused the authorities of being biased or racist.

The characteristics of participants in group C were a more unique finding emerging from the work, and one that has not been discussed as dominantly in other work in this area (although Cockbain, 2018, does acknowledge a victim-offender hybrid). Literature on sexual offending more generally (which does not distingish between offending against adults and children) has acknowledged certain groups as more vulnerable, including female perpetrators of sex offences (Williams et al. 2019; Gannon and Cortoni, 2010; Gannon, Rose and Ward, 2008; Turner, Miller and Henderson, 2008) and male sex workers (Ellison and Weitzer, 2017).

The research findings have also highlighted the different manifestations of power and control in child sexual exploitation. The issue of power cut across each of the three groups in different ways. Firstly, group A discussed how the perceived power imbalance between adult and child was a point of arousal for them. Secondly, group B discussed how their perceived wealth and associated power and notoriety in the local area was a 'draw' for young people to approach them (although they contest this was purposeful). Many in group B reported being 'loving' or 'nice' towards their victims and denied any violence or coercion. However the use of emotional or romantic relationships has been suggested as a covert coercive control strategy, particularly in adult sex trafficking (Bassil, 2019) and domestic violence (Towns and Adams, 2000). Group C participants presented as victims of a power imbalance, in that they had been exploited by other members of the network. This has been discussed by Wake and Reed (2019) in the context of adult victims of human trafficking, but not in the context of victims who were also convicted perpetrators.

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22   According to neutralisation theory, acts that violate norms or go against beliefs can carry with them guilt and shame, which dissuades most people from engaging in criminal or delinquent acts. Would-be delinquents, therefore, must find ways to preemptively neutralise the guilt and protect their self-image if they choose to participate in delinquent or deviant behaviour. There are five neutralisation techniques: denial of responsibility, denial of injury, denial of victims, appeal to higher loyalties, and condemnation of condemners (blaming authorities).

CHAPTER 5: Networks

The aim of this chapter is to consider how participants discussed the network they were convicted as part of, the relationships they described with co-defendants, how they came into contact with the network, what the network provided them and the influence it had on their behaviour. The size of the networks in the sample, based on those convicted together, ranged from 2 to 21. The structure of the network became harder to discern as the network size increased, and several participants stated they were unclear on the total numbers convicted in their case.

In this and subsequent chapters it has not been possible to present themes that emerged from the research under each of the three groups, due to the cross cutting nature of the themes across the total sample. Instead, we have indicated which groups discussed themes, where possible.

5.1 How the network was connected

Overall, this part of the interview was the most challenging to get clarity on. Participants were asked about who they knew in the network, but also how it was alleged (in court, for example) that the others had been connected. Particularly for larger networks, participants often stated they did not know people they had been convicted alongside. Larger networks were described by participants in the sample as either sprawling or linear, rather than hierarchical.

> *"There was no hierarchy like that. There's individual like … everybody whatever. It's not like a business. It's not a business at all."*
> Participant, group A

Interviewers often had to draw diagrams during interviews and check with participants that the configuration of the network (and its victims) had been correctly understood. Participants themselves were not able to share this information accurately, as they were not privy to some of the connections within the rest of the group, and were able only to comment on their own relationships with co-defendants.

Four participants (three from group B, one uncategorised) stated they did not know a single other person in the network, while others across groups A, B and C stated they knew one or two but not the whole group.

> *"You've got people that I've never even spoken to, so I wouldn't have a clue who they were so I'm sat in a, in a courtroom, in a dock, and there's people coming in and I'm like 'Who the fuck are you?' you know what I mean?"*
> Participant, group A

Participants across the sample often described their contact with others as a loose association, far from being something that was sophisticated or highly coordinated.

> *"Obviously then that person could have a link to that person and could have a link to that person, and those two people could have a link to me and I could have a link to two other people over here that maybe he interacted with that person over there but not with those two there, and it's that kind of, it's not neat like a triangle."*
> Participant, group A

Participants in group B reported they may have known of their co-defendants, or recognised them from the local area, but struggled to identify them as friends.

> *"I did know them but not like, I know them but not know them like that. You know some of them are, you know when you live in an area in a community yeah, because they were all … black and that. Like you know faces innit. If you smoke, if he smokes, if he's selling drugs you all know, you know."*
>
> Participant, group B

Some participants (across the groups) stated they were only linked to others in the group because of one central victim.

> *"The only way any of us were linked was from [the victim] outwards."*
>
> Participant, groups A and B

Some participants in group A reported they may never have met their co-defendants in person prior to court, having an online relationship only.

> *"I didn't think I knew them. I think one of them was in my [online] contact list, because I had built up quite a massive directory … of people so yeah they were in there but they weren't people that I was aware of or recognised, or recognise their names or faces or anything like that."*
>
> Participant, group A

Online networks were described as having an instigator; this was usually a chat room or chat administrator.

> *"There never seemed to be a particular ringleader but there must be someone who sets it up and who administers these sites and runs these sites. Um, I think in places like [app name] you have, someone must be the author or the owner of a group for it to exist."*
>
> Participant, group A

Some participants, across all groups, stated they did not know about the activities of their co-defendants and were not complicit in these.

> *"Then they mentioned about my co-d [co-defendant]. They are like 'He used to beat us up. He used to do like things to us that we don't like.' And they felt like they were doing a porn when they with him. But they were talking really good about me, because I didn't do anything wrong."*
>
> Participant, group B

Five participants stated they had been convicted alongside one other person, in which case they were more able to describe their relationship with that co-defendant. Where participants did admit to knowing their co-defendants, they described a variety of relationships. Three participants discussed the fact that their family members had also been implicated in their offence. One of the participants was convicted alongside his brother, and the other two participants had been convicted alongside their cousins. Five participants described romantic relationships with their co-defendants. Three of these five participants were classified as being in group C, having been exploited or victimised by their co-defendants.

> *"I had an ex-partner who I was convicted with um [co-defendant], he um, unbeknown to me at the time he was abusing his niece, so we met through one of these chat rooms."*
> Participant, group A

It was participants in smaller networks who described their co-defendants as friends.

> *"So, we used to go cricket to play each other. In the same team we're playing. So, you know kind of like a friendship we had."*
> Participant, group B

Four participants in group B described their co-defendant as a work colleague.

> *"We worked together as well, I trained him."*
> Participant, group B

Some in group A admitted that they had actually offended at the same time as others.

> *"He was there, he took part in it. So yeah, he took photographs of what happened."*
> Participant, group A

Yet most of the behaviour participants described was separate from other co-defendants, and offending was not described as being undertaken together. Participants rejected the idea that they and their co-defendants had sourced victims together.

Participants across all three groups also struggled with or contested the terms that had been used to describe the relationship between them and their co-defendants, such as 'ring', 'network', 'group' or 'gang', because they did not view themselves as a coordinated collective, which they felt these titles suggested.

> *Participant: "I wasn't in a paedophile ring, I do object to that."*
>
> *Interviewer: "How do you understand that term? What does that term mean to you?"*
>
> *Participant: "It means a group of three or four people who use and abuse, er, an underage child together. I didn't see it as a ring because it was just two, the two of us, but maybe that is just my feeling on the term."*
> Participant, group A

5.2 Purpose of the network

For some participants, across all groups, the network provided access to victims, acting almost as a gateway.

