



# A qualitative study of the practices and experiences of staff in multidisciplinary child sexual exploitation partnerships in three English coastal towns

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## Abstract

This article presents findings from a qualitative study of the practices and experiences of people working in multidisciplinary child sexual exploitation (CSE) partnerships in three coastal towns in England. The study is based on focus groups conducted with 36 practitioners from a range of professional groups, including police, social work, substance misuse, education, specialist youth workers, sexual health, and statutory and non-statutory children's services. The article begins with an overview of the three towns and the structure of their responses to CSE. It goes on to explore a range of factors, which contribute to the local issues around CSE and which affect and direct multiagency working. These include practitioner perspectives on CSE vulnerability, the discrepancy between young peoples' and practitioners' views about "exploitation", a discussion of how CSE perpetrators initiate and develop contact with young people and the role of incentives—including drugs and alcohol—as part of CSE exploitation. We finish by drawing out some general conclusions.

Polly Radcliffe and Alastair Roy contributed equally to the paper.

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## KEYWORDS

child sexual exploitation, coastal towns, gangs, risk, substance use, vulnerability

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

This article explores practitioners' understandings of the contribution of a range of factors that contribute to the local issues around child sexual exploitation (CSE) in three coastal towns in England. Awareness of CSE has grown internationally in the last decade (Barnert et al., 2017; Hallett, 2017; Jackson, 2014; Jay, 2014; McKibbin, Halfpenny, & Humphreys, 2019), although in some jurisdictions human trafficking is more commonly referred to than CSE (Mitchell et al., 2017). CSE first came to mainstream public attention in England because of cases in which multiple teenagers were victims of organised sexual abuse by groups of men in areas such as Rotherham, Rochdale, Oxford, and Telford (Jay, 2014; Griffiths, 2013; HMIC, 2015; Oxford Safeguarding Children Board, 2015). One aspect of the notoriety of these cases was due to the profile of those involved, because most of the victims were white teenage girls and nearly all the offenders were South Asian men. The demographic profile in these most oft-reported cases significantly misrepresents the broader demographic picture of CSE victims and offenders however (Cockbain, 2013; Patel, 2018). Research (Cockbain, Brayley, & Ashby, 2014; Coy, Sharp-Jeffs, & Kelly, 2017) finds that many young men are also victims of CSE and that female perpetration is widely under detected and under-reported (Bourke et al., 2014). In a study of over 9,000 CSE service users, Cockbain, Ashby, and Brayley (2017) found that one third were boys and young men. Further, as Miah (2015) argued, the binary of Asian male perpetrators and white female victims does not stand up to scrutiny.

The English Department for Education captures the different ways in which CSE perpetrators operate, in its definition of CSE as a form of child sexual abuse:

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 (Department for Education, 2017, p. 3)

Research and commentary has increasingly focused on characteristics that make young people *vulnerable* to sexual exploitation (Alderson, 2016; Brown, 2017; Hallett, 2016, 2017). In her study of CSE policy from the perspective of young people, Brown (2017) has described vulnerability as "a slippery idea loaded with moral and ethical connotations" (Brown, 2017, 4). She argues that there has been a shift in official discourse and commentary, from understanding and explaining social problems in relation to poverty and disadvantage, to a focus, in the past 20 years, on individual vulnerability characteristics. Brown (2017) advances an argument that although, apparently sympathetic, the language of vulnerability can have unintended exclusionary effects for young people whose troublesome behaviours means that they are misaligned with "normative assumptions that vulnerable people should display or perform weakness or frailty" (Brown, 2017, p. 43).

In societal comment and debate, distinctions are not always clearly made between the language of vulnerability or risk in relation to CSE. Our interest in this article is in exploring practitioner perspectives on the dynamic relationships between social contexts as vulnerabilities, individual risk factors and behaviors. A report by the Children's Society suggests that although any young person can be at risk of exploitation, socially created vulnerabilities place some young people at greater risk (Turner, Belcher, & Pona, 2019) including growing up in poverty, having learning

difficulties, being excluded from school or being a looked after child. Here, individual risk factors are linked to socially and structurally located vulnerabilities. The report also suggests that although older adolescents are more likely to be recorded as having been criminally or sexually exploited, children as young as seven are being targeted by CSE perpetrators (Coy et al., 2017) as well as those involved in broader patterns of child exploitation (e.g., gangs involved in drug supply). In a review of CSE research findings, Alderson (2016) suggests studies describing the factors associated with CSE vulnerability over-sample from those who are already in contact with children's services and do not explain the pathways to exploitation for other young people. In examining the interface between the range of structural vulnerabilities and individual risk to CSE, our article is informed by the call for a more dynamic understanding of vulnerabilities and seeks to contribute to these debates (Brown, 2017; Hallett, 2017).

