CHILD CRIMINAL EXPLOITATION

From Contextual to Criminal Harm:
Young People's Perceptions
and Experiences of Child
Criminal Exploitation (CCE)
in Northern Ireland

The Executive
Programme on
Paramilitarism &
Organised Crime

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Child Criminal Exploitation

Child criminal exploitation (CCE) has become an increasing policy priority in many parts of the UK over the last decade (Brewster et al., 2021). Despite having no legislative footing (Maxwell et al., 2019), aspects of its harms are covered under a number of legislative provisions, including the Modern Slavery Act (2015) and the Children (Northern Ireland) Order (1995). Criminal exploitation is broadly defined as the incitement, coercion and/or manipulation of children and young people into criminal activity (Baidawi, Sheehan and Flynn, 2020), including in cases where children and young people believe that their behaviours are consensual (Maxwell et al., 2019). Child criminal exploitation (CCE) has been characterised as a form of 'child abuse' given the mechanisms at play and its potential impact (NSPCC, 2020). Indeed, child criminal exploitation is a manifestation of violence which has been defined by the World Health Organisation as:

"The intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself of another person, or against a group or community that either results in, or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment, or deprivation." (Krug et al., 2002)

Taking this well-established definition, the practices of child criminal exploitation are violent insofar as those working alone or in concert knowingly influence children and/or young people to engage in potentially criminal behaviours. This definition also recognises the harm that can be caused through coercion. Indeed, the 'business model' of criminal exploitation is inherently violent, with compliance often assured via the threat of physical harm, and defiance met with brutality and injury (UK Children's Commissioner, 2019). Vulnerability to criminal exploitation does not tend to exist in a vacuum but is facilitated by nested challenges that exist within the social ecology of children and young people.

Vulnerability to child criminal exploitation and social ecologies of harm

Studies have demonstrated the multi-level 'social ecologies of harm', with risk and protective factors across the ecology interacting to contribute to specific outcomes. Building on the work of Bronfenbrenner (1979), there has been a burgeoning of studies from multiple sectors and disciplines showing that some of those young people most vulnerable to child criminal exploitation are youth who experience difficulties, in many ways and across multiple social systems (Beaglehole and Yach, 2003; Holmes, 2021). These ecologies of harm within the state, community, school, and family systems can contribute towards both a cumulative and a dose-response effect (Duffy et al., 2021). Similarly, any strategy to reduce exposure and/or harm should understand and take account of these harm inducing contexts across multiple systems and develop a contextual lens through which to respond (Firmin, 2020).

At the broadest level, the relationship between state and community may be at least partially predictive of the prevalence and clustering of serious and organised crime (Walsh, 2021). The context can be conducive to the development and sustaining of criminal exploitative practices. For example, Murray (2006) points out that the way that the police 'police' varies temporally and spatially. Murray refers to an approach he terms 'traditional policing', which he posits creates distance between communities and the justice system. Within the context of this style of policing, the principles of prevention become of lesser importance, as confidence is reduced, information is less likely to be shared, and collectively this reinforces the hand of criminal groups. In essence, those most at risk of harm are least likely to have the confidence to invoke the law. Cooney (1997) suggested that many of those most vulnerable to threat do not invoke the law.

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Through experience, their frustrations with lawful processes have led them to discount legal means of satisfaction, such that, Cooney argues, many young men instead develop their own systems of control, dominated by status and respect. If someone pushes you around, insults you or your family, is physically aggressive (or threatens violence towards you), or steals from you, then there is a need to protect (or at least portray an image of protecting) yourself without the support of legal authorities. This extends beyond a practical application of violence. Aggression becomes both instrumental (a means of achieving something) and expressive (a cultural expression that carries its own meaning within a given context) (Blok, 2000).

In those areas where organised criminal gangs operate, they are characterised as experiencing elevated rates of multiple deprivation (Bateman, 2017) and being more violent than other communities (Windle et al., 2020). Whilst the criminogenic effects of such strains are well established (see for example Agnew, 1992), systematic reviews have illustrated how living in violent contexts can contribute towards greater acceptance of violence and aggression as normal behaviours, and, at the same time, minimise the harm caused to victims (Fowler et al., 2009). Indeed, they found that living in violent environments not only elevates trauma responses in individuals (such as being hyper-aroused to threats and increased aggressive responses) (Dodd et al., 2022), but also contributes towards increasingly violent and criminal behaviours among victims as they find ways of coping (Agnew, 1992; Kar, 2019). General Strain Theory (Agnew, 1992) posits that where a tension exists between socially endorsed values, beliefs, norms and expectations and the legitimate means of achieving them, this can lead to negative emotions and pressure to engage in maladaptive or 'criminal coping' (Baron, 2004). Violent and criminal norms are often reinforced through intimate and personal relationships, particularly when family members are actively engaged in, or victims of similar criminality and/or coercion (Akers and Sellers, 2004; Falconer, Casale and Kuo, 2020). Indeed, in those communities most affected, some suggest that violent and criminal behaviour can be instrumental in increasing a sense of safety, and, in the absence of 'capable guardians' (Maxwell et al., 2019), exploitative adults provide the promise of belonging and protection.

Within the family system, risks associated with familial violence, abuse, family functioning, parental mental health and entry into care are now well established, and contribute towards a range of deleterious outcomes (Duffy et al., 2021), including those associated with violence and affiliation with peer groups engaged in other criminal behaviours (Coomber and Moyle, 2018; Shaw and Greenhow, 2019). From this perspective, childhood trauma, as well as a felt lack of belonging and support, might elevate vulnerability to criminal harm (Andell and Pitts, 2017; Walsh, 2019; Falconer, Casale and Kuo, 2020; Walsh, 2022). Furthermore, living in a context where the parent or caregiver are themselves involved in, or vulnerable to, violence and criminality (Clarke, 2019) may elevate the risk of a child or young person becoming engaged in criminally exploitative practices themselves. Exposure to community and peer violence places some young people at greater risk of interfacing with, and indeed joining in with, antisocial, violent and even (loosely) organised criminal networks (Fowler et al., 2009; Naughton, Redmond and O'Meara-Daly, 2022).

At a formal education level, academic engagement and attainment are predictive of better outcomes and may even buffer against the wider systemic risks in communities (Craig et al., 2017). Previous studies in Northern Ireland have shown that boys and young men are at particular risk of disengaging from the formal education process (Harland and McCready, 2012). Where tensions exist between home and school, truancy is common and school disciplinary practice not only contributes towards greater time spent unsupervised in the community but also academic underachievement (Henggeler et al., 1997). It is well documented that for these young people, individual optimism, hope for the future, and self-efficacy are all reduced (Maruna and Mann, 2019), and may contribute to the wider crime inducing effects of the social ecology (Maxwell and Corliss, 2020). For youth not engaged in education, employment or training, informal education or youth services can buffer these effects, and even help to reverse the impact of educational underachievement through signposting and the facilitation of vocational accreditation. Further, the presence of effective youth services in the community can mitigate against the criminogenic effects of other family and community factors (APPG, 2020). The youth worker can be a positive role model, providing much needed support in the absence of other social supports, and the youth centre can provide refuge in contexts that are dangerous (Thapar, 2021). However, much has been made of the cuts to youth services in England and Wales, with reductions in spending due to austerity and closure of services due to Covid-19 being correlated with recent increases in serious youth violence (APPG, 2020; Ellis et al., 2021).

Business models

Whilst criminal enterprises can be agile, understanding the fundamental 'business models' which provide the frameworks within which actors operate, provides insights and opportunities for prevention. The processes underlying exploitation are often characterised as complex and multi-level. In one of a limited number of reviews, Densley (2014) suggested that these networks operate at multiple levels, with a higher level or inner circle directing the activities of a middle level who in turn exert influence and direct the activities of a lower level of members, often children and young people.