> *"It's like say you go to the library, I mean I know this isn't very nice saying it in this way, but it's like going to the library and reading a book saying and then they'd phone a friend and say 'Oh look I read this book and do you want to have a read of it?' Because they're fed up or they've read it and they just pass it on and they were passing on and passing on."*
>
> Participant, group A

Networks provided access to victims through the sharing of online images or opportunities to meet the same victims in real life. Two participants described how the network they were part of online eventually meant they gained access to their victims, and a contact offence followed. One participant, in group C, said his co-defendant provided access to her daughter (although he denied that a contact offence took place).

For those who were reportedly acting on the encouragement of others in the network, they stated this contributed to them feeling 'accepted'. Participants across all groups described their activity and contact with other members of the network as an escape from everyday life. One participant described that he felt 'safe' when he was texting his co-defendant.

> *Interviewer: "Can you explain to me what you meant about that, how it was making you feel safe?"*
>
> *Participant: "Because, um, because we were texting it … to be honest I wasn't getting beaten up any more [by his ex-girlfriend]. It was just … I was in my … if you like, I was in my own little bubble. And it was only me and this one person there."*
>
> Participant, group C

Participants in group A, whose offending and contact with the network largely started online, overwhelmingly reported that they felt this provided a place and a space to be 'honest' about their sexual interests and preoccupations. This was not mirrored, for obvious reasons, in the real world, and they struggled to find others with common interests. Two participants in group A said that they initially started communicating with members of the network online to try and quell their sexual fantasies so as not to progress to contact offences. Although this was unsuccessful ultimately, they stated they initially felt it was a way to 'manage' their urges.

> *"I went through a period of what I would say, like, fantasy kind of like, online chatting as a way to like just try and get it out, and then it's kind of like out and it's done with for a bit, and then it comes back, but it's probably not very healthy, but it's a way to like manage it. Um, to not acknowledging it at all, which didn't particularly work very well because then it just comes back and then you just feel shit because it comes back."*
>
> Participant, group A

Another participant in group A stated he felt 'connected' to others through the network, something he struggled to feel outside the group. He explained how he used the group as a support mechanism.

> *"It was an emotional crutch, because it was, and, but it was one that I didn't recognise was an emotional crutch until after the event for me."*
> Participant, group A

Several participants acknowledged that being part of a network, especially an online network, where images of children and young people were shared and fantasies were discussed, provided them with sexual gratification.

> *"It was pretty much sexual gratification … it was purely about masturbation you know. Orgasm and that was it. For me that was what it, that is what I was wanting. To masturbate to orgasm and that was what and the longer they stayed online, if it meant lying about what I had done, I did it."*
> Participant, group A

Two participants, both from group A, stated they enjoyed the feeling of being needed, wanted or approved of by the rest of the online community. One participant stated he was responsible for setting up the chat rooms and this made him feel important.

> *"To have that group of people that kind of more or less adored you at that time and that felt obviously that feels good."*
> Participant, group A

In group B, one participant stated he joined the network for financial gain, having been offered £500 for letting others in the group use his bank account details. Others in group B played down the purpose of the network, and often said it was just people to 'chill' with (for example 'hang out' recreationally, smoke cannabis, or listen to music).

Where participants were also part of other networks, such as those related to violence or drug dealing, they also commented on what *those* groups provided, which gave some further insight into group processes.

> *"If I am walking down that street there on my own everything's fine. I'm not brave, I'm not, if you walk with two or three other people and that's a group you get brave, you get more louder and that's why there's always groups and that's why oh if they say something to me, well we'll soon sort that out."*
> Participant, group A

Reflecting on his relationship with drug dealers, one participant in group B stated he felt good being a 'trusted' member of the network.

> Participant: *"The more you got trusted right, do you know what I mean? One of them used to say, an Albanian chap. You are my son, you are not my worker, you are my son."*
>
> Interviewer: *"How did that make you feel?"*
>
> Participant: *"Loved sort of like. I was loved anyway. My family are decent they are not from no fucking bad background like. You just feel like, yes!"*
>
> Participant, group B

Two other participants, both from group B, described how they felt they had no choice but to be part of the network (which was involved in drug dealing as well as sexual offences) for protection or fear of what would happen if they said no. In this way, they almost described the purpose of the network as protection.

> *"I was living with my stepmum, so I started selling drugs. The area that I'm from is [place name] so it's a gang area that, and if you're not involved in a gang then like you're not welcome in the area innit?"*
>
> Participant, group B

5.3 Influence of the network on behaviour and decision making

Participants in the sample reflected on the extent to which the network or their co-defendants influenced their behaviour. Reflecting on the influence of his online network, two of which ultimately introduced him to his victims, one participant from group A stated:

> *"Did it help to moderate me over the course of a long period of time? Yeah. But did it also lead me to offend? Yep."*
>
> Participant, group A

The influence of the network also extended to 'offline'.

> *"... later on that day he said 'Oh do you fancy a bit more fun?' and then he started doing what he did on his phone, and before we knew it, he had found this 15-year-old boy. And he said 'Do you fancy this?' and I really didn't want to but I thought if I don't say yes. I felt pressured even though I, I'm an adult and everything, I felt pressured into saying yes and going."*
>
> Participant, group A

A small number of participants in group B blamed their co-defendants for their own behaviour and expressed regret for associating with them, holding them accountable for introducing them to a 'new life'.

> *"… me and this guy, before that I used to go on, like I used to close my business and half past five, 5.45 I was at home and I used to, I never used to put my phone upside down at home. When I met him, I had to hide things you know because of the other girls involved. Before I never went with any girls. I was like, I had another life."*
>
> Participant, group B

As a result, some participants said they had explicitly asked to be separated from their co-defendants, because they felt so much anger towards them.

> *"If I see him, I murder him. He's the reason I am in jail."*
>
> Participant, group B

One participant who was using online forums said he enjoyed the kudos he got from setting up chat rooms. He was able to give insight into how the group influenced his behaviour by positively reinforcing and encouraging him to send more and more extreme images. He described that he felt 'adored' by other group members online.

> *"The ones that were serious were deemed to be more capable of doing it and would therefore be invited into a special chat room … so the more serious you were perceived to be, the more access to images … and the more perverse, or extreme I could come up with an idea or fantasy … there is a lot of confirmation bias going on there in terms of that cycle of perpetually increasing the levels up and up and up until you get to like horrendous stuff."*
>
> Participant, group A

Several participants, spanning all groups, detailed how difficult it was for them to leave the network. One participant in group C had his co-defendant living with him, and he stated he asked him to leave continuously.

> *"It's like it's not my home any more. He was always there."*
>
> Participant, group C

Those involved in drug dealing also documented the challenges in walking away from this network, which was a further helpful insight into organised crime.

> *"There is nothing I could have done miss, even if I could have, even if I would have said 'No I don't want to be in this, I don't want to get involved.' My cousin would have said, 'Yeah, it's all right,' but then the others, if they would have said 'No, you can't do that, you can't just come in and then you go out.'"*
>
> Participant, groups B and C

The impact of the network extended beyond the offence, and participants detailed in court how they still felt influenced by the network. For some this was described as an overt and explicit effect, while for others this was more subtle.

> *"When I see [co-defendant], throughout my court case, having [co-defendant] behind me in court in the dock, I was scared. Every day I was going to court, I wanted to end my life. I was sitting in the dock, I had the person who raped me behind me. He had power over me. I had him going in the dock shout, saying to me in the dock … 'You're gonna be on my wing, and I'm going to rape you again and again and again.'"*
>
> Participant, group C

Reflecting on the fact that he wanted to speak out in court, one participant categorised as being in groups B and C described how he felt unable to, because he was fearful of the repercussions from his co-defendant.