One of the questions that motivated the research was the role of substance use in CSE relationships. A common theme in the reports into CSE in Rotherham (Jay, 2014) and Oxfordshire (Oxfordshire Safeguarding Children Board, 2015) was that perpetrators routinely used drugs and alcohol to sexually groom and to make children and young people more amenable to abuse. In an evaluation of Barnardo's CSE services, Scott and Skidmore (2006) described the exchange of sex for drugs in forms of "informal exploitation". The young people who took part in both Hallett's (2017) and Brown's (2017, 2019) research referred to making calculated decisions to exchange sex to meet needs for money and items—including cigarettes, drugs and alcohol—that would otherwise not be available to them. In addition, Hallett's (2017) interviewees report using alcohol and drugs to cope with feelings of loneliness and isolation as a result of their unmet need for adult care and attention. Other research has linked the experience of sexual exploitation with drug and alcohol use by describing how intoxication can be a way to "self-medicate" (Frisher, Crome, Macleod, Bloor, & Hickman, 2007; McLelland & Newell, 2013). Williams (2013, 2015) argues that whilst British Government statistics now report downward trends in overall drug use, the role now played by demographics and social context is perhaps greater. Studies that have examined substance use amongst young people in disadvantaged places have found a range of factors, which make early onset—and/or problem patterns of—substance use more likely, including low levels of interaction with their families, the availability of substances and peer influences (Frisher et al., 2007). Therefore, some of the risk factors for early onset substance use are also risk factors for CSE but as we describe, our research highlighted that substance use is only one aspect of grooming and exploitation of young people.

English Government guidance (Department for Education, 2017) suggests that an "effective local multi-agency plan to combat child sexual exploitation" requires contributions from all multi-agency partners monitored by the Local Safeguarding Children Board (p. 16). This involves the police, statutory and voluntary organizations, health, education and youth services (Coy et al., 2017; Greenbaum et al., 2015) with clearly defined roles and responsibilities and clear lines of communication and accountability. Multiagency teams in England have been established through local Safeguarding Boards (SCBs) and Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hubs (MASH; Home Office, 2017) to provide a more coordinated response to children and young people experiencing abuse, including CSE. This strategy provides the framework for different agencies to share information and knowledge to support the development of both preventative targeting of "hot-spots", as well as providing direct services to CSE victims (Barnardo's, 2012).

The geographic focus of this article is on CSE in English seaside towns. Many seaside towns are experiencing sets of issues, which result from a combination of industrial decline and geography (House of Lords, 2019). Whilst some coastal towns, especially ones on the English south coast, have seen tourist economies go from strength to strength, others seem to have been left behind. Low housing costs, alongside the introduction of competitive markets in social care provision, have led to a concentration of populations of children and young people categorised as "in need", "looked after" (in local authority care), and "care leavers" in coastal towns such the ones which are the subject of this article (Capon, 2004). These issues have their roots in the decline of their core industries with domestic tourism being the most prominent example, but with fishing, shipbuilding and port activities also subject to long-term decline in these areas (Capon, 2004).

Coastal towns with highly disadvantaged populations are also increasingly identified as sites of thriving drug markets and the target for metropolitan gangs seeking to extend their drug dealing business into new locations through "County Lines" (Coomber & Moyle, 2017; National Crime Agency, 2017). Figures reveal that six of the ten local

authority districts in England and Wales with the highest rates of heroin and/or morphine-misuse deaths are coastal towns (Office for National Statistics, 2018), suggesting a relationship between substance use, social disadvantage and place.

## 1.1 | Coastal towns and CSE responses

### 1.1.1 | Overview

This article reports on focus groups conducted with practitioners who are part of multidisciplinary CSE teams in three English coastal towns in 2018. Each area is anonymised in this article, and we refer to them as North West Town (NWT), South West Town (SWT), and South East Town (SET). The three coastal towns were selected for their location in different parts of England and were known to have distinct multiagency models of services for addressing CSE. They share many common features. Each town is characterised by economic decline, seasonal and fragile employment, and all feature areas of multiple deprivation (Agahwal & Brunt, 2006). Central wards in all three towns feature low quality, rented Houses of Multiple Occupation (HMO). Small areas within wards in each town rank between 1 and 5% of the most deprived in England according to the index of multiple deprivation (Department for Communities and Local Government, 2015). While sharing broadly similar characteristics, as we discuss below, the three towns also have distinct features.

Since 2011, local authorities in England have received specific funding to address CSE following lobbying from the children's charity, Barnardo's (Department for Education, 2011). The Tackling Child Sexual Exploitation Progress Report (Home Office, 2017) stated that £14 million of additional funding was made available to provide support for victims and survivors of sexual abuse between 2015 and 2017. In the three towns where we conducted focus groups, models of addressing CSE are characterised by partnerships between police and local safeguarding children's boards, working with a range of social care agencies, and all three areas have multi-agency, information sharing fora.