In the context of England, the rise of one model of exploitation known as 'county lines' has garnered significant media, policy and academic attention (Stone, 2018). This specific form of CCE emerged from a saturation of drugs in the larger cities and a relatively untapped market in the suburban and rural areas (Windle and Briggs, 2015; Maxwell et al., 2019). The aim of these networks is primarily material gain, operationalised in part through the exploitation of vulnerable children and young people. County-lines is a specific model that relies on a drug distribution network (Brewster et al., 2021) where gangs contribute to the supply of illicit substances, moving them out of large urban areas and into smaller towns and coastal areas (Caluori, 2020). Operationally, organised criminal network members maintain a 'list' of drug users and use a 'deal line' to facilitate a supply. That supply line is fed by children, young people and vulnerable adults (Coomber and Moyle, 2018).

The lure of money may induce some young people to steal, store illicit goods/materials; and/or supply/transport drugs (Rees, 2011; Baidawi, Sheehan and Flynn, 2020; Brewster et al., 2021), particularly in areas with high economic strain. However, young people are also motivated to engage in potentially criminal behaviours in the face of violent threats. As outlined in the opening paragraphs, criminal exploitation is itself inherently violent. Indeed, the concept of the criminal exploitation of young people has become integral to the government's Serious Violence Strategy (UK Government, 2018). Young people can also find themselves in 'debt bondage' (Maxwell et al., 2019), with few feasible options other than to 'pay-off' gang determined debts for fear of personal, peer, or even familial harm (Wigmore, 2018).

These processes are not homogenous, and whilst these 'motivators' can generally fall into the categories of **safety, status and belonging**, it also appears that the specific activities are often differentiated by gender. For example, girls and young women are more likely to be at risk of sexual exploitation (Moyle, 2019; Robinson, 2019), with some evidence that this may lead to increased criminal exploitation (Baidawi, Sheehan and Flynn, 2020).

Indeed, despite their relatively siloed empirical and policy contexts, the evidence suggests that the links between sexual and criminal exploitation of children and young people are more intimate than current policy contexts acknowledge (Maxwell et al., 2019). Boys and young men on the other hand are more likely to be directly engaged in the disruption and supply of drugs, as well as a plethora of other violent and intimidatory behaviours (Wedlock and Melina, 2020).

The term 'business model' is therefore more than conceptual - it is instructive. It aids in understanding the variation in crime being facilitated, the inception of the networks, and the processes and adaptations made to delivery.

The current study

The Northern Ireland Executive is committed to giving all children the best start in life. The NI Children and Young People's Strategy 2020-2030 (DE, 2021) aims to improve the well-being of all children and young people by delivering positive long-lasting outcomes. The strategy has been developed in the context of the Children's Services Co-operation Act (NI) 2015 (CSCA). The Act defines the well-being of children and young people with respect to eight characteristics, including: physical and mental health; living in safety and with stability; learning and achievement; economic and environmental well-being; the enjoyment of play and leisure; living in a society in which equality of opportunity and good relations are promoted; the making by children and young people of a positive contribution to society; and living in a society which respects their rights.

Regrettably not all children in NI get the best start in life, with many not living in safety or stability, nor do all children and young people have their rights respected (Walsh, 2022). Some children can face a number of challenges to their health, safety and wellbeing, including violence and criminal exploitation (Walsh, 2021). Some children find themselves at risk of or experiencing exploitation and can become both victims and perpetrators of harm, which can have severe consequences for them and their families, friends, and communities (Walsh, Doherty and Best, 2021).

Existing responses and support frameworks

There is emerging evidence around young people's use of personal agency and 'choice' in the context of criminality (Hesketh and Robinson, 2019; Harding, 2020), however, the reality is that these 'choices' are often made in contexts where feasible alternatives are rarely available. This may in part explain why so few victims accept a victimhood status (Robinson, McLean and Densley, 2019) – which becomes a barrier to interruption and support. Many young people who have been victims of organised and higher-harm violence and criminal exploitation believe that they were willing actors and any harm that was caused was due to their decision to engage in those activities. This underscores the lack of insight around how individuals' vulnerabilities are knowingly exploited for criminal gain, but also demonstrates the impact of social norms, and particularly gender norms such as masculinity (Agnew, 2001; Zahn-Waxler et al., 2008), which play down the role of victimisation and harm. Challenging dominant narratives and connecting victims to support becomes all the more difficult in contexts where violence and abuse is normalised. For example, emerging evidence from the Tackling Paramilitarism and Organised Crime Programme and Education Authority has found that children and young people living in areas characterised as having elevated rates of organised crime are more likely than the general youth population to experience a range of violent harms and to experience mood or stress disorders (Walsh, 2022) (see table 1). These data illustrate the contextual harms that young people are exposed to - harms that contribute to, and are predictive of, the onset of a range of psychosocial difficulties including clinically diagnosable mental health conditions, problematic substance use, violence and criminality.

Table 1: C&YPs exposure to violence and harms

	Need	NI comparison
Any potentially traumatic event	93%	37%
Violence direct (community)	35%	9%
Violence direct (home)	13%	3%
Violence indirect (witness in community)	52%	17%
Violence indirect (witness at home)	16%	7%
Sexual violence	35%	2%
Any paramilitary violence	48%	N/A
Any mood disorder	48%	13%
Probable PTSD	16%	2%

In another study, Walsh, Doherty and Best (2021) found that within a custodial group in Northern Ireland those who had been victims of violence were nine times more likely to have been convicted of a violent offence, and those with experience of paramilitary related violence were more likely to have used more serious forms of violence. The data points towards an association between contextual harm and criminal harm. In the context of clustered but complex pathways (Beaglehole and Yach, 2003; Banyard and Hamby, 2022), **the public health approach to violence prevention** has received significant attention (Williams and Donnelly, 2014; Lee et al., 2019). Indeed, this has been central to strategic efforts to address youth violence in Scotland, and more recently in England and Wales (HM Government, 2021). More recently, the Tackling Paramilitarism and Organised Crime Programme has invested significantly in an array of preventative as well as targeted interventions underpinned by administrative data and embedding robust evaluative frameworks into those responses (DOJ, 2020). This form of public health approach is in many ways informed by an appreciation of social ecological perspectives on understanding complex human behaviour and interaction (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The framework distinguishes between levels of need and responses, describing interventions as either primary (universally applied), secondary (targeted at those with known or emergent risks), or tertiary (those with acute and elevated risk) (Prothrow-Stith and Davis, 2010; Banyard and Hamby, 2022). Emerging findings from secondary and tertiary level interventions suggest that important risk factors are reduced and protective factors enhanced (Ritchie and McGreevy, 2019; Walsh, 2022)

Central to the implementation of the public health approach is a coherent, joined up and multi-disciplinary approach, informed by reliable and timely data (Krug et al., 2002). Through the appraisal of administrative and empirical data, decisions can be jointly taken around the nature of the responses that could yield the most beneficial outcomes. In stark contrast to the criminal justice framework, which punitively responds following violent incidences, a public health framework places greater emphasis upon an upstream-downstream model (McKinlay, 1979), seeking to understand the needs of those most at risk based upon known risk and protective factors. By understanding these more comprehensively, both victims and perpetrators can be supported at the earliest possible stage to prevent violence and interrupt pathways of harm. The net gains attributable to this purposive approach vastly outweigh the traditional, justice reliant and siloed response.

Despite the violent history and enduring presence of paramilitary organised crime groups, little is understood about the prevalence and nature of CCE related harms, particularly from the perspective of children and young people. There is burgeoning evidence of some young people's exposure to various forms of paramilitary related violence in the community (see for example, Walsh, 2021; Walsh, Doherty and Best, 2021; Walsh, 2022).

The reality of child criminal exploitation is under evaluated in the UK (Maxwell et al., 2019), with even fewer robust studies undertaken in the context of Northern Ireland. As a result, the true scale of CCE is largely unknown. Even in other parts of the UK, where research around county lines has gained significant momentum, exposure to CCE and the harm that it causes is likely to be significantly underestimated (The Children's Society, 2019).