> *"When I found out, 'cos it's one of them, when you know what the guy and what he can do, and what power he has got, what he can do to your family, when you are in court there is no way you can something like this. It's not like a normal person, a normal working guy, it's just the guy has got power, he can just literally make people do whatever they want to."*
>
> Participant, groups B and C

It was also observed, when approaching potential participants to take part in the study, that individuals who were located on the same wing or prison with their co-defendants were less likely to agree to take part in the interview process, or expressed a keen desire to know who else had contributed. This appears to demonstrate a continued influence of group processes.

5.4 Methods of communication

Five participants (across the groups) stated that they had met the network or their co-defendant online, either through social networks, an online dating website or chat rooms where they shared or discussed indecent images of children. Participants in group A stated that being online permitted a degree of anonymity and remained a popular way of communicating.

> *"You didn't have to tell people where you lived. You didn't have to give people your phone number. You were a user name."*
>
> Participant, group A

Some participants had also met their victims online on social networking sites or on mobile phone applications.

> *"… how it started was, 'Wow you are beautiful,' and that sort of instantly had her, she was like 'Ah thank you,' you know … I asked her the question like 'Would I be able to touch your body, maybe underneath your clothes?'"*
>
> Participant, group A

Those whose offending spanned a long time reflected on how technological advances had introduced new opportunities for communication. Once participants had started their communication online, this often progressed to an in-person meeting. Referring to meeting his co-defendant, one participant explained:

> *"… over time, it's like any relationship really, built up that trust, built up and you trust them more and more and have longer conversations and then I think it got to swapping phone numbers so we would text one another and then yeah eventually that, that led to kind of a face-to-face meeting."*
>
> Participant, group A

Participants in group B often described their communication and interactions with co-defendants occurring in person, with them seeing each other around in the local area, working together or 'hanging out'. Their communication methods seemed far more casual and spontaneous than those in groups A or C.

5.5 Evading detection

As many participants did not consider their activities to be criminal, they were unlikely to describe explicit methods to evade detection. In fact, some participants in group B and one in group A described their activities and relationships with their victims as quite overt and public, walking through the local town with them, eating together in public, or committing offences in public spaces.

> *"It was out in the open … it was in a park. There was no one else around, we were way out in the middle."*
>
> Participant, group A

Some participants did describe that their offences took place in private houses, and one participant had sex with his victim in the back of a car (while being driven around by his co-defendant), but these were not described as specific efforts to evade detection.

A small number of participants discussed the steps they took to avoid being caught, or measures they had taken to try to evade detection, which were ultimately unsuccessful. We have refrained from including specifics and limited participant quotes in this section, because it could be harmful to put this type of information in the public domain.

In summary, some of the ways of avoiding detection that were mentioned included:

- using code words;
- avoiding using smart phones altogether;
- being 'vetted' by other perpetrators in online networks by submitting proof of being sexually aroused by certain topics and images; and
- using video chat rooms rather than images.

These methods were used predominantly by members of group A who had an online footprint.

5.6 Discussion of research findings

CEOP (2011) found that almost one in three of all 'localised grooming'[23] perpetrators were operating in groups, which were mostly small with only two or three perpetrators. Most of the networks in the current sample were similar to this, with the mean number of co-defendants said to be known by participants being just two. Most participants in the sample admitted to knowing fewer people in their case than the number who were convicted. Many participants also expressed their surprise (and frustration) at the number of other perpetrators involved who they alleged they did not recognise. This seemed to be more common in the current sample than previous work (for example Pancholi and Palmer, forthcoming; Cockbain, 2018), and especially dominant in the larger networks. Based on participants' accounts, networks in groups B and C appeared less organised than the online networks in group A and more like the description given by Cockbain, Brayley and Sullivan (2014) of "*loose federations*".

Work by Weerman (2003) indicates that co-offending (that is, offending that takes place at the same time or in the same place as that of another person) is influenced by three key factors: willingness to co-offend, presence of co-perpetrators, and attractiveness to co-perpetrators. In particular, 'attractiveness to co-perpetrators' resonated with the current research findings. For each member in groups A and B, there were some strong similarities which bound the networks together, but group A was the only group whose members openly disclosed committing offences at the same time as other people.

Unlike in the wider literature on group offending, there was limited explicit discussion of a sense of diffused responsibility (for example, "*he was doing it so it was fine*"; Bandura, Underwood and Fromson, 1975). Participants highlighted the negative impact of being in a pair or group, and the challenges this presented in desisting offending behaviour (even if being in a pair or group had initially seemed to be positive). Some in group B expressed the challenges in leaving the group or resisting joining in the first place, suggesting there was a cultural obligation and they would be threatened if they chose not to engage. This has parallels with other organised crime types and was more pronounced when the network was reportedly also involved in drugs or violence, but it has not necessarily been noted in work on perpetration of child sexual offences or exploitation.

23   CEOP (2011: 7) defines 'localised grooming' as *"a form of sexual exploitation – previously referred to as 'on street grooming' in the media – where children have been groomed and sexually exploited by an offender, having initially met in a location outside their home. This location is usually in public, such as a park, cinema, on the street or at a friend's house. Offenders often act together, establishing a relationship with a child or children before sexually exploiting them. Some victims of 'street grooming' may believe that the offender is in fact an older 'boyfriend'; these victims introduce their peers to the offender group who might then go on to be sexually exploited as well. Abuse may occur at a number of locations within a region and on several occasions. 'Localised grooming' was the term used by CEOP in the intelligence requests issued to police forces and other service agencies in order to define the data we wished to receive."*

CHAPTER 6: Victims

This chapter presents participant narratives that discuss the nature of the relationship between perpetrator and victims, how they met, the way the victims were described, as well as issues that were raised around choice, free will and consent. The term 'victim' is used here to describe both male and female victims. All participants in group A except one had male victims, all participants in group B except one had female victims, and two participants in group C had male victims. Participants in group A showed more remorse in discussions around their victims, citing their victims' especially young age.

6.1 Relationship between perpetrators and victims

Participants described a range of 'relationships' or connections with the victims in their cases. Three participants (across groups B and C) categorically denied ever seeing, meeting or knowing the victim. Others stated they knew of the victim and had seen them around or knew of them from the local area, but still maintained they had not had sexual contact with this person.

> *"I've never socialised with her. I've never hung around with her. Nothing. I just know her as somebody who lived in that area. Lived in that community like I know hundreds of people. I lived in that area all my life. A lot of people know me."*
>
> Participant, group B

For those participants who did admit that they knew their victim, how they had met was often opportunistic, and they may have been introduced by their co-defendant or a friend of a friend. Many in group B described that they would 'chill' with the victim, as part of a broader group.

> *"They are giving me some pictures of girls, a few girls that I know and I said to them 'Yeah I know them,' you know they used to come to my house … at that time they checked on my [social media], they checked on my phone number, I never had their number, nothing to do with me. They used to come down for my mate that used to smoke drugs with me."*
>
> Participant, group B

Those in group A, although admitting to seeking indecent images, stated they were not seeking a victim for a contact offence and upheld that the offence was, again, opportunistic.

> *"For me personally it was opportunistic yep. Obviously he [the victim] had a connection to the person who facilitated me offending."*
>
> Participant, group A

Two participants in group C described that they were mixing in similar circles as the victim, through working in the sex industry.

> *Participant: "It was just a … he was a prostitute and I was a prostitute."*
>
> *Interviewer: "Were you friends?"*
>
> *Participant: "No."*
>
> Participant, group C

Six participants, one within group A and the rest in group B, described that they had had casual sex with the victim. For some participants it was blurred as to whether they considered this a relationship.