### 1.1.2 | South east town (SET)

London drug gangs have extended their reach to SET via "county lines", grooming and criminally exploiting children and vulnerable adults to move drugs and money (Coomber & Moyle, 2017). In addition to being described as a particular "hotspot" for CSE by the local police, SET is a centre for drug gangs who use similar tactics as CSE perpetrators to groom young people to traffic and sell drugs. Following the collapse of a CSE trial the local police response to CSE was reviewed in 2011. A multi-agency Sexual Exploitation Group for practitioners meets once a month to share information and discuss potential CSE cases. The local Police Child Exploitation team now takes responsibility for high risk CSE investigations and local police district Missing Child Exploitation Teams take on cases that are deemed lower risk. An early intervention project, the SET Task Force, is a co-located multi-agency, police-led team that seeks to intervene in complex cases including CSE and criminal gang exploitation across the local authority area. Public health money has funded a project providing psychological and social support to young people who are deemed vulnerable to criminal gangs or CSE.

### 1.1.3 | North west town (NWT)

NWT features many indicators of poverty and disadvantage including high rates of teenage pregnancy, one of the highest alcohol related death rates in England and one of the highest rates of looked after children in the country. Drug gangs from large Northern cities operate in NWT and our focus group practitioners referred to the grooming and exploitation of young people by CSE perpetrators and by drug gangs seeking to recruit young people to traffic

drugs and for sexual exploitation. A multi-agency CSE team has been operating since 2008. The local response to CSE involves a dedicated, co-located, multidisciplinary team managed by specially trained police officers alongside health, education and social care staff that is a point of contact for other agencies for CSE-related incidents and a source of support to CSE victims and their families. The team—which brings together practitioners from licensing, social services, education and police—aims to root out and arrest abusers before they do serious harm and protect children and young people from exploiters. CSE cases are discussed through the MASH and as part of the county-wide CSE strategy. The local SCB has a CSE sub-group that develops and monitors action plans for the CSE strategy and reports on outcomes.

#### 1.1.4 | South west town (SWT)

In 2015, SWT ranked fifth in the country for people receiving Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) for a drug problem. According to End Child Poverty (2019) just under one third (27%) of children in the town live in poverty. The county's SCB has created the role of dedicated CSE/Missing Coordinator to organise the multi-agency response to CSE. Practitioners from a range of agencies share information about victims, peers and perpetrators in "complex strategy meetings" and at bimonthly West of England CSE Networking meetings. The partnership encompasses local authorities, children's services, education, police, specialist youth workers, health specialists (particularly sexual health) and the voluntary sector (e.g., Parents against Child Sexual Exploitation). SWTs strategic overview of CSE is provided by the Sexual Exploitation and Missing Subgroup of the local SCB. Key strategic objectives include: identifying those at risk of or experiencing sexual exploitation and those who sexually exploit; prevention of harm for children, young people and vulnerable adults who are at risk of or experiencing sexual exploitation; safeguarding and supporting all those identified as being at risk of or experiencing sexual exploitation and to investigate, disrupt and prosecute perpetrators of sexual exploitation.

### 1.2 | Aims

There is currently a poor understanding of the relationship between CSE, substance use and youth transitions in areas of specific disadvantage and how contexts, risk factors and behaviours interact with each other (Shildrick, 2016). Sociological investigation is needed into how young people's recreational drug use, their risk taking and risk avoiding behaviours and the context in which this takes place may make them more or less vulnerable either to sexual exploitation, or to broader forms of exploitation, including by gangs (Beckett et al., 2013). In seeking to examine CSE practitioners' understandings of the complexities in grooming, sexual and other forms of exploitation in three English coastal towns this study contributes to an emerging sociological literature (Brown, 2017; Hallett, 2016, 2017) that explores the contexts of CSE.

## 2 | METHODOLOGY

### 2.1 | Participants

To explore these questions from the perspective of practitioners involved in CSE multiagency networks, four focus groups took place with 36 practitioners and stakeholders in SET ( $N = 12$ ), SWT ( $N = 8$ ) and NWT ( $N = 16$ ) between September 2017 and January 2018. Focus groups were considered an appropriate way to involve a range of different practitioners and to generate data pertaining to their experiences of factors influencing CSE in their locality (Kitzinger, 2005), not least because the approach models multi-agency forums in which local discussion about CSE

policy and practice is already discussed. The practitioner make-up of the focus groups varied in each area (see Table 1) and included dedicated CSE police officers, Missing Persons Unit coordinators, nurses, social workers, young people's substance misuse workers, youth workers and staff from pupil referral units.

The focus group topic guide included questions that aimed to identify participants' understanding of the local features and distinct characteristics of CSE; the typical characteristic of young people who experience and are at risk of sexual and other forms of criminal exploitation and the characteristics of perpetrators and forms of perpetration. In order to explore participants' understandings of the relationship between substance use and CSE, questions were asked about whether and how substances and substance use is involved in CSE, how and whether young people's leisure activities and leisure spaces are involved in CSE, the characteristics of local drug markets, and the strategies in place locally to address CSE.