"A failure to define, scope, and ensure robust protective and disruptive responses to CCE amounts to further societal neglect of those children, who may become embedded in these harmful interactions" (Baidawi, Sheehan and Flynn, 2020: 7).

This lack of conscious consideration, underpinned by robust and reliable research, has a direct impact on the nature of the response and the support afforded to victims.

Child Protection Senior Officials Group (CPSOG)

The issue of child criminal exploitation in the context of Northern Ireland was highlighted by the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People in the wake of the Spring 2021 riots. NICCY provided advice to government on Safeguarding Children and Young People from Abuse and Exploitation from Criminal Gangs (NICCY, 2021). CPSOG have a specific remit for both Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE) and Child Criminal Exploitation (CCE). In response to the emerging data (see for example Walsh, 2021) and the recommendations by NICCY (2021), CPSOG **agreed to establish a Task and Finish Group to examine the issue and make recommendations. Membership of the task and finish group included representatives from government departments and statutory agencies as well as from academia. The membership is listed below:**

• Department of Health
• Department of Justice
• Department of Education
• The Executive Office
• Education Authority
• Police Service of Northern Ireland
• Health and Social Care Board
• Youth Justice Agency
• Safeguarding Board
• Housing Executive
• Northern Ireland Local Government Association
• Queen's University Belfast
• The Executive Programme on Paramilitarism and Organised Crime

The Task and Finish Group was jointly chaired by the Department of Health and the Department of Justice. The remit of the Task and Finish Group was to consider: *awareness of CCE; current service provision [prevention, protection, disruption and collaboration]; and service improvements required [prevention, protection, disruption and collaboration].* The Task and Finish Group were also tasked with identifying what further actions are needed, to: raise awareness of child abuse and exploitation; prevent harm and abuse to children and young people; protect and intervene where children are abused and exploited; and pursue those who seek to harm, abuse and exploit children.

The group was initially tasked with undertaking this work over seven sessions over a four-month period, starting in December 2021 and concluding in April 2022. During this process, the group agreed to a working definition of CCE:

"Child criminal exploitation is a form of child abuse which occurs where an individual or group takes advantage of an imbalance of power to coerce, control, manipulate or deceive a child or young person under the age of 18 into any criminal activity for financial and/or another advantage of the perpetrator or facilitator. The abuse and exploitation is often through violence or the threat of violence.

The victim may have been criminally exploited even if the activity appears consensual. Child criminal exploitation does not always involve physical contact, it can also occur through the use of technology.

The criminal exploitation of children can include exploiting children or young people into forms of criminal activity such as drug dealing, theft, acquisitive crime, knife crimes and other forms of criminality. Children can also be groomed, physically abused, emotionally abused, sexually exploited or trafficked."

In March 2022 it was agreed that, given the paucity of CCE relevant data and the commitment to upholding and facilitating Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (i.e. the right to be heard), a formative research process would be undertaken that would capture the views and experiences of young people in relation to criminal exploitation.

Aims

The aim of the current study was:

To understand the young people's experiences of, and attitudes towards criminal exploitation in the context of Northern Ireland

The objectives of this element of the study included:

• To recruit between 40 and 60 young people aged between 16 and 18 living in communities characterised by the PSNI as having elevated rates of paramilitarism and organised crime

• To facilitate a minimum of six in-depth focus groups that would explore young people's understandings of the concept of child criminal exploitation; perceptions around exposure to child criminal exploitation in the NI context; and beliefs about what could reasonably be done to prevent the exposure and harm associated with child criminal exploitation.

• To identify where and how the harm occurs

• To explore the relationship between victims and perpetrators

• To identify the factors that facilitate harm and impede safety

Methods

A social constructivist framework (Merriam, 2009) captured young people's understandings and experiences of criminal exploitation. A purposive sample (Patton, 2015) of young people aged 16-18 was recruited through the Education Authority for Northern Ireland (EANI). All young people were involved in the 'Engage' programme, a novel, regional intervention designed to identify and support young people at risk from paramilitary related harms. The sample mostly resided in areas that experience elevated rates of paramilitarism and organised crime. Inclusion criteria included the participants' active engagement with the project and that all young people had the capacity to consent. All of those who met the inclusion criteria were invited by the local Engage workers to take part in the focus groups.

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A semi-structured guide was developed for the research project after reviewing the literature and gathering input from various stakeholders actively engaged in the task and finish group. The guide started with an overview of the study and a process of clarification that the young people understood the parameters and their role. Following this, the researcher confirmed and clarified issues of consent, disclosure, and confidentiality. The focus group protocol followed a series of thematically focused areas: About you; About your area; About criminal exploitation.

To ensure anonymity, no personally identifiable information was included. Audio-recorded interviews were undertaken. Where the identifiable information was disclosed (e.g. the name of an individual or reference to a specific event) these were omitted from the report. Each focus group lasted between 60 and 95 minutes, with a mean duration of 80 minutes.

Ethics

Ethical approval for the study was granted by Queen's University Belfast School Research Ethics Committee (SREC).

Data analysis

The intention of the analytical process was to interpret and establish themes that emerged from the interview data. All focus group interviews were transcribed verbatim. Data collected was stored and analysed using NVivo 12. Based on the social constructivist paradigm, the data was coded and interpreted across two phases. The first cycle of coding identified words or phrases that captured the essence of the data. The second cycle highlighted important features of the data required to generate categories. The data was then analysed inductively using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2019). Three meta-themes (the context of young people's lives; understandings and experiences of CCE, and prevention and support) and fourteen operational themes were identified. The findings are discussed below.

Sample

In total seven focus groups were facilitated. A total of 44 young people (28 male and 16 female) were engaged in the project. Ages ranged between 16 and 18. On average the young people were 16 years old. All young people identified as either Protestant/Unionist/Loyalist (PUL) (n=21) or Catholic/Nationalist/Republican (CNR) (n=23). Geographically, the focus groups were facilitated in Derry City, Carrickfergus, Craigavon, East Belfast, North Belfast, South Belfast and Woodvale. Table 2 provides a more detailed breakdown of the sample.

Table 2: Overview of the sample

Area	N	Male	Female	CNR/PUL
Bogside (Derry)	5		5	CNR
Carrickfergus	5	5		PUL
Craigavon	8	5	3	CNR
East Belfast	2		2	PUL
North Belfast	9	5	4	CNR
South Belfast	8	6	2	PUL
Woodvale	7	7		PUL
Total (n)	44	28	16	

Findings

Context of young people's lives

Family, School and Community

Young people described their lives in the context of nested social relations (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Banyard and Hamby, 2022). Whilst the geography of their social lives had expanded since childhood, the areas that they often fondly referred to as 'our way' was generally limited to a number of streets. This hyperlocal sense of place was also characterised by a number of family members being clustered together, often for decades or more. This transgenerational, established presence in the community contributed towards a sense of familiarity for many of the young people. However, this fondness for the familiar was also starkly juxtaposed with many examples of ecological stress. One indicator of ecological stress, referred to frequently across all focus groups, was pervasive substance use. In line with decades of research on risk taking and substance use in Northern Ireland, alcohol use appears to be widespread, highly normalised, and first experimented with during early adolescence (Higgins et al., 2018). Several of the young people in this study suggested that substance use was more than recreational, being performative, and enabling young people to conform according to the perceived behavioural norms within their local context. In one of the focus groups the young people described laughing at one of the group members because they didn't start drinking until they were 14, indicating that alcohol use was not only widespread, but few avoided it even if they were motivated to do so.

"It's just because it's all around you and everyone is doing it" (FG4)

Details tended to quickly move beyond descriptions of alcohol use to include other substances. In some areas, drug use appeared to be endemic, with very easy access to a wide range of drugs. Indeed, participants believed that children in early adolescence not only had access to, but were routinely using, drugs such as cannabis and cocaine.