> *"Then [victim name] liked me and dat we start going out together and that like be a little bit girlfriend boyfriend. Obviously I wasn't interested at that moment, because I just broke up with my girlfriend and that, so I was a bit, I was a bit unsure, when she was staying in my house and dat, she, obviously I was getting drunk and that we fucked each other a few times."*
>
> Participant, group B

Two further participants had fathered children with the victims; one participant stated his victim had got pregnant but had an abortion. One participant described that he was "*deeply in love*" with one of his victims, going on holiday with her numerous times, although he had a wife and children as well.

> *Participant: "I was with her three years in a relationship you know I was seeing her every morning. I used to leave my house, go to McDonald's, get a breakfast, go to her house, see my daughter … there, one hour, and then I go back to work."*
>
> *Interviewer: "How would you describe your relationship with her?"*
>
> *Participant: "Very loving, very, we would, I would say I was deeply in love with her but I had to choose between her and my family."*
>
> Participant, group B

For those who described being in a relationship with their victim, they simultaneously expressed shock and hurt that they had been accused of a sexual offence against that person.

> *"I got arrested for rape. I couldn't believe it. You know I loved the girl."*
>
> Participant, group B

6.2 Perceived vulnerability of victims

Across the groups, some participants were able to detail the backgrounds of their victims, although they may not have explicitly acknowledged how their victims' backgrounds made them vulnerable.

> *"That girl was being abused in her home, by her dad. That girl erm her mum was a drug addict. Erm, that girl is being in foster cares for god knows how long."*
>
> Participant, group B

However, on the whole, participants from groups B and C suggested that the background of the victims encouraged them to seek attention or attempt to escape their difficult lives and, in turn, this made the *perpetrators* vulnerable.

> *"Before I found out she's 15 and when I talked to her on [social media] and basically she quite openly talk to me, and I think she's basically struggling with this house and I think not getting enough spending money from her mum and everything and I think that's why she go to try to find somebody else, to gain something."*
>
> Participant, group B

In this sense, participants (especially those in group B) reversed the narrative and suggested that they were preyed upon by the victims, and not the other way around.

> *"She accused several other people with sexual offences and rape and it didn't go anywhere for her because in every erm, occasion they found out she was lying about something. For example, there was evidence that this girl she's proper predator she, she preys on people, vulnerable people like me."*
>
> Participant, group B

One participant stated he found it hard to say no to girls who he described as continuously approaching him due to his reputation and relative standing in the local town.

> *"I didn't force anybody for anything if they didn't come to me … because I was older they looked up to me. That's not my fault … they come to me. I shouldn't sleep with them when they are under 16. I shouldn't, and I shouldn't sleep with them at all because I am a married man but, but when they are there and then you don't force them."*
>
> Participant, group B

The idea that victims were chosen purposefully or targeted due to their vulnerability was rejected by most participants (except those in group A).

> *"I don't see people go outside these homes, care homes for young children. I don't see people go there just to pick up girls. I don't see that. These things happen by coincidence. Honest to god. Nobody go there and look for somebody who is young."*
>
> Participant, group B

6.3 Minimisation and justification

Participants in group B regularly asserted that victims had deliberately lied about their age or dressed in a way that made them appear more adult.

> *"If we knew her original age, I would never have even been in the same room as her. She looked about 25, no joke. You wouldn't pass her for a 15-year-old girl. The way she acts, talks and you know her persona you know, everything about her."*
> Participant, groups B and C

In addition, participants, predominantly those in group B, frequently questioned the motivation of the victims for coming forward, suggesting they were 'professional liars' or were 'coached' or 'groomed' by the police.

> *"She had the police officer, there was a lady that she had loads of personal contact with her like on the evidence it shows that she goes to her house and pick her up, pick her up going for a drive with her, talk to her and that. I reckon she put ideas in her head and tell her what to do, what to say."*
> Participant, group B

Most commonly, participants claimed they thought the victim was motivated to seek financial gain through compensation.

> *"I'm in jail because a girl wanted compensation and fair play to ya. Twenty, 30 grand for a girl who has never had nothing and it's as good as winning the lottery and I can't blame her. I blame the British justice system for letting it happen."*
> Participant, group B

For this reason, several participants suggested victims should not receive compensation or should have any compensation diverted for education or therapeutic purposes.

> *"… in some parts of Europe and some Scandinavian countries … they're only allowed to use that money for treatment. You know, some sort of therapy or something. I think that's a bloody good idea … if somebody genuinely had stuff like that done to them, they're going to need counselling and you know, to deal with the issue that they encountered. You don't need to give them 20, 30 grand so they can go and buy a new car. I guarantee you, if you said to them, 'You're going to get 20 or 30 thousand pounds' or whatever it is 'and you're going to use that for treatment' and then, you're going to see a big drop off in the amount of people making accusations."*
> Participant, group B

A small number of participants suggested victims had accused them of sexual offences because they were upset the relationship had ended.

> *"Because I got back, back with my wife she is accusing me of rape charge."*
> Participant, group B

6.4 Alleged choice and consent by victims

Many participants (except those exclusively in group A) disputed, even if the victim was underage, that there was a lack of consent.

> *"I'm sorry but ... this bullshit they put on TV, about all of a sudden these young girls are the victims. It ain't always like that. They know where they are. They know what they're doing. They're 13-, 14-year-old girls. You do it or you don't do it. And if you're a drug addict that is the only way you can get your drugs and you know that that's the only way you can get your drugs and you still do it."*
>
> Participant, groups A and B

Participants insinuated that their victims willingly and knowingly took part in activities, including sexual activity, even if simultaneously acknowledging that the age gap was wrong. Yet the central narrative, as noted in the previous section, was that victims sought opportunities to have contact with perpetrators, rather than being coerced or targeted.

> *"When a girl is getting in an Asian bloke's car, she's drinking vodka, she does sexual things with him, it's, he's a wrong un, he's a fucking 40-year-old man. Do you know what I mean? And the girl's like 14. It's noncing ain't it? I'm not, it's bad. Do you know what I mean? But like she's, she chose to get in that car, she's chose to drink that bottle of vodka, it, it's not like, and then all of a sudden she's a victim, she's been exploited."*
>
> Participant, group B

Many participants (except those exclusively in group A) asserted that the victim had a *choice* in whether he or she engaged in the activities, and struggled to understand the idea of exploitation in the absence of violence or threats.

> *"You are able to leave, you are able to come back, you are able to go and eat, get changed, have showers, meet your friends, you know what I mean, there has to be as well a point where people actually open their eyes and say well hold on a minute, fair enough yeah this guy had been doing this ... but at what point does other people take responsibility for their own actions? That was her way of living ... regardless of age, she was fully aware of what was going on. He raped me, he sexually assaulted me, he pimped me out, he done this, he done that, but what about you darling?"*
>
> Participant, groups B and C

A particular area of contention for participants was where victims had been described (in their cases or trials) as being involved in commercial sexual exploitation and where there had been multiple occasions of contact with other perpetrators.

> *"She knows what's wrong, what's right, and nobody has dragged her or nobody forced her to jump in a car or put a gun to her head or ... there's no pressure."*
>
> Participant, group B

They described this as a 'sign' that the victim was willing to engage.

> *"While we was all in court, he was still being a rent boy. So you know, it doesn't make these other nine people any better, but it doesn't mean that he's learnt from what has happened to him mentally or physically, he's still doing it. You know he's got his erm internet escorting … ."*
> Participant, group A

Participants also strongly denied the concept of grooming, with many stating they had never heard of this term before they were convicted.