## 2.2 | Procedure and data analysis

In the run up to the focus groups one member of the research team visited each of the three areas for a day in order to meet with local safeguarding leads. These meetings offered the opportunity to introduce and discuss the research with those professionals leading multiagency partnerships and to glean some important initial understandings about the local context and approach to CSE. This initial work proved helpful in building rapport within the focus groups, as researchers were able to demonstrate some understanding of the local context and situation.

In SET the focus groups took place in a group room in one of the services. In NWT, the focus group took place in a meeting room of the police station where the multi-agency team are based. In SWT the focus groups took place in the town hall. Focus groups lasted between 60 and 90 min. Written information sheets were provided to all participants, and written consent was taken in all cases. The information sheets confirmed that no names would be used in the reporting of the findings, and we subsequently decided not to use the names of the towns, which are the focus of the study.

All focus groups were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. One member of the research team (MB) attended all four focus groups, took notes and transcribed each focus group discussion. PR and AR developed a

**TABLE 1** Practitioners ( $N = 36$ ) involved in focus groups by area

Practitioner role	South east town	North west town	South west town
Safeguarding board members			1
Police officers	1	6	
Missing persons unit coordinators		1	1
Nurses/mental health nurses	1	3	
Social workers	2	5	2
Young people's substance misuse workers	4		
Adolescent wellbeing service workers	1		
Early help service workers	1		
Youth workers	1		
Pupil referral unit staff	1		
Voluntary sector organization - CSE			2
Further education college officer			1
Licensing manager			1
Administrative officer		1	
Total	$N = 12$	$N = 16$	$N = 8$

thematic coding (Braun & Clarke, 2006) frame based on the topics discussed in the groups and coded the transcripts with the aid of the software package NVivo. This process involved reviewing each transcript line by line and electronically coding segments of text. PR and AR coded the first two transcripts together in order to identify any anomalies in the coding system. After this, the coding frame was modified following joint consultation and coding anomalies were discussed to ensure consistency. Then, the other two focus groups were coded separately. In this article, we focus on four themes that emerged as key ways through, which practitioners explained CSE and other forms of exploitation: *CSE practitioners' perspectives on CSE vulnerability*; *Discrepancy between young people's and practitioners' views of 'exploitation'*; *Pull factors—incentives as part of exploitation*; and *How CSE perpetrators make and develop contact with young people*.

### 3 | RESULTS

#### 3.1 | Practitioners perspectives on CSE vulnerability

Practitioners in all three areas were keen to convey that all young people can be at risk of CSE, and, in common with the advice in the Working Together document (Department for Education, 2018), that assessment tools are insufficient in isolation to identify CSE risk, not least because they can produce false positives, mis-identifying young people as victims of CSE. This is because some of the factors used to identify risks for CSE include behaviors that are common to youth transitions and general risk taking in adolescence. Practitioners in SET and SWT gave examples of middleclass children who were targeted for “grooming” by drug gangs. In SET, practitioners described how drug gangs sought to recruit “clean skins” (with no offending history) including “grammar school students” with their own issues of self-esteem and/or family dysfunction who could become “indebted” financially to “drug dealers” and subsequently exploited:

*“I can think of a young person who was from an affluent family, but was almost very overly-controlled, and loved and supported, but pushed a lot about that ... and they weren't given any freedom. Self-esteem comes into it massively though ... young people with really, really low self-esteem and self-worth, no matter what that family background is.”* (SWT, Project Worker, Children's Charity)

*“There are peer groomers in the school – and this does include grammar schools and middle class kids with parents who are business people – the peer groomers will befriend them and give them free cannabis and a few weeks later say 'my boss man outside wants £120 plus interest and if you don't pay it, we'll send a hitter down from London’”* (SET, Police Inspector Manager, Taskforce)

Reference here to 'peer groomers' acknowledges the complex role that young people's networks can play in normalising sexual exploitation (Firmin, Warrington, & Pearce, 2016). There was consensus across different practitioner groups in all three areas concerning the profile of those young people most vulnerable to CSE. These were young people whose “vulnerabilities” and “naivety” made it more likely that they would be drawn in by adults who might seek to exploit them, making them vulnerable both to CSE victimization and other forms of exploitation. Such vulnerabilities included growing up in poverty, living in poor quality accommodation (for example, HMOs where families shared bathrooms with other residents), having learning disabilities and/or attending schools and colleges for students with specific educational needs