"Well I wouldn't say they're using coke now, but they use grass and smoke and give it a few years-say when they're 14 they will probably be using coke. It's too easy. Their mas and dads are smoking it so it's easy to nap a bit and smoke a joint..." (FG4)

"It's like all of these areas, there's just loads of drugs" (FG6)

In communities characterised by elevated exposure to a range of risks such as easy access to substances, higher rates of interpersonal violence and the presence of organised criminal networks, family and other social support can buffer against these risks (Trickey et al., 2010). Like many samples, the young people in this study described a range of family experiences and parental practices that both increased and mitigated risk. For example, participants believed that where parents were engaged in substance use this was a strong predictor of youth engagement. From the perspective of these participants, the social learning (Akers et al., 1979) mechanisms were related to the observation of the behaviour and interpretation of it as acceptable (Milaniak and Widom, 2015). If young people also had easy access to the substances then their use became more likely. Family functioning appeared to be particularly salient in the context of vulnerability for some of the participants (Craig et al., 2017). In particular, the issue of the social supervision of younger children was referred to frequently during focus groups. Interestingly, this has been shown to be an important factor, predictive of young people's outcomes across a range of metrics (Henggeler et al., 1997; Walsh and Best, 2019; CES 2022). When these young people were asked to consider the factors that place some young people at risk to themselves or others, one of the strongest themes was the role of parents and parental monitoring. Whilst specific details were avoided, many young people described the factors that push some young people out into the community, where they become more vulnerable to the risks that exist there.

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"I hate being in the house, I just stay out" (FG3)

"I think it's a lot to do with what's in the house as well because a lot of them are allowed to just run about and do what they want as well..." (FG5)

Conversely, where parents understood the risks that existed in the community and made conscious efforts to facilitate avoidance, risks appear to be mitigated against.

"If my mummy knew what was going on and if something was happening down the road, she would like not let me go out" (FG3)

Exhibiting a strong commitment to education and learning as well as achieving educationally are known protective factors even where risks exist within communities (Craig et al., 2017). In general, most young people in this sample did not describe positive learning experiences, but instead had limited optimism for their futures - factors that can exacerbate existing risk (Maruna and Mann, 2019). Few had attained academically, with many unsure of their educational pathways. Whilst it seemed that most had some plans for further training or employment, motivation for these opportunities and general optimism was generally low. In line with previous research (see for example Harland and McCready, 2012), these negative experiences appeared to begin early, often from the start of secondary education, and to extend beyond specifically academic challenges. Relationships which are central to our success in many areas of life also appeared to be partially predictive of the level of engagement in education (Walsh and Harland, 2019). For example, where young people had strained relations with peers or teachers, academic performance appeared to be affected.

"It was just a really bad school. I didn't like the teachers or the people in there. I didn't really do well from about second year on" (FG7)

"I didn't really do GCSEs. I did four subjects and didn't really do good in them. I just can't wait to finish" (FG3)

Few of these young people appeared to excel in school, and indeed many spent time either on restricted timetables due to school enforcement or through deciding to abstain themselves. Alongside increased rates of school truancy, most of the young people who were interviewed spoke of their local youth services with affection. Maybe unsurprising given the context of the interviews, but youth services appeared to provide several buffers to community risks (Thapar, 2021; Walsh, 2021). For example, in areas with easy access to drugs, high rates of anti-social behaviour and violence, the youth centre provided a venue where young people could socialise and relax without the threat of violence or exploitation. A relationship with a youth worker could also provide much-needed positive social support and mitigate against the trauma and violence inducing effects of other forms of violence (Trickey et al., 2010; APPG, 2020). Further, they are less likely to be actively engaged in potentially criminal behaviour whilst they are taking part (Thapar, 2021). Core to youth work is the non-formal educational curriculum (Harland and McCready, 2012). Young people described the potential to engage in critical conversations that are relevant to their lives (Walsh and Harland, 2019). Additionally, youth services provide structured pathways for vulnerable youth to engage as volunteers, achieve vocational qualifications and assume a peer leader role.

"What was different about them-why did they go one way and you went another way?"

"Because we had the youth club...it's a lack of opportunities as well, because being in the youth club we always had something to do...and you could say 'we can't go out tonight because we had this group'" (FG4)

Despite this potential, there was also significant evidence that youth services had not actively engaged with these young people around the theme of criminal exploitation- and violence more generally. This is something that most young people indicated that they would like more opportunities to engage in.

Sense of safety and exposure to violence

Personal safety within the community was described incoherently and inconsistently. At first, the majority of young people described their areas with fondness, indicating that they felt safe and generally close to other members of their family. Indeed, several suggested that should they become concerned for their personal safety, they believed that they could approach anyone for help.

"We all know each other around here so we all get on...you still get scared but you know everyone and you can go into any house" (FG3)

"I live in X, but I used to live in X and if I was getting chased, I would just run into any house... Everyone sticks up for everyone no matter who they are" (FG1)

"I think X is the safest place. You go to the shop and you might see ten people you know..." (FG7)

Interestingly however, when these verbalisations were unpacked a little further, it appeared that few young people had ever approached another adult in their local area for help, despite most having had at least one experience when they felt at significant risk of harm. Further, those who reported going to the shop (FG7) and seeing many familiar faces, were also those who reported that the back of that same shop was where young people were taken (voluntarily and involuntarily) to receive summary justice including beatings and shootings. Therefore, as interviews proceeded two things became clear. Firstly, their 'area' was in fact hyper-local, and what they often referred to were a number of streets where family members tended to be clustered. Secondly, most of the violence, threat and intimidation that these young people experienced was in fact in their local area despite their verbalisations that these areas were the safest. Indeed, exposure to violence, including being witness to and/or a victim of it, appeared to be a normal part of life, and had become so normalised that even when they had experienced harm this was not connected to their sense of safety more widely. When asked about specific examples of when they had experienced (directly or indirectly) violence related harm, every young person could provide examples and these were situated within the context of their local areas, often within a few yards of their own homes.

"I live beside a place and people get kidnapped and people get followed down there...a month ago someone got followed..." (FG3)

One of the focus group participants described being around 14 and being chased by men with hammers. Whilst scary, this was not the first experience of significant, higher harm violence.

"Was this your first experience?"

"No fuck. I was brought up in a house like that...a fuck. My X was big in the [group], big in the [group]. My sofa had things cut out of it..." (FG1)

"...There was a hit and run and we went down to help him. I went back into my house to get kitchen roll because his face was all busted up...and I told all the wee kids to go away..." (FG3)

Others described their first experiences when they were still toddlers.

"I was about four. I looked out and they were all throwing petrol bombs" (FG1)

So much so that some forms of threat and aggression were not considered by young people to be violence. For example, in one focus group, two young women recalled being shot at by young men with metal pellets.

"We were walking around and got shot by pellet guns...metal ones" (FG3)

Young people described living in an area only a few hundred yards away, which they collectively described as being quiet, and yet in the area where they socialised violence was part of everyday life. It seems that the pull factors towards those more dangerous areas with concentrated levels of risk were stronger than the push factors away from them.

"Experiences are all different for us- even for a couple of metres like" (FG5)

Some of the focus groups explained that given the prevalence of violence and perceived threat, young people have increasingly been carrying knives and other sharps. Their motivations were believed to be related to self-protection.

"Would young people walk about with knives?

"Yeah (collectively). Just to be safe. Hoods or people under threat, it's their fault for being scared like because they've done something wrong. They've got themselves into that situation." (FG1)

Paramilitaries and organised crime

This violent context could not be understood without reference to structured groups which continue to exist across the communities in which the interviews took place. Despite the transition towards peace, each focus group affirmed that the presence of paramilitary and organised crime groups remained a reality. There was also a paucity of responses which inferred that their continued activity was related to the attainment of politically motivated goals. A minority of young people living in specific areas believed that their presence provided a protective function and that they were generally safer with those networks in place.

"Do you feel safer that they're [paramilitaries] in the area?"