> *"I found out in my court it was grooming but I wasn't even doing anything bad … when the girls comes, I have a break … then I buy them drink or Subway to eat as well and then I was talking like that to my barrister. My barrister said like it's sort of grooming. I was like I don't even know what grooming is! You know I got children myself, I buy things for them, am I grooming my own kids?"*
> Participant, group B

6.5 Discussion of research findings

The manner in which participants from group B 'reversed the narrative', suggesting *they* were vulnerable and *they* were actively sought out by victims, has not been reported elsewhere.

Participants displayed evidence of what are known as 'rape myths' (Burt, 1980). These are false beliefs that exist in society which shift the blame from perpetrators to victims, and include: 'they asked for it', 'it wasn't really rape', 'they lied or cried rape' and 'she was promiscuous'. Shechory and Idisis (2006: 651) state that "*three decades after the first studies of rape myths, prejudices and stereotypes concerning rape and rape victims still exist*", and this can be seen in the current study.

Participants, especially those in groups B and C, discussed the perception that young people *wanted* to spend time with them, and alleged they had willingly consented to sexual activity. This adds weight to arguments from previous work about the importance of expanding conversations about exploitation to afford consideration to wider contextual and macro factors that can influence or enable exploitative contact to occur, rather than considering exploitation as a one-way coercive exchange.

Concurring with narratives from the current sample, Cockbain (2018: 86) highlights the importance of considering each victim as an important participant in an exchange, rather than a "*passive object*". Similarly, Pancholi and Palmer (forthcoming) argue there is a need to expand the conversation around child sexual exploitation to include and consider the current reality and subcultural norms that underpin child sexual exploitation. They stress the need to contextualise interpersonal dynamics in relation to the sexualisation of youth in UK culture. They argue that the commodification of youthful 'beauty' alongside new technologies that encourage young people to 'hook up' for sex have created a cultural environment in which the boundaries of acceptable sexual behaviour can be difficult to navigate for all concerned (Pancholi and Palmer, forthcoming). Firmin, Warrington and Pearce (2016) have also highlighted this as important, and discuss and differentiate between structure (context) and agency (individual) to investigate child sexual exploitation and the sufficiency of related safeguarding responses. Wortley and Smallbone (2006) also concur it would be relevant to consider the situations and contexts that permit exploitation to occur, that distort perceptions of choice and consent. They assert that "*the immediate environment is more than a passive backdrop against which action is played*

out; it plays a fundamental role in initiating and shaping that action" (Wortley and Smallbone, 2006: 8). Participants in the current study made reference to the broader context in which consent was being navigated, discussing how they found it hard to discern a young person's age, and portraying themselves (as perpetrators) as the ones who were sought and pursued.

The power of grooming on children and the resultant impact on the young person's awareness of sexual abuse has to be acknowledged. Indeed, Cockbain (2018: 84) explains that sexual grooming can sometimes include certain features that are "*virtually indistinguishable from normal adult–child interactions*". Poverty also plays a role in young people's decision making. Participants discussed how the impoverished backgrounds some victims came from may have meant they were more intrigued by the wealth or perceived social standing perpetrators had. The normalisation of sexual violence in society is also important to look at in the context of how this affects what is considered acceptable. Pearce (2013) argues that professionals (and the public) need to be much more tuned in to the extent of the problem and move away from the view that child sexual exploitation is rare or not happening in their area.

The current study builds and adds weight to this previous work, as perpetrator narratives suggest a lack of awareness of how consent can be influenced or constrained, moving beyond age. The research shows that context needs to be incorporated routinely and more readily when considering child sexual exploitation and consent.

CHAPTER 7: Prevention and intervention

his chapter presents participants' narratives around prevention and intervention. Perpetrators mostly did not take responsibility for what had happened, and instead tended to blame others, including parents, social services or police, for failing to protect young people adequately or for failing to provide them, as perpetrators, with adequate support and help.

7.1 Perceived responsibility of parents, police and social services

When asked what could be done to prevent or disrupt children from being sexually exploited, participants, especially those in groups B and C, indicated that the responsibility for this was on external agencies, rather than the onus being on them not to offend. Some participants, from groups B and C, suggested the responsibility fell on parents.

> *"At home. That's where it starts. My mum and dad would never ever, I had to be in the house at 4 o'clock. If I wasn't on and off the bus from school on time, that's it, my dad was on the phone, 'Where are you? What are you doing?' Boo boo boom. And the way society is nowadays, something has to happen, has to change you know. You're walking down the road on your phone, online dating websites and whatever whatever and Snapchat do you know what I mean like? It has to change. It all starts at home."*
>
> Participant, groups B and C

A small number of participants described how perpetrators had met the parents of their victims, and there was evidence in their narratives that parents had also been groomed or enticed into a romantic relationship with the perpetrators, which facilitated access to their children.

> *"That girl are invited home and her mum would see the guy, meet the … the guy would drop her see and meet the mum … even buy the mum drinks and whatever, weed, the mum is buying weed off the guy, or stuff like that, and she knows the daughter is going with him and allow it."*
>
> Participant, group B

Both female participants were mothers. They discussed how their offences had taken place when they thought they were protecting their children, and were able to offer insight into how challenging they found it to safeguard children (who were implicated in their cases).

> *"It was my responsibility, but her upstairs bedroom window she just jumped out. She just jumped out. She didn't know what was on the floor down below. So you're prepared to hurt yourself just to get out to a party?"*
>
> Participant, group C

One participant explained how she felt that being strict actually isolated her daughter further and pushed her away. Since being in prison, she explained that she had benefited from parenting courses.

Participants recognised that some of the victims were well known to police, in terms of being missing from home or school regularly or being alleged to be involved in commercial sexual exploitation. In relation to this, participants also raised the role of police in prevention and disruption, requesting their more visible presence in areas which are notorious, or for them to act when they see something suspicious.

> *"Also the one thing, police, I would say you know get better vision if they see anything suspicious. They should act on it, even if, whether it's just like kids all together, one kid, two kids in a group where there is like, I don't know 20 olders ... Why would it be a kid around them? Or let's say, there is a kid who's 14 or 15 and should be at school and it's about 10 o'clock and he should be at school and he isn't ... so something is wrong."*
>
> Participant, groups B and C

One participant, who said she did not know that her co-defendant had previous convictions for sex offences, expressed concern that he was not 'policed' better.

> *"Why aren't the police policing these people better? It's all right for them to turn, turn round and say he'd pulled the wool over their eyes as well, well yeah that's fair enough, but he's ruined my entire life and he's ruined my kid's life."*
>
> Participant, group C

Some participants acknowledged the difficulty in policing and disrupting networks that might be operating 'underground', or were hidden.

> *"It's just a case of staying one step ahead of the latest technology perhaps. I think undercover stuff is probably the best way of, of the police kind of infiltrating that and kind of getting in on that side of it so they can be privy to that information."*
>
> Participant, group A

A small number of participants also felt that social services had a role to play in better protecting children and young people, given that some were under local authority care at the time of the offences. Two participants stated that victims had told foster carers about the harm they were coming to, but reported they had not acted on this information.

> *"It was social workers that he told. Care homes that he told, it was a lot of people that he told. I mean he wasn't an angel to be honest but he's still a victim at the end of the day."*
>
> Participant, group A

7.2 Seeking help confidentially

Participants, largely those in group A, who admitted a sexual attraction to children, acknowledged their obligation to prevent children and young people being harmed by them as perpetrators. They discussed the fact that they did not feel there was anywhere or anyone to turn to, to speak about the thoughts, urges and fantasies they were experiencing, and would have valued being able to access support before the offence.