The views expressed by CSE practitioners mirror those in a report by the Children's Society (Turner et al. 2019, p. 27), which provides a summary of the main factors that contribute to children and young people becoming exploited, criminally or in other ways. These include: the *child's own vulnerability*, for example having learning difficulties or simply through being a child; *vulnerability created by society*, for example poverty, experiences of discrimination, lack

of opportunities for young people or an inability to access education; the *presence or lack of protective factors in child's life*, including the support a child can get from their family or local community; or the *proximity or access a perpetrator has to a child*. That report identified being a "looked after" child as something which created specific elements of vulnerability. However, this was an issue which generated equivocation in our focus groups. Some practitioners identified being 'looked after' as something, which made young people more vulnerable, identifying examples of young people from care who had been victims of CSE. Others indicated that children and young people in residential and foster care sometimes had important protective elements in their lives, for example, because they were living with adults who expressed an interest in them and who were required to report children missing as matter of course (Department of Education, 2014). However, the nine young people who took part in Hallett's (2017) study nearly all of whom had experience of being "looked after", described forming relationships that were deemed exploitative, in the absence of caring adult relationships (Hallett, 2017). Practitioners in our study suggested that young people who had been 'looked after' often became most vulnerable to exploitation once they became 18 when they were expected to live independently, with minimal support and often in poor quality accommodation. Practitioners noted the importance of the change in legal duties at this age, which affected the forms of service involvement and the possibility of professionals being able to provide support. Although it is a statutory requirement for English local authorities to place looked after children and young people close to home (Department for Communities, Schools and Families, 2010), low housing costs in English coastal towns have created a market in children's social care that make residential children's homes in coastal towns financially attractive for metropolitan local authorities. A recent inspection report (OFSTED, 2014) tracked the experience of 54 children and young people who were placed "out of area" in nine English local authorities, finding that their life experiences often made them especially vulnerable to CSE and other forms of exploitation.

Several practitioners described regularly coming across families with "neglectful", "disinterested" parents often with problematic substance use, who were seemingly unable to provide "basic care", "support" or "interest in the lives of their children". There was a clear suggestion that many young people at risk of CSE are victims of parental neglect prior to becoming victims of CSE. There were large differences in the ways practitioners emphasised these issues, with some attaching more blame to parents and others placing more emphasis on structural or personal issues such as "poor" housing, substance use, or mental health, which might lead to parents taking their "eye off the ball". The latter presentations described how depleted personal resources and the reduced availability of local services had a disproportionate effect on vulnerable young people. However, these different presentations all captured a belief amongst practitioners that living in depleted home environments generated important push factors, which were prominent risks for CSE:

*"There's nothing in the flat, there's no TV, there's very little food, no entertainment, the parents aren't interested, they've got their own drink and drug problem. You can't blame the child for going out and seeking something else."* (NWT, Police Officer)

*"The families that we're working with ... they're sharing a bathroom with another family, haven't got a secure doorway... they're living in situations where they're nowhere near touching [having their] ... basic needs met."* (SET, Early Help Manager)

Parental substance use was another factor that could contribute to a young person's sense that their parent(s) were not interested in them, and hence prompt searches for interests outside the home. This is likely to be closely associated with the known alcohol and drug problems in the three areas:

*"The kids are coming home, mum's pissed up, dinner's not ready. Who wants to stay at home? 'she's already screaming at me' and out they go. It is a massive impact."* (NWT, CSE Specialist Service—Education Officer)

Other practitioners referred to events in young people's lives, including the death of a parent in early childhood, being estranged from a parent, or the experience of being "looked after" by the state, which might make them more

vulnerable to CSE victimization or other forms of exploitation, such as being groomed as drug couriers for metropolitan gangs:

*Quite a few of my young people [have] a huge sense of not belonging anywhere, and issues around their identity and understanding where they've come from. A couple of mine have had a parent who's passed away at quite an early age. Quite a lot of young people have been Looked After, or there's been an adoption breakdown (SWT, Project Worker-Children's Charity)*

### 3.2 | Discrepancy between young people's and practitioners' views of "exploitation"

A common theme that has emerged from previous research into CSE is the discrepancy in how young people view the early phases of their relationships with perpetrators, which often contrast considerably with the views of practitioners and family members (Gilligan, 2016). In a study of young people engaged with a CSE project, Gilligan (2016) found that in the early stages of engagement with the project, young people were often resistant to their 'relationships' being described as exploitative. Gilligan (2016, p. 121) argues that "such responses serve to emphasise the complexities involved in interactions between practitioners and young people in the context of CSE". These findings were echoed in our focus groups where practitioners referred to relationships between teenage girls and older men or teenage boys and older women which they saw as "risky" and "inappropriate" whilst recognising that young people very often did not share these views:

*"I would say there's still quite a lot of young people who do not see themselves as being exploited." (SWT, Project Worker - Children's Charity)*

*"The issues we've found, especially in social care, is that culturally, it's not unusual for girls - teenage girls - to be in relationships with older men. ... That seems to be accepted by some parents of these girls - okay they're 14/15 and they've got a 19/20-year-old boyfriend. ... For us, is obviously an issue. We're never gonna say that that's okay." (SET, Social Worker)*