"Yeah" (FG7)

Whilst the specific functions of the groups tended to differ between personal gain and community protection, ultimately most young people suggested that their presence presented a threat to young people and, despite the façade of enhancing community safety, actively undermined it and contributed towards cultures of criminality and violence. Despite their influence and sustained activity, there appeared to be few spaces to safely talk about issues of personal safety, violence and crime. In particular schools were mentioned as being avoidant and even hostile towards any critical reflections on young people's exposure to paramilitaries.

"I think it would be good to talk about this in school because anytime you're told to fuck up about paramilitaries. They don't want to hear about it. It would be useful to talk about because other people don't go to [youth] groups like this so they really don't get a chance" (FG2)

This reflected young people's desire for learning to connect to their lived experiences and also the challenge that the formal education system has in engaging young people who live in a context of significant harm across multiple systems.

Trust in public bodies

Social connectedness - a feeling of belonging and trust in others - extends beyond family, peers and community to include those services that have a statutory duty to provide support and help. The police service is one of those services that can contribute to the overall sense of social connectedness and sense of safety. Conversely, where relationships at a local level are strained, then often so too is collective efficacy. Whilst there are a range of agencies that provide statutory support, young people's perceptions of local policing were notable for their consistency across various communities. Beyond the bravado, most young people were highly critical of the way that police 'policed' and they lacked confidence in the police to keep them safe. This, in the context of communities where young people described being exposed to a range of risks.

"The police stand and guard their bonfires but they put ours out. We don't like them. See if they seen us standing crying and they wouldn't even stop –they would drive on. They don't come in unless there's something going on" (FG7)

"Say you were in trouble, would you contact the police?"

"I wouldn't...nobody likes the police. I had a relationship with two cops but don't trust them anymore" (FG1)

What was more common was the harm graded decision making. Generally, young people who required immediate assistance to protect themselves or others would be more likely to report being happy to contact the police. In the situation where there was no immediate risk to themselves or others, or there were other ways of dealing with the issue, the preference was to avoid contacting the police. This extended to wider contact with the police, for example via formal and informal education provision.

"Do you ever meet the police through this programme?" (FG7)

"No"

"There's people who say that the police are the biggest paramilitaries out there. There's loads of real dirty dirty cops. The police control the paramilitaries and let them do what they do, like they gave them what–£10 million" (FG6)

"The police literally don't do anything. I was almost kidnapped and didn't call the police. I told my sister and she told me what to do" (FG5)

"I was missing and at a flat with older men all through the night and they [the police] came to the door and never even knew it was me. They were there to do with the music" (FG7)

In line with previous attitudinal surveys (see for example Walsh, 2021), despite concerns there was general agreement that there existed a threshold at which point the police would be called.

"If it's something that you can deal with yourself, I wouldn't phone them" (FG7)

What was more concerning was that in several areas young people advised that they believed that the community had more confidence in paramilitaries to take action than in the police.

"People turn to the paramilitaries rather than the police because police don't do anything about it" (FG6)

Despite the focus on trust in policing to attend to community (safety) needs, this only partially described young people's resistance. In fact, the dominant community norms actively denounced information sharing, colloquially known as 'touting', and symbolically endorsed extra judicial or community forms of justice. Among this group, those norms were themselves 'policed' by a fear of reputational damage as well as the threat of (further) violence.

"Can't go to the cops because you'll get it far worse than a beating" (FG2)

Understandings and experiences of CCE
Concept of CCE

Despite the high levels of organised crime in the young people's local areas and the elevated rates of exposure to violence in the community, the term child criminal exploitation was new to many of the participants, and for some did not resonate. Those that had heard of the term equated it with the ventures of networks in other parts of the world, for example drawing on Netflix shows that depicted mafia style enterprises and more recent depictions of the 'County Lines' phenomenon in England. However, these depictions rarely resonated with the NI context, or with these young people's lived experiences.

"There's criminal gangs? There wouldn't be criminal gangs. What would you call them? It wouldn't be organised crime in the local area. Organised crime is like a mafia boss. There isn't gangs lad. A gang is a... what....it's like people who think they are something. People who walk about carrying knives"

However others noted that these loose affiliations popularised in the media were generally not active in Northern Ireland, and whilst there were some young people who carried knives their motivation was not to engage in criminal activity as part of a collective identity. If they were involved in such activity over a protracted period it would be in the context of being part of another group, not considered a gang but instead an organised criminal group or paramilitary organisation.

"There's no room for gangs-the paramilitaries are the gangs and they control any of the wee-er groups anyway" (FG5)

Almost none of the young people appeared to routinely use the term, and even less were able to articulate its meaning.

"I've heard of that 'criminal exploitation' but never really knew what it meant until today. I think it's something like getting a child to do something that they don't want to do or they don't know the risks" (FG5)

This quote illustrates the potential to engage young people in meaningful and critical conversations about their lives (Walsh and Harland, 2019), particularly when they live in contexts that are potentially harmful. Whilst the opportunities to do so appear to be limited, when prompted, several young people had ideas about what the term child criminal exploitation could mean in the context of their own lives.

"Is it about being forced to do things...like sell drugs and join gangs and all?" (FG3)

"Everything is based around coin. Paramilitaries are organised and they are involved in crime. So are they organised criminals?" (FG6)

In fact, concepts of exploitation were intimately connected to access to drugs and their distribution.

"Drugs. It's about being used-by dealers" (FG1)

Interestingly however, the functions of the 'drug dealer' and the paramilitary were generally considered to be distinct. Indeed, many young people believed that there were groups or networks of drugs dealers separate from paramilitary structures who operated independently of those crime networks and were even at risk from them.

Across the sample there was little consensus about the nature of criminal exploitation and, importantly, the actors involved. For a minority, criminal exploitation was intimately connected to paramilitarism and its prevailing structures, while for others it was drug dealers who recognised latent vulnerability and exploited children in the sale and distribution of drugs. Interestingly for the latter, paramilitaries were considered to be a buffer against the risks of the true organised criminals. For these young people, there was a perception that paramilitaries provided a para-policing function, ensuring that order ensued in their local areas. In this context, within certain parameters a certain level of crime was tolerable.

However, when these other, non-paramilitary networks crossed those mutually agreed lines, young people believed that the response would be physical harm and expulsion from the community - both of which appeared to be acceptable.

"I think what they [the paramilitaries] do is for the betterment of our community, like they do put drug dealers out..." (FG4)

"They do more for the [community]. They walk around the streets and do what the police should be doing. They look after the elderlies. The people feel that they can rely on them more than the police" (FG7)

Indeed, there was a sense that the presence of paramilitaries put a 'cap' on the frequency and severity of other forms of crime which have become common in other communities.

"All the ones in England fight for postcodes and are way worse-they would stab you. You don't get brutally murdered when you're 16 here"

For many of the young people, across various communities, paramilitaries continued to be portrayed as principled protagonists, and whilst organised and engaged in criminal activity, threat, violence and intimidation, they were 'of' the community.

"Not in our areas no...you know the paramilitaries in [the area] are just normal people that you see every day" (FG4)

"They would be like [our area] police. They control drugs and ASB. They hate drugs"

When participants were probed around paramilitaries' perceived 'hate' of drugs and active efforts to reduce consumption and related harms, it seemed that some of the beliefs were contradictory. For example, despite referring to the intention to reduce organised crime in the form of drug distribution, most young people simultaneously agreed that access to a range of drugs is very easy and the type of drugs available has expanded.

"Aye there wouldn't be a street without a drug dealer round here...it would be easier to get drugs than to walk into a shop and get a packet of fegs, like grass, E's, coke" (FG4)

Interestingly, it was apparent that at an individual level the conversations created cognitive tensions for some young people who were trying to reconcile their beliefs about those they knew on a personal level with the reality that they were engaged in serious crime and higher harm violence. This ambivalence was in part created and sustained by a very effective marketing strategy in which two apparently distinct illegal networks were portrayed to exist in the community, whilst in reality their existence mutually reinforced each other. This symbiotic smokescreen appears to be fundamental to the Northern Ireland business model, and it is one that is distinct from other areas where children are at risk of criminal exploitation.