> *"... looking on the internet, trying to look for support groups ... so there would be forums and things like that, there's everything on the internet, but you'd get, someone would put something up, 'I'm attracted to looking at images of young children' or whatever and then you'd have 500 responses 'You dirty paedo, I hope you die' ... not one person would offer any kind of support. So then you'd try to look on the NHS website and there's nothing there, you know, you start to look on the police websites. It says if you think someone is suffering from child abuse report it. But there was never anything that was there, 'I've got, I've developed this behaviour,' or 'For some people I have these feelings. I'm attracted to children.'"*
>
> Participant, group A

It was not uncommon for participants, especially those in group A, although also one in group B, to describe their behaviour at the time of the offence as 'addictive' or 'compulsive' and suggest that, had they had somewhere safe to speak about these difficulties, they might not have offended.

> *"I'll be honest, I was totally addicted."*
>
> Participant, group A

One participant in group B also expressed how he felt his behaviour was addictive and he was addicted to the attention and thrill of leaving his 'normal life'.

> *"As soon as the kids go to bed, I wanted to leave the house. A bit like a drug addict. A bit like, not the sex but excited, not the sex is not exciting, the sex is nothing but that excitement you go out you know that time you are spending."*
>
> Participant, group B

A small number of participants in group A remarked that, unlike for other addictive behaviours, there was not a space where they could discuss their 'addiction' with someone who had been through similar experiences, although they acknowledged the perceived dangers of mixing with others with similar convictions.

> *"For me, I think if I was wanting to approach someone it would be approach a group of people that have been through the same situation as me, but those people who have, or have been through the prison system and understood their offending."*
>
> Participant, group A

Participants described how fear of repercussions, for example being reported to the police or social care and of losing their home or job, prevented them from speaking out initially.

> *"I think there needs to be, there's got to be something, where um if some kind of like organisation, where people can go to for help, or that isn't going to instantaneously, in doing so completely wreck their life, because at the minute it seems to me that there's a fear like and that's the reason why people don't come forward until something, until it's too late."*
>
> Participant, group A

A small number of participants in group A *had* reached out to early intervention initiatives (post arrest) but gave negative feedback on this experience, largely around feeling judged by professionals they came into contact with. One participant expressed disappointment that it had been used against him in court. Several participants felt there was nowhere truly confidential or anonymous they could go to for help in a preventative manner.

> *"I spoke to the [charity name] and initially they were quite helpful, but then I spoke to one of their psychologists and they referred me to a psychiatrist … she made me feel so bad I almost killed myself … She was really aggressive with me yeah, yeah. Straight away, right from the off. Um, so she was like, you know, um, 'What's it you like about them? Is it the little bums, is it the little willies? What is it that you like?' And I was like, whoa, too much, and I couldn't deal with it."*
>
> Participant, group A

Two participants from group B did not agree that individuals such as those in group A (who they did not identify with, perhaps as group B's victims were teenage girls and not viewed in their eyes as 'children') should have a space to go to seek help.

> *"They shouldn't be allowed to talk about that. That is against the law, you should not be thinking like that. You should not be wired like that. How can find a child attractive, do you know what I mean? It should never be allowed, so that's why they shouldn't be able to talk about it."*
>
> Participant, groups B and C

This highlighted the stigmatised nature of sexual offending, even among those convicted of these offences, which was raised as a barrier to seeking help.

> *"There's definitely, you know, a lot of stigma attached to that, so think that is the main barrier in terms of people seeking help for things, anything just sexual not even related to children. Not just child abuse, any kind of sexual, erm, kind of addiction, if you want to call it that. There's definitely a stigma attached with that and I think that prevents a lot of people from seeking help. I think there needs to be some kind of funding to make people aware of it and that it's okay to seek help."*
>
> Participant, group A

7.3 Perceived positive impact of the justice system

Relating to their desire to be able to speak openly about their thoughts or meet people who had been through similar experiences, some participants (from groups A and C) reported that their contact with the criminal justice system had been positive.

> *"Even now, the thought of even looking at images of anyone under the age of probably 25, it doesn't interest me. I don't even think about that. My whole sex, attitude towards sex has changed since I have been convicted and since I have come here and actually talked about my childhood, my abuse and everything."*
>
> Participant, group A

One participant described how he felt he had benefited from the informal peer support he had while in prison.

> *"None of us wants to come back to prison. None of us wants to commit crimes again. We fucked up. We've lost eight years of our life. We're not going to do it again, and we'd pick each other up and when one of us, you know one of them has a wobble every now and then and we sit down and we talk him through what he's feeling, what he's feeling, what he's thinking and teach him, you know he's got coping mechanisms, remind him what they are and things like that."*
>
> Participant, group A

However, this positive impact was more pronounced if participants admitted to their offence. Those in group B who rejected the label of 'sex offender' also rejected the need for 'treatment' and were sceptical about its impact for others.

> *"They want me to do one in here but it's because of that word I don't think I will be doing it, 'treatment' – I ain't no nonce, I ain't no rapist, I haven't put my hands on anyone."*
>
> Participant, group B

Some participants who partially accepted their offence stated that prison had still been beneficial as it had allowed them to 'take a step back' and do other courses outside those related to sexual offending, including education, therapeutic interventions such as counselling, and courses on healthy relationships, domestic violence and general thinking skills.

> *"I am kind of glad I am here, I am not saying I am glad, but like if I had stayed out and I would have done a lot of drugs and still dealing, I would have probably been inside for something more serious. Like for murder or even worse than that. It's just I came to prison, I've done 42 qualifications – I've got for a level 3 upper level, A levels, Open University. I mean I've done quite a lot since I've been in prison."*
>
> Participant, groups B and C

Several participants talked about new strategies to keep themselves and others safe when they were released, such as ensuring they had a support network around them and being able to speak up when they felt they were struggling. They suggested that these ideas came from prison courses which also helped them identify risk factors for reoffending or identify how they found themselves in their situation.

> *"My risk areas are not being open and honest. Loneliness. Erm, being in debt. And not feeling wanted. All my friends know, I have told them my risk factors. I told my brother, but all my support networks, so they know what to look out for."*
>
> Participant, group A

Some participants in group A described as helpful the restrictions they would have on them when they are released.

> *"I have suggested things like, erm, having like a 'net nanny' thing on my computers so I can't go onto pornography sites. In terms of practicalities and things, I have got a sexual harm prevention order. So I am not allowed any online accounts without the police being aware of them. So I have got to email all my user names for every, if I want a Twitter account or an Instagram account then that's got to be registered with the National Crime Agency. So I think that's quite a good idea, because that, for me, is probably the easiest way to reoffend is to just go back online and start talking to people and I have got things like I am not allowed to talk about any sexual abuse online whether it's consensual adults' stuff, I can't talk about any of that."*
>
> Participant, group A

Several participants, across all groups, also valued the opportunity to stop using drugs when coming to prison; they did, at times, correlate drug use with their offending behaviour and blurred judgement.

> *"Quite [a] lot of the journey has been coming off the drugs and you know getting my head in the right place. I mean I am in such a different position to what I was, I am ready to go out there now. I won't be making the same mistakes again."*
>
> Participant, group A

However, some participants who maintained their innocence described that they were fearful of being released into the community and expressed concern about 'false allegations' in the future.

> *"What can I put in place? I can't stop people … making accusations against me. I think a lot of people, from what I've spoken to, you know, they feel that this country is not a safe country any more. Anybody can make the accusation against you."*
>
> Participant, group B

7.4 Lack of understanding of what constitutes an offence

Several participants, across all groups, stated that they did not know that their behaviour constituted a criminal act. This was especially common in conspiracy offences where the offence had been discussed but not carried out.