The practitioners in our study recognised that there was frequently a mismatch between their own perspective of young people's sexual relationships with adults (as "inappropriate" or "exploitative") and those of young people themselves. This finding is also highlighted by Hallett (2017), in her study that represents the views of young people who had experienced CSE alongside the views of social care practitioners in South Wales. Hallett (2017) argues that discrepancies in perspectives arise in part because of the narrow definitions of child sexual exploitation that is employed by professionals (associated with the language of "grooming" and the notion of organised abuse) that does not capture the more mundane and every day ways in which young people may be, in the words of Hallett's participants, "used" and "taken advantage of". Further, Hallett argues, discrepancies between the perspectives of CSE of professionals and young people, arise as a result of professionals' failure to acknowledge that, although they are constrained by limited choices, young people do exercise choices to engage in sex with adults. As Weston and Mythen (2020 p.20) observe in relation to practitioners involved in CSE awareness raising interventions "... the cultural contexts and lifeworlds which young people are bound up in" can all too easily "appear somewhat distant from and to those [adults] involved". In a similar vein, Hallett (2017) argues that, at the heart of this problematic, is the ambiguous category of "youth", that is "distinct from childhood yet lodged somewhere between it and adulthood" (Hallett, 2017, p. 29). In our study, practitioners recognised that whilst the language of "gang membership" and "sexual exploitation" is part of the practitioner lexicon in CSE, most young people did not recognise or use such language to describe their own situations or relationships. Practitioners described that in discussions with young people behaviors known to be common to gang activity are not seen or viewed as gang type relationships by young people. This is

difficult for practitioners who must work hard to generate trusting relationships, to define an appropriate approach to their involvement, but who are also aware that gangs and CSE are very closely linked:

*"I don't think they're always seen as gangs in SWT, a lot of time it's like, 'oh no, they're just a group of friends', but actually, when you compare it to say a (South West City) gang, it's exactly the same behaviors." (SWT, Project Worker – Children's Charity)*

While there was an awareness among practitioners that any risk taking behavior might lead young people to be considered at risk of CSE, they emphasised that CSE risk *"doesn't exist in isolation"* and that concerns related to CSE are rarely the only risk facing the young people with whom they work:

*"We met with a young person yesterday and she is a cannabis and cocaine user. She was very open that she smoked with her boyfriend. He gets it for free because he does jobs. We phone the Task Force just to get the name – did that partnership working – but she doesn't see that she's at any kind of risk. She doesn't see that he's in a gang, and she could potentially be pulled into that because [she says] he would never make her do anything that she doesn't want to do." (SET, Early Help)*

### 3.3 | How CSE perpetrators make and develop contact with young people

Practitioners in all three areas consistently argued that the received idea of groups of male perpetrators working together in organised ways to exploit young women was inaccurate and unhelpful in describing the context of CSE they were working with. They also described CSE as quite a fluid and changing problem with no single local manifestation. However, participants in NWT did describe a particular profile of many of their current offenders:

*"In [NWT], obviously the main offenders are like white males under 30, which kind of goes against ... what the general public think are CSE perpetrators... Like [social worker] was saying before, a lot of perpetrators at the moment are around 17, 18, 19 [years of age] not like the old people that people picture who are stuck behind a computer at home." (NWT, Police—CSE Specialist Team)*

Practitioners in all areas described that where offenders did work together in exploiting young people, it was often based on existing relationships taking the form of, for example, a father and son inviting young women to gatherings in their home, or groups of existing male friends inviting younger women to parties. This can make it quite difficult for practitioners to distinguish clearly between those social settings in which young people may be at risk and those that are part of the normal realm of informal teenage socialising and pleasure seeking, which can involve young people of different ages. Historically, practitioners commented that young women have often found it easier to access venues in the night-time economy at younger ages than young men, leading to interactions with males older than themselves. Gatherings of young people on the beach or in town centres were referred to as *"risky sites"* as were *"parties"* taking place in hotels and guest houses in SET and NWT to which young people are invited by older men:

*"We've had issues with hotels where they've allowed groups of young people under 18 in with no checks and no adult to stay. Where there has been parties offered at the hotel, where young children under 16 have frequented as well, so... we do have some venues that are a concern. We do have a problem – particularly before summer we had a big issue with a lot – with large groups of people congregating in town and part of that group of young people were adults that we knew to be of concern." (NWT, Social worker – CSE Specialist Team)*

Participants in all three areas described how cuts in youth services had meant that there were few legitimate spaces for young people to gather. In SWT for example, a disused building where young people congregated in the town centre was reported to have been closed off by the council. A dispersal order had also been issued for the shelter outside a supermarket where young people in SWT gathered, which was reported to be somewhere drug dealing had taken place, and its proximity to the supermarket providing a cheap source of alcohol. The threat posed by CSE may provide an impetus for the surveillance and disruption of gatherings of young people who, as Brown (2019) argued, are seen both as risky as well as *at risk*. The point is that young people who engage in any unsupervised activity can potentially become the object of risk management on the basis of practitioner concerns, which all too easily seeks to “responsibilize young people” on the basis of judgements formed in relation to “inflexible demarcation lines” (Weston & Mythen, 2020, p. 1). Most practitioners in our study sought to convey that they were keen not to overreact to the dangers attached to young people’s associations and were aware of the ways in which structural factors contributed to these situations. For example, practitioners were keen to convey that CSE is not separate from the broader picture of structural disadvantage, vulnerability, and exploitation:

*“[And what we see is] there’s a disproportionate effect of resources and energy going into older people – and I’m not saying that’s wrong, but young people don’t feel heard here. ... I’m seeing a bit more despair in the kids.”* (SET, Early Help Manager)

All practitioner groups in all three areas reported that social media was a key mechanism by which CSE perpetrators made initial contact with young people through networking websites and mobile messaging applications such as SnapChat, Instagram, WhatsApp, Ask, Tinder and Facebook (Kloess, Beech, & Harkins, 2014). In the vast majority of cases, some networks already existed between victims and potential victims by virtue of living in the same areas, attending the same school or colleges and/or other forms of affiliation such as friendship networks. Practitioners sought to convey that in most cases these associations existed between potential victims more often than offenders. In NWT, police officers gave an example of a case in which teenage girls attending a school for students with learning difficulties were being groomed, initially through Facebook, by a number of different young male perpetrators, some of whom also knew each other.

Many practitioners suggested there is often a naivety on the part of young people who may find initial online contact from older men via social media flattering, enjoying the interest and attention. Practitioners’ accounts suggest that, at this point, CSE grooming relations are often attractive to young people and are characteristically not seen as threatening. In SWT, practitioners described how simply living on a particular housing estate or having Facebook friends may make young people vulnerable to contact with CSE perpetrators who also live on the estate and who use social media to infiltrate friendship groups of young people:

*“All it takes is one name, ‘oh I know so-and-so’, ‘oh I know so-and-so, and so-and-so knows so-and-so’ and that’s it.”* (SWT, Team leader—Looked After Children)

*“These girls just see it as exciting or funny that they’re being shown attention by an older male. In my case, it’s the early twenties – and at school, they just share stories, ‘oh have you seen this guy’ and you know, and all through social media and Facebook.”* (NWT, Police Inspector)

However, in SET a number of practitioners gave examples of forms of social media used by young men and women to initiate contact with older men independently. Despite being aware that this was taking place, practitioners described how these young people were often “*off the radar*” of all practitioner groups working around CSE. Examples of the platforms used by young people included Sugar Daddy, where young women can meet older men and applications for selling male sex. One staff member explained that older men must pay to go on the Sugar Daddy website, which has a rating system where men are coded amber, green, or red:

*"In terms of Sugar Daddy and stuff, I mean that is so specific. My experience of that is that those young women who are using those sites, they are not connected to anybody else. It's one or two girls who are aware that they have a commodity."* (SET, Social worker)

Practitioners did recognise that in their use of such dating websites and apps, young people exercise agency in seeking out relationships with adults with whom some go on to have sexual relationships. The range of examples emphasises the heterogeneity of young people's decisions and the complexities and diversity of sexually exploitive relationships. The very wide range of personal, psychological, family, environmental and technological factors that practitioners described making young people vulnerable both to CSE and to drug gang grooming, emphasises the complex task involved for multiagency teams in identifying grooming.

### 3.4 | Pull factors—Incentives as part of exploitation

While drugs, alcohol and other material goods are recognised as mechanisms used in grooming, they were not necessarily perceived by staff to be the only or main incentives for young people in their initiation into exploitative relationships. Fast food restaurants were identified as places where some adults initiated meetings with young people who were often there because of access to affordable food and drink as well as free Wi-Fi. Practitioners in all three areas thought fast food restaurants were sometimes targeted by gang members to recruit young people to traffic drugs and by some CSE perpetrators for sexual exploitation. In SWT, we were told about younger children and in SET young people with learning disabilities who had been groomed initially with food items such as hamburgers and milkshakes:

*"You have a team of three come down from London and sit outside a fast food outlet, observe for an hour through the window, identify their targets and go in and groom them with food."* (SET, Taskforce Manager - Police Inspector)

While empirical research with young people who have experienced CSE has suggested that young people's needs for money and or substances may influence their decisions to exchange sex (Hallett, 2017), practitioners in NWT emphasised that some young people were largely drawn to adult interest and attention, which they lacked in their wider lives. As such, exploitation did not rely upon gifts of drugs or fast food:

*"[It] is the time, attention - the victim is actually seeking that aren't they? If they get that in return, they will form that relationship."* (NWT, Nurse)

In the SET focus group however, staff described how drug gangs offered some young people "free cannabis" in exchange for them acting as couriers or street level dealers. In SWT, drugs were also involved in CSE grooming relations:

*"The young people that I've supported, it's wanting to go to a party, have fun - there's drugs and alcohol on offer there - and the perpetrators purely just want them to get as much off their face as possible, and then sexually assault them."* (SWT, Project Worker Children's Charity)