The business model

As referred to throughout this report, the concept of and literature around child criminal exploitation has in many ways become synonymous with the phenomenon of County Lines. This not only reflects a specific form of child criminal exploitation, but also a business model based on economic benefit and material acquisition through the movement of drugs across borders using vulnerable children and young people as the means of doing so. Understanding the business model provides insights into comparisons between those models that are better researched and the less well researched context in Northern Ireland.

Central to any business model is the branding. The branding provides an insight into the organisation and nods at the structures that help to facilitate the business. Of course this is mostly marketing and is designed to appeal to a particular audience. In this case, it appears that the branding involved the suggestion that two distinct entities exist within communities. On the one hand, networks that were actively involved in the sale and distribution of drugs for the sole purpose of financial gain operated within communities. They were responsible for supplying a range of drugs, from the more socially acceptable (i.e. cannabis and cocaine) through to the less socially acceptable (heroin). On the other hand, other organised crime networks, in the form of paramilitarism, performed a different function, sometimes for the benefit of the community, and in regard to drugs were perceived by many to moderate their influence. In particular, they had a role in ensuring that more harmful drugs were less available, and especially not to children.

"Are the paramilitaries drug dealers?"

"Ah.....no. Not round here they wouldn't. It would be in other places maybe. Paramilitaries are trying to get drugs off the streets. There are firms who deal drugs" (FG1)

"No, are the paramilitaries not more to do with like shooting and beatings and all...are they not the ones that stop the drugs-the ones that are annoyed by people selling drugs in the area?" (FG3)

Whilst a minority of young people suggested that an intimate relationship existed between organised crime networks, most did not make this connection and suggested that not only were the structures distinct, but so too were their motivations.

"There's always a connection between paramilitaries and drug dealers. It's the same in every community" (FG4)

Their motivation, in contrast to the drug networks, was less about self-gain and more about community protection.

"It's all volunteers-they don't get paid to do it. They don't make money for themselves" (FG7)

Others had more nuanced opinions, and whilst agreeing that the two distinct networks existed suggested that paramilitary crime networks were also motivated by material acquisition.

"They take a cut from what's going on-they organise the organised crime..." (FG6)

But, despite acknowledging a connection, this comment reflected a broader assumption – that the structure and identity of paramilitaries were separate from that of drug dealers, and whilst there was some kind of business arrangement where protection money was paid on a regular basis, generally the paramilitaries had no active role in supply or distribution, or indeed the violence and intimidation that often accompanies such enterprises.

What these young people, across various communities, were describing were mutually reinforcing structures - something absent from the wider literature around CCE. Paramilitaries, who often portrayed themselves as the protectors of the community, were said to monitor, approve of (within some parameters), police and punish the functions of drug dealers (who were a distinct entity). The presence of 'dealers' in communities, and the harm caused by drug use, provided some justification for the enduring presence of paramilitaries.

Whilst there was no consensus as to which of the two community criminal networks were actively involved in the exploitation of children and young people, there was a broad consensus that the motivation for exploitation was primarily (although not exclusively) monetary gain and material acquisition.

"It's all about money. They get the kids in to do the running about-if they sell for them-they take the fall" (FG6)

Cascading levels of influence were perceived to exist within the networks, with the more 'senior' members generally unknown to the young people, whilst the more active, and often younger, members were often well known within the community. Whilst it was the 'elders' who appeared to develop and implement strategy, it was often these younger and less experienced members who young people had direct contact with, but who were also responsible for facilitation.

"They have people below them, selling for them" (FG1)

"... [there is this one person], they would go to a drug dealer and the dealer would give them say, 20 tablets, so they sell 15 and keep 5 for yourself. They would try to come to us boys and sell them to us. Or they might say if you can lend me £50 then I will give you X...oh my god that actually did happen...he asked all of us [laughs]...he's in debt" (FG3)

This appears to be central to the creation of the critical mass of young people at the bottom rung of distribution necessary for the selling of common and socially accepted drugs, but also essential for access to the market. There was consensus across focus groups that, with respect to commonly used drugs, it was often acquaintances or friends who supplied their peers. Indeed this process has been made easier by increased technological innovations and agile networks eager to test innovative methods of distribution. Across the focus groups young people referred to the use of social media as a means of accessing drugs. Most of the young people were able to articulate the ways in which 'dealers' used various platforms to sell their own drugs as well as to establish smaller networks of supply chains.

"Some people have Facebook or Snapchat to sell the stuff. There would be a good few people that you know selling. Maybe some people younger even" (FG7)

"See now, social media is everything and you might not even know who people are or that what someone is asking you to do could get you into trouble" (FG6)

From a business model perspective, this could be interpreted as networks leveraging a combination of resources (e.g. communities with a critical mass of support for those who sustain criminality and have a lack of trust of state agencies) and operationalised through transactions (e.g. recognising vulnerability). Vulnerabilities were verbalised in a variety of practical ways by young people. For some, these were pressures to conform. It is well established that during adolescence young people are highly responsive to social cues and seek symbolic rewards from peers.

"You try things just to fit in. everyone does it. Depends on the crowd you're in what you do though and where you want to fit in" (FG4)

This is also well embedded within criminological orthodoxy, as articulated through social learning theories (Akers et al., 1979; Akers, 1998) which suggest that the more time young people spend with others who hold attitudes that endorse criminality, as well with those who are actively engaged in crime, the greater the chance that they will engage in criminality themselves. In the context of these young people's lives, both drug use and violence were normalised and certain levels of both were tolerable.

"You don't even think of people who sell grass as dealers, you just call them the grass man [laughs]" (FG4)

In part, this increased vulnerability to 'consent' to engage in criminal behaviour is associated with a desire for status and for respect, both of which are intimately connected to masculine ideals, which may help to explain the role of boys and young men in criminal ventures, particularly those characterised as highly violent and aggressive (Agnew, 2001; Zahn-Waxler et al., 2008).

"Most of the time people are in paramilitaries and gangs and it is for drugs and status" (FG1)

But status cannot wholly explain vulnerability. Safety and the desire for belonging may also play a part. In regard to personal safety, it is well established that those most at risk of criminal exploitation often live in areas characterised as having high rates of violence (Fowler et al., 2009).

"I think it would be more about protection. If people know you and you're connected, then you feel that joining could protect you and your family" (FG5)

Indeed, many victims have been victims of other forms of violence themselves, including in the home. From the perspective of these young people, individuals known to be involved prey on people who are in need of money, but also poly-victims in need of protection. Often the two mutually reinforce one another. That is, those who are in need of money may find illicit ways to secure those resources, at the same time often needing protection when they are unable to maintain or fulfil the transactionary 'agreement' (Naughton et al., 2022). Indeed, this failure to adhere may be fundamental to the network's business model. By exploring opportunities for quick returns, young people, particularly those without positive social supports, can become indebted to organised criminals, with the criminal behaviour that they engage in deepening the hold that networks have over them (Maxwell et al., 2019). Young people also have basic needs which include being part of a group, and whether this is a friendship group or association with a more organised network, the same affective function is performed – the promise of belonging.

Among this group it was evident that criminal networks recognised this basic need, leveraging it to obscure their true intent.

"Not in our friendship group now, but there were other people who would pretend to be your mates" (FG1)

"They can see young people that want respect or attention, or maybe they don't feel safe. They pretend to be your friends. See with me, they bought me KFC. Just letting on to be your friends. The ones that I was with were in their 30s–so they were men" (FG5)

"There's this boy now and he's really young–like he only turned 13 now. When he first started coming round here he was 10 …by getting into his head, because he was so young, they said all these things and got him to fight…he didn't know he was being used–he still doesn't know…because of the amount of influence he put on him, he's been kicked out of school… he's the most used and manipulated one ever… if he found our friend group before he found them, he would be like us…it's kind of sad though just thinking about it…he wants them people to respect him…see now thinking about it, I'm just realising it" (FG1)

Another component central to this business model was fostering and sustaining a mistrust of outsiders. The most obvious form of mistrust in the context of Northern Ireland was between two communities differentiated by religious identity. This culture of fear appears to have facilitated and sustained coercion within communities, providing leverage for organised crime groups to maintain, often via interpersonal and family norms, the façade of protecting hyperlocal communities against the 'others'. One participant described not meeting someone from another community until she was 15, despite living yards from a peace line that separated the two communities. Their preface was "I come from a [political] family", indicating that this physical separation was transgenerational and connected to wider community norms.