> *"I thought that that was consensual, um, you may call me naïve, that was legal, I still struggle to a degree to understand how two people talking about their sexual fantasies could result in an 11-year prison sentence."*
>
> Participant, group A

A small number of participants also expressed a lack of understanding, pre conviction, about the offence of trafficking.

> *"She mentioned my name, this taxi driver blah, blah and so the police, first I was convicted, charging from trafficking. I don't agree because, far as I am concerned I'm a taxi driver and they pay me. So, it's my job to pick them up and drop them off."*
>
> Participant, group B

For those who started offending online, they reported a dissonance between the images they were seeing and the harm done to children, which they now understood to be false.

> *"That was done probably before I was born and there was, you know, a disillusion, dis, er, dispatchment, that's not a word, but that's you know, that's what it was, and it was only when having a conversation with the probation officer I think and she said it's supply and demand. And I'd never thought of it that way before. And that was really stupid and naïve but I hadn't thought of it that way."*
>
> Participant, group A

To this end, several participants stated they wished they had known that what they were doing was illegal, had better understood the impact and risks associated with their actions, and known that the offence carried a long custodial sentence. Several participants expressed regret and remorse over their conviction.

> *"I've caused a lot of hurt for my own family, the families of the victims and it just extends outwards doesn't it? It's like a massive ripple effect and for what? You know, one offence, okay it was overnight, but the actual committal of the offence was probably for about 45 minutes and the other one was probably about 10 minutes, for the sake of that, the amount of damage and hurt, not to mention the fact that I've completely wrecked my own life."*
>
> Participant, group A

One or two participants questioned the extent to which perpetrators could be prevented, in spite of knowing the consequences or that their behaviour was illegal.

"You would never prevent … okay say me. If I was intent on doing something like that, you could never prevent me going out and trying to do it. All you can do is educate the person that I will be going out and looking for."

Participant, groups A and B

Therefore, participants also noted that children and young people should be educated in terms of child sexual exploitation.

"Definitely education is key, but obviously teaching them what to look out for. Not to meet up with anyone they don't know. But also, I think you know, there could be more done to protect them, because like for instance, say for instance anyone under the age of 16 has to have an adult account attached to theirs."

Participant, group A

Talking as a mother, one participant suggested that parents also need to be educated on the risks and dangers associated with child sexual exploitation, but also on how parents can be implicated.

"I think if they can have not a school list, but like an assembly once every term with the parents and the kids maybe like year 7s, year 8s and year 9s because it is happening at the young ages as well … My friends have all stuck by me because they know who I am and they know the troubles I was having with [daughter] at the time and they said 'So what you are telling me is if I take my daughter to a party and something happens to her there, I can get done?'"

Participant, group C

This same participant also said she would like to do a course in prison to be educated on trafficking and exploitation and what risk factors to look out for.

7.5 Discussion of research findings

Participants found it hard to offer suggestions relating to prevention and disruption. This aligned with the research finding by Cockbain (2018). When asking perpetrators what work should be undertaken to prevent offending, there was a lack of focus on education as well as a notable absence of perpetrator-focused interventions.

However, those in group A, in particular, made reference to the need for support to divert them away from offending before it occurred. They highlighted the stigmatised nature of their sexual interests as a barrier to accessing support. This has been seen elsewhere in research on perpetrators of sexual offending (Jahnke 2018; Lasher and Stinson, 2017; Freimond, 2013).

Treatment programmes targeting sexual offending have been designed to reduce the likelihood of an individual reoffending and reduce the risk of harm posed to others. In the UK, the majority of programmes are delivered by Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS) across the prison and probation service. Other treatment programmes are delivered by private providers such as the Lucy Faithfull Foundation, Safer Living Foundation and Circles UK, which exist to support those with atypical sexual interests to cope with these preferences safely.

The effectiveness of typical sexual offender treatment programmes, as measured by the reduction of sexual offence recidivism, is limited at best. There is not enough high quality research to show that sex offender treatment programmes have an impact. Evaluations on the impact of Kaizen and Horizon,[24] the current accredited programmes for sexual offending, are still underway.

Stop it Now! (delivered by the Lucy Faithfull Foundation) was evaluated by Brown et al. (2014), who found that over 31,000 calls were taken between 2002 and 2013 from a diverse range of users. Almost half of users had a past sexual offence in the period 2012–13, and 8 percent admitted a sexual attraction to children but had not acted upon it. Brown et al. (2014) found that subsequently callers had increased wellbeing scores and felt they were in a better position to cope (and, in some cases, not reoffend).

Safer Living Foundation is currently being evaluated by Nottingham Trent University. Circles UK has been evaluated favourably (Kitson-Boyce et al., 2017, 2018, 2019; Duwe, 2018), with reduced reoffending demonstrated.

Little is known about how effective such support is specifically for perpetrators who commit child sexual exploitation, especially those operating in groups. It is of interest that the participants in the current study, especially those in group A, discussed the need for help, despite support organisations being in existence. Some participants had had negative experiences of these existing support streams, and others did not know that these initiatives existed.

From the current literature, it is clear that further well-controlled studies are needed in order to accurately determine the effectiveness of all sex offender treatment programmes (Schmucker and Lösel, 2015), regardless of provider, particularly in relation to treatments specific to those who have perpetrated child sexual abuse and exploitation alongside others. It is important to note that none of the programmes discussed have been tested or explored with perpetrators of child sexual exploitation (and especially with individuals like those in group B).

Maintenance of innocence was highly prevalent across the project as a whole, from recruitment to interviews. This has been seen elsewhere in work specifically on perpetrators of child sexual exploitation in groups (for example Pancholi and Palmer, forthcoming), as well as being common with more general perpetrators of sexual offences. Blagden et al. (2013) argue that "*professionals need to realise that denial does not represent the endgame in treatment and that success does not necessarily depend on its eradication*". However, it was discussed as a barrier to treatment by group B, who did not wish to engage in traditional 'sex offender' treatment programmes. They felt more comfortable talking about the pressures of gang-related behaviour rather than sexual offences. This may suggest they would be more open to taking part in a programme which aligns with this, rather than one exclusively for perpetrators of sexual crimes.

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24   Horizon is designed for medium and above risk adult men who have been convicted of a sexual offence. iHorizon is a version of Horizon for men whose sexual offending is internet only.

Kaizen is delivered in the community to high or very high risk adult men who have been convicted of a sexual offence, and to high or very high risk adult men in custody who have been convicted of a sexual, intimate partner violence or general violent offence.

CHAPTER 8: Key findings from the research

This chapter brings together the research findings from chapters 4–7 and discusses avenues for future research.

8.1 Key research findings

Participants interviewed for this research study were diverse and came from a range of backgrounds

The participants interviewed for this research study represented a diverse group. The age range was 22–66 years old at the time of interview, with an average age of 38. Over two-thirds of the sample (n = 18) were white British/white other, but participants also identified as Asian, black African, other Asian, Indian, and white and Asian. Participants came from a range of employment backgrounds. Victims ranged from 4 months old to 15 years old and were both male and female. No participant offended against both males and females.[25]

Perpetrators could be loosely clustered around three groups (A, B and C) according to their lifestyle, motivation, sexual interest and attitude towards conviction

Despite perpetrators' varied backgrounds, they could be loosely clustered around three groups, noting differences in their lifestyle, motivation, sexual interest and attitude towards conviction. This emerged as an observation of the aggregate data, and was not an intended or deliberate purpose of the research. Hence this is not a tried and tested typology, more an observation of our own sample.[26]

- Group A: participants admitted their offence and discussed a historical sexual attraction to children or young people. Participants described living a double life and spent an excessive amount of time online.