In these accounts, drugs are described as being used in the grooming and exploitation of young people including by "drug gangs", although the practitioners sought to clarify that gangs were not responsible for the majority of CSE activity in these three areas. Practitioners referred to the use of drugs in CSE both to lure young people as part of the grooming process and to intoxicate young people prior to their sexual assault. While the ulterior motive of CSE

perpetrators and gang members is not in question, it is important to recognise that in many cases young people are also seeking out substances of their own volition in order to have fun with their friends, whereas some practitioner accounts too readily link all substance use with problems (such as, boredom or low self-esteem). These representations may fail to register young people's own agency and interest in normalised activities related to accessing drugs and alcohol and in becoming intoxicated (Brown, 2019; Hallett, 2017; Williams, 2013, 2015). As Coomber (2006) notes, accounts of young people's drug use too readily draw on *drug pusher myths*. In order for drugs and/or alcohol to work as incentives in grooming relationships, young people must at the very least have an interest in using them in the first place. We know that many young people engage in recreational substance use behaviors, and that it is more likely that those who are tempted to take on—or, in some cases even aspire to—roles in drug supply/ delivery are particularly vulnerable to drug gang exploitation.

## 4 | CONCLUSIONS

In the last decade, increased national and international attention has made CSE a high-profile public issue demanding new forms of policy and practice response. In England, the need to provide contextually relevant safeguarding for CSE (Firmin, 2017; Firmin et al., 2016) has incurred new and unexpected costs for local authorities at a time when central government funding for public services has reduced significantly. In line with government advice (Department for Education, 2017), multiagency collaboration, cooperation, decision making, and information sharing was the norm in all three English towns, which are the focus of this research. The very broad range of practitioners involved in the focus groups reflects that CSE is a complex range of interconnected issues, which can manifest quite differently in different places as well as differently in the same place over time. Practitioners are keen to convey that there is a significant gap between media portrayals about those who are victims and perpetrators of CSE offences, and the realities involved in understanding and addressing these issues in pragmatic ways on the ground.

All practitioners in all three areas were clear that many of the issues most likely to make young people vulnerable to CSE are complex and entrenched structural issues, which relate to the long-term economic decline of some sea-side towns (as well as other areas) and the concentration of different vulnerable and marginalised population groups in certain areas. So, for example, whilst a few practitioners identified the inevitable effect of parental “disinterest” on CSE vulnerability, many more sought to set parental neglect in the context of poor-quality housing, limited financial and social support and personal issues related to mental and physical health and welfare. Some practitioners explicitly identified the ways in which long-term structural issues, deficits in education and youth service provision and related support, and reduced welfare provision, were having a disproportionate effect on vulnerable young people locally.

Our study focused on the views of CSE practitioners rather than young people themselves, providing important insights into their understandings of CSE. These findings build on existing research and echo the range of views expressed by young people who had experienced CSE, interviewed for studies that have combined analysis of policy with interviews with young people and practitioners (Brown, 2017; Hallett, 2017). In defining an appropriate approach to their work, professionals recognise that attempts by young people in coastal towns to exercise agency and choice in how they have fun, where they go, the substances they use or do not use, inevitably interact with adult-led disruption measures intended to protect them from harm such as closing down disused buildings, preventing beach parties and parties held in hotels. The challenge for professionals is to identify and disrupt exploitative relationships with predatory adults without making young people feel that they are subject to unnecessary forms of surveillance, which problematise what they often see as the pursuit of normal youthful pleasures. This is especially difficult given that in many of these areas community youth services have been decimated since 2010, removing important spaces for young people to take part in community life, as well as the interest and informal support of adult youth workers. CSE practitioners are acutely aware of young people's suspicion of “practitioner curiosity”, and their concern with being objects of concern, rather than subjects with their own wants, wishes, and desires

(Hallett, 2016; Lefevre, Hickle, Luckock, & Ruch, 2017). However, practitioners must also wrestle with a recognition that naivety and inexperience often contribute to risk which makes it very difficult for practitioners to define an appropriate approach.

Our study illustrates that social media has opened up new modes of communication both between groups of young people and between young people and adults who may seek to exploit them. In the same way that the awareness of CSE in areas of social disadvantage has produced concern amongst police and social care practitioners about social gatherings where young people may be targeted for exploitation, the involvement of new technologies and social media in exploitative relationships means that unregulated online spaces and social networks are also deemed risky, especially as some young people can find initial online contact from older men flattering (Kloess et al., 2014). The very wide range of social, personal, psychological, family, environmental, and technological factors that make young people vulnerable to CSE demonstrates the complexity of defining and designing appropriate responses. Our research highlights the need for spaces in which young people can both socialise safely and access information and support outside their families. Responding to CSE and the extrafamilial risks that young people can be subject to requires approaches that balance safeguarding with the recognition that risk taking is an inevitable part of youth transitions.

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## ETHICAL APPROVAL

Ethical approval for this study was provided by King's College, London, research ethics committee (MR/16/17-1,300).

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no potential conflict of interest.

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