"My daddy had it in my head that the [others] are all [expletive] and they can't be trusted" (FG4)

But these young people also focussed heavily on trust in public authorities, and in particular the police. This appeared to play a critical role in the perceived options available to vulnerable individuals, with a lack of confidence in the police (as gatekeepers to the justice process) or community norms that endorsed access to legal forms of justice. Indeed, this relationship between mistrust and community norms appeared important in sustaining the structures responsible for CCE.

"If you were in trouble and couldn't go to the police, who do you go to?"

"Paramilitaries…paramilitaries are needed there. Communities trust the paramilitaries more than the police. You reach out to them. You know people" (FG4)

Conversely, the presence of paramilitary groups appears to benefit from the coercive culture created at a hyper-local level, which in turn could provide the foundation for elevated rates of CCE. Whilst mistrust appeared widespread, verbalisations also included indications that reluctance to access support, particularly from outside of the community, was also driven by a fear of reprisal.

"You can actually put yourself in more danger if you tell anyone or tell anyone about the threat or anything. You can make it worse for yourself and put yourself in more danger" (FG5)

"If you're a tout–there are a few people touting here–you would get battered. You've been brought up to know, if you know anything–don't say anything" (FG7)

"You would get battered. Put it like this, everyone in [this area] has been brought up not to tout. You just don't. You would lose friends. You wouldn't be accepted anywhere" (FG1)

"You don't know what goes on behind closed doors. You don't talk about this stuff. Everyone just knows to keep quiet about what goes on and everyone just accepts that" (FG6)

"You can't even tell the peelers and say that I've been threatened…it would be even worse for being a tout…people wouldn't trust you…word spreads quickly…your name would be spray painted about the area" (FG4)

In contexts where mistrust is endemic and communities are programmed to pathologically doubt the intentions of others fear becomes currency. The more fear that can be leveraged, the more people can be exploited - often with impunity, and indeed the tacit support of the community. This largely externally focussed fear also shifts to include an internal focus. That is, members of organised criminal networks ensure that victims are aware of the potential harm that could be caused and that they explicitly understand the inherent risk of violence.

"See if you do wrong in their territory, you have to join them or they'll break their legs" (FG5)

Indeed the business model embodies cultures of violence at all levels of enterprise - violence is a core element of the currency. Used symbolically and instrumentally (Blok, 2000), violence is perceived to contribute towards maintaining the status quo and thwarting any threat to that.

"...Just say, fuck sake, an 11 year old walks up, you're not going to be intimidated at all...see drug dealers, they're dangerous, they would get you shot like"

"would they have weapons?"

"oh aye, 100 per cent" (FG4)

"...We're going to come into the house and we're going to wreck the house and we're gonna shoot you or something or you can come to this place and that will be it all over. That's organised crime" (FG6)

Even victims can themselves refuse to accept their victimhood status (Robinson, McLean and Densley, 2019), believing that the harm that has been caused to them is reasonable and justified. Whilst criminological literature is replete with examples of 'neutralisations' by perpetrators which help to cognitively justify actions and ignore the impact on victims, it seems that these neutralising mechanisms can also apply to victims (Sykes and Matza, 1957). As one participant eloquently described it, the process of manipulation and exploitation is a conscious one.

"It's called Pimp...a very good book...there was a wee girl that wasn't doing what she was told and he said 'that's easy, you beat her with a coat hanger and after, you run her a bath and she'll be so grateful that you fixed her that she'll forget that you fucked her up in the first place'. They work like that" FG5

"If they just said yes because they wanted to...they can't be victimised if they said yes and they wanted to. Say you are like running about taking drugs and someone asks you to sell drugs for them and you're thinking 'ah yeah this is all free drugs-this is going to be lethal' so you smoke all their drugs and use their supply and you've nothing to give back to them, moneywise and he comes and does you in, you can't say it was anyone else's fault" (FG1)

Activities

Initially, most focus group participants reported that despite criminal structures being active in their areas, young people were generally not exploited by their members, nor asked to do anything for them. "Not in our areas no..." (FG4) was the initial response of many. However, as interviews progressed and questions were preceded with illustrative examples of what could reasonably be considered exploitative, participants provided significant evidence of how young people were being actively used in various ways. Indeed, many of the accounts were first-hand and the facilitator was careful not to encourage specific disclosures or capture personally identifiable information. There was however significant variation in the nature of exploitation and the duration for which young people were exploited. There were some examples of young people being actively groomed over a prolonged period of time, taking increasingly dangerous risks to undertake more serious forms of crime as time progressed.

There were other examples of more agile engagement, whereby young people were exploited for a particular purpose and for a specific period of time with no indication that this would continue. Both of these were associated with violence and unrest, with the spring 2021 riots foremost in several focus group members' minds.

Violence and unrest

Whilst few appeared to understand the reasons for the spring 2021 riots, as evidenced by their incoherent and generally inconsistent explanations, there was general agreement that the violence was organised (Walsh, 2021). Further, the organisation of children and young people was declared by the Commissioner for Children and Young People to be tantamount to child abuse (NICCY, 2021). On this, there was broad agreement among the participants.

"See last year when the rioting was all happening that was all organised" (FG4)

"The paras were giving young people petrol bombs" (FG5)

"They are worse in their own ways. Kids go out rioting here and don't even know what it means" (FG6)

This example demonstrated how some young people are more actively and acutely involved whilst others only become engaged in specific behaviours for a specific purpose and are generally not encouraged to take part in other activities. In fact, these agile victims are often not aware that they are part of a wider and more coordinated effort.

"Wouldn't really see young people being used here. You're not told to do it but sometimes they will supply things like petrol bombs" (FG7)

The numbers of young people that were engaged in the riots has been well documented, but there is less understanding of the extent to which vulnerable young people are actively engaged in more serious and prolonged criminality at the behest of network leaders. Through these discussions it was clear that at least some young people are involved in activities such as violence, intimidation, extortion, property damage and the concealment of weapons.

"I've heard a lot of people hiding guns for them. They think they are friends and want to be part of them. They think they're doing their friends a favour. They are usually older and more involved"

"Can you understand why someone might move drugs or hide weapons or get involved in violence for them?"

"Yeah, I can understand why they would hurt someone for them" (FG5)

"How far do you think they would go to please somebody else?"

"oh far-like they would stab somebody else" (FG1)

"If someone like hadn't paid what they owed, we-kids would go around and maybe smash some things up or break things so it costs them more to fix the stuff than just pay up" (FG3)

Distribution of drugs

Just as young people believed that the supply and distribution of drugs was core to the organised criminal network's business model, so too were drugs central to the activities that young people were criminally exploited to engage in. From an outside perspective, these young people, often living in areas of multiple deprivation, witnessed their peers having access to money and all the things that money provided access to (Agnew, 1992).

Not only other material rewards, but also opportunities (Rees, 2011).

"See from about 17, they're all running about in the best of gear…they just start off small like selling grass" (FG4)

Whilst the relationship between those organising the supply of drugs and young people engaged in their supply may be that between known acquaintances, it appears that the proliferation of social media platforms and the potential anonymity that these provide, enable quick cash potential (Brewster et al., 2021). In these situations young people may not know the supplier nor recognise the potential harm (Robinson, McLean and Densley, 2019). The relationship is perceived as both consensual and transactional - a quid pro quo (McNaughton et al., 2022).

"Sometimes you don't even know who the drug dealer is. You see them on Snapchat. They put stories on saying 'need runners-will be well looked after' is what they say. And then if I approach them and say 'I can sell your drugs'. They make Snapchat accounts and don't put their name on it" FG1

Young people could be engaged in the supply of drugs in a number of ways. For example, unwitting young people may be asked to provide transport and help to facilitate the 'deal'.

"I passed my driving tests a couple of months ago and I've been asked by people that I used to run about with back in the day…it was to take them and I be the driver" (FG4)

This taxi-ing appeared to be very common. Focus group members suggested that 'dealers' sent people alone with the package and an address, and sometimes the dealer went in the car as a passenger to complete the 'deal' themselves. Those actively and strategically engaged in the supply of drugs also leveraged the economic vulnerability of children and young people, creating the illusion of a transaction with the understanding that many of those who accepted the terms would be unable to fulfil the expectations. This is particularly the case when young people are provided with a line of 'credit' or 'tick' to accept drugs on the understanding that the money would be repaid at a later date. However, it was also clear that difficulties can arise when young people fail to comply with the terms of such criminal transactions.

"They would try to persuade young people and use them. For example, offer young person drugs on 'tick'. That's the way they operate, they charge you far more than what you owe them" (FG5)

'Defaulting' on what the lower ranks of criminal networks define as the terms of a transaction is associated with the threat of serious harm. All of the focus group members agreed that assault was a realistic outcome.

"I know someone and when they couldn't pay the money back, they shot him in the [body part]… because they owed a lot of money" (FG3)

Given the potential for this, alternatives - any alternatives - become more favourable, and individuals who would be unlikely to engage in certain activities during normal or 'cold' times, become more inclined to engage in riskier and potentially more harmful activities under stressful, strained or 'hot' times.

"When you heavily involved in things like drugs, people are in debt and have no money. They know this and that keeps you locked in" (FG6)

For these young people, it seems that the nature of exploitation extended beyond engaging in several criminal acts. A small number of young people appear to be more chronically engaged in criminality and are routinely exploited by higher ranking members of the networks. Often they can become members of these groups and sometimes unwittingly.

"Recruitment isn't really a thing-it's more of a force. Like they would be like 'right you owe us money-join us. It's pressure" (FG6)

"See once you're in-you're in. sometimes, you don't know that you're in, but they know you're in" (FG6)

A less common activity was discussed in two focus groups. In these, young people described something referred to as 'car spotting' whereby young people kept watch over a specific vehicle, noting the times of arrival and departure as well as other details that might be requested. Whilst young people were generally unaware of the reasons for this, or indeed the ultimate outcomes, the participants inferred that some harm would come to the occupants of those vehicles.

"Like, people would be like 'you go watch that car for a few days' to see who it is and see what time they're there. That happened to my mate" (FG6)

But, despite the variation, or maybe even because of it, participants generally believed that there were significant gender differences in the ways that organised criminal groups engaged and ultimately exploited children and young people.

Gender differences

Boys and young men were generally believed to be more actively involved in the activities described above. These were believed by the young people to be 'riskier' forms of criminality, directly engaged in more violent and aggressive behaviours such as beatings and intimidation. As one young person put it, the paramilitaries themselves, as the most dominant criminal network, consist of mostly men.

"A wee girl won't be interested as much in the money and won't ask wee girls to do some of the moving drugs. It's like the paramilitaries-they're mostly fellas" (FG6)

"None of the girls are really involved in drugs here. See the rule in [my area] is that, you touch a wee girl and you're dead" (FG1)

Although most participants initially believed that young people were not criminally exploited at all, as the focus groups progressed there was a sense that girls and young women were actively engaged in more subtle forms of abuse and exploitation. References to sexual abuse and exploitation were more frequent, in line with previous research (Moyle, 2019; Robinson, 2019). This appears to have been endemic in some of the focus groups, with participants themselves describing experiences that could only be construed as abusive. In a similar vein to the experiences of young men, young women described entering into a transaction where the supply of substances was met with the expectation of sexual favours.

"If you go to a wee boy's house, they might drug you or rape you. When you go to a party, you could get used…people get free drink or drugs and they have to go with somebody. Like say you go to a party, they will be like 'I'll give you two bags of coke or I'll give you a bottle of vodka if you go with him'" (FG7)

"How common do you think that is?"

"I think it's really common"

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"Say they're having a party, they'll be like 'get some wee girls up here' and they'll get free drugs" (FG4)

In some of these descriptions young women focused on age as an indicator of parity of power, not recognising that their peers could reasonably be part of an organised network. In other cases, the discrepancy in power relations was more obvious and overtly described.

"They could be forced to pleasure a drug dealer...wee girls can be doing stuff for drugs...wee lads would be like, well if you can't pay, you need to pay me in some other way [all laugh]..."

In this sense, there was significant overlap between CSE and CCE, with young women in particular at risk of being exploited via drugs to engage in sexual activity within both criminal and non-criminal networks. The role of agency and choice (and therefore the lack of victimhood) was even more contested within the conversations around sexual activity (Robinson, McLean and Densley, 2019).

"It's their choice in a way. Say you go already under the influence, it is your choice. You might be out in the town and meet a group of boys and they say they have some gear back at a party house. They might say, 'here, he wants a bit of you if you want this?' It wouldn't be like 'take this here or else'. They could be the same age as you or older or way older, it just depends"

"Girls do it out of their own free will. They know that they're getting drugs for free...and in return those lads are getting to be with the wee girls..." (FG4)

Even those young women who inferred they had had experiences such as this were unsure as to whether they had been the victim of abuse or had been fully aware of the context and willingly engaged in the activity:

"when the police were looking for me, I ended up in hospital... But see, the people I was with, they were known for that there-for drugging people up. They were way older, like 30s. I wanted to go like-they didn't make me" (FG7)

In one of these cases it was evident that older men had been involved, and only by describing the event did the young woman become aware that the process by which she ended up at the particular venue was wholly inappropriate and the intentions of the men were equally so. Young men who were equally quick to dismiss the prevalence of the criminal exploitation of girls and young women on reflection noted signs that caused concern. Evidence from social media posts, including photos, pointed to relationships that were not only unhealthy but potentially toxic and abusive.

"Like you see wee girls on Snapchat and you say 'who's that, your da?' and they say it's some older boy" (FG6)

Interestingly the overlap between sexual exploitation and criminal exploitation became more apparent as the focus groups progressed. Several young people in different communities suggested that the sexual abuse and provision of substances was part of a grooming process that enabled members of criminal networks to demand a range of things from girls and young women (Baidawi, Sheehan and Flynn, 2020).

"There was a boy down in [area] and his ex-girlfriend called him down to the house, so he went down and went upstairs to talk to her and there were people

waiting on her and he got stabbed...it's harder for girls to get caught...they would use young girls to arrange to meet people at a certain place-certain time" (FG1)

Among those who reported being asked to engage in potentially criminal behaviour, there was a prevailing belief that they had significant choice, with those who were asking being known to the participants. In general, they were all young men and being asked to move drugs. They also believed, because of their relationship to the potential perpetrators (friends and even family), that their engagement was consensual, and often a favour to those they knew, via what appeared to be relatively benign requests.

"It's your choice. It's like if you want to go to the [group], it's your choice. Girls wouldn't really get offered to join"

"I've been asked but it's usually our mates asking so we can say no. The people who would ask us to do something would be our mates and they would say 'you can do it if you want' but they more or less peer pressure you to do it. They don't say 'if you don't do this, I'm going to stab you', they say, 'ah don't be a dick'" (FG1)

Definition of CCE

To summarise young people's thoughts on organised crime and the concept of child criminal exploitation, the working definition of the Task and Finish Group was read to young people. The process involved reading aloud the definition in its entirety and then returning to repeat the same definition, stopping at intervals to ask young people about their thoughts on the language, to what it extent it