- Group B: participants denied or partially denied their offence and did not disclose attraction to children and young people. They reversed the narrative and suggested *they* were vulnerable rather than the victims, and described a hedonistic lifestyle.

- Group C: participants either denied, partially denied or admitted their offence. They presented as vulnerable and seemed to have been exploited or groomed by co-defendants.

Networks were described by participants as loose associations rather than organised networks

Participants said the groups they had been convicted as part of lacked a ringleader or hierarchy. Participants said they only knew one or two other individuals convicted of offences arising from the same or similar set of circumstances, claiming to be linked to these individuals via a number of different relationships: family members, romantic connections, people they knew of, and friends or work colleagues.

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25   Due to the explorative nature of the research, these characteristics pertain to the current sample and may not be applicable to other perpetrators.

26   The research does not claim that every perpetrator of child sexual exploitation necessarily falls into one of these groups, and acknowledges there could be different characteristics that were not observed in this sample.

Participants acknowledged their behaviour to varying extents, with some using minimisation and justification to explain their motivations and offending behaviours

Some participants did not take ownership of their behaviour, diffused responsibility and minimised harm.

a) **Participants in group A said that an anonymous supportive space in which to discuss sexually harmful thoughts may have prevented them from offending.**

   Participants from group A recognised and acknowledged work they could have done to prevent them offending. They stated they would have liked a place they could go or person they could speak to about their sexual preoccupations and inappropriate thoughts before their offence was commissioned. Some had accessed charities *after* arrest but reported this experience as negative and judgemental. Participants in group A likened their thoughts to an addiction and stated that, compared to other addictions, they felt there was nowhere they could access help before things escalated.

b) **Where denial was prevalent, so too was diffusion of responsibility.**

   Participants, mainly those in group B, displaced their responsibility onto others, including parents, police and social services, and rejected the identity of 'sex offender', refusing to take part in treatment programmes and rejecting any suggestion that the problem lied within their behaviour. They also rejected the idea that their victims were chosen purposefully or targeted due to their vulnerability.

c) **Across the groups, several participants claimed a lack of understanding of what constituted an offence.**

   Participants often asserted that they did not know that what they were doing constituted an offence. This was most common where offences were trafficking or conspiracy offences (rather than contact offences). Several participants advocated a need for education around this to prevent offending.

8.2 Areas for future research

The work has highlighted a number of knowledge gaps and opportunities for future research, which other agencies might want to take forward:

- Undertake research to further explore the differences and overlap between groups A, B and C and whether they are replicated in other samples.

- Undertake more focused research on groups B (hedonistic lifestyle, maintenance of innocence, offence-supportive beliefs) and C (victim-offender hybrid) to explore what type of intervention each group could benefit from (for example, group A seemed to benefit from and engage more with treatment programmes in prison, whereas group B rejected this identity and were less likely to engage).

- Undertake further well-controlled studies to determine the effectiveness of treatment programmes, particularly treatment programmes for perpetrators of child sexual abuse and exploitation operating alongside others.

- Undertake research exploring the suitability and effectiveness of mutual aid and peer support for perpetrators of child sexual exploitation as referenced by participants in group A.

- Undertake specific research with females convicted of child sexual exploitation alongside others.

- Undertake further qualitative research that adopts a triangulation approach, using interviews together with police and court records (for example witness statements) for a sample of cases, looking to verify, challenge or expand the current research findings.

Appendix

● Glossary

CEOP	Child Exploitation and Online Protection command – a command of the National Crime Agency.
Child sexual abuse	Involves forcing or enticing a child or young person to take part in sexual activities, not necessarily involving a high level of violence, whether or not the child is aware of what is happening. The activities may involve physical contact, including assault by penetration (for example, rape or oral sex) or non-penetrative acts such as masturbation, kissing, rubbing and touching outside of clothing. They may also include non-contact activities, such as involving children in looking at, or in the production of, sexual images, watching sexual activities, encouraging children to behave in sexually inappropriate ways, or grooming a child in preparation for abuse. Sexual abuse can take place online, and technology can be used to facilitate offline abuse. Sexual abuse is not solely perpetrated by adult males. Women can also commit acts of sexual abuse, as can other children. (Working Together to Safeguard Children; HM Government, 2018 – statutory guidance)
Child sexual exploitation	A form of child sexual abuse. It occurs 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 perpetrator or facilitator. The victim may have been sexually exploited even if the sexual activity appears consensual. Child sexual exploitation does not always involve physical contact; it can also occur through the use of technology. (Working Together to Safeguard Children; HM Government, 2018 – statutory guidance)
Co-defendant	An individual who has been joined with another individual or group of individuals in the same criminal prosecution.
County lines	When drug gangs from big cities expand their operations to smaller towns, often using violence to drive out local dealers and exploiting children and vulnerable people to sell drugs. (National Crime Agency)
Grooming for child sexual abuse	Building a relationship with a child in order to gain their trust for the purposes of sexual abuse or exploitation. (Inquiry website)
HMPPS	Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service, an executive agency of the Ministry of Justice responsible for the correctional services in England and Wales.
Interview schedule	A set of questions to guide the researcher through an interview, ensuring all research questions are covered.
Modus operandi	A Latin phrase that means 'mode of operating' or an individual's methods of doing something (often related to crime).
NVivo 12	Software to enable qualitative researchers to organise, analyse and visualise qualitative information, rich in detail.

NWG Exploitation Response Unit	Formerly known as the National Working Group for Sexually Exploited Children and Young People – a charitable organisation formed as a UK network of over 14,500 practitioners who disseminate information through their services to professionals working on the issue of child exploitation and trafficking.
Organised networks	A network 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 a person allowing his or her property to be used for sexual activities with a child (Inquiry investigation on Child Sexual Exploitation by Organised Networks).
Prison National Offender Management Information System (PNOMIS)	A database, used in prisons, which contains individuals' personal details, age group, type of offence(s), type of custody (including those remanded on bail and sentenced) and sentence length, prisoner movement data (internal and external), case note information, addresses of the prisoner, and details of any involvement in breaches of prison discipline.
Purposive sampling	The specific selection of participants based on their characteristics.

Trafficking	Under the Modern Slavery Act (2015), human trafficking is defined as:
	
	 (1) *A person commits an offence if the person arranges or facilitates the travel of another person ("V") with a view to V being exploited.*
	
	 (2) *It is irrelevant whether V consents to the travel (whether V is an adult or a child).*
	
	 (3) *A person may in particular arrange or facilitate V's travel by recruiting V, transporting or transferring V, harbouring or receiving V, or transferring or exchanging control over V.*
	
	 (4) *A person arranges or facilitates V's travel with a view to V being exploited only if –*
	
	      (a) the person intends to exploit V (in any part of the world) during or after the travel, or (b) the person knows or ought to know that another person is likely to exploit V (in any part of the world) during or after the travel. "Travel" means arriving in, or entering, any country, departing from any country, travelling within any country.
	
	 (5) *"Travel" means –*
	
	      (a) arriving in, or entering, any country,
	
	      (b) departing from any country,
	
	      (c) travelling within any country.

▶

Trafficking *(continued)*	(6)	A person who is a UK national commits an offence under this section regardless of –
		(a) where the arranging or facilitating takes place, or
		(b) where the travel takes place.
	(7)	A person who is not a UK national commits an offence under this section if –
		(a) any part of the arranging or facilitating takes place in the United Kingdom, or
		(b) the travel consists of arrival in or entry into, departure from, or travel within, the United Kingdom.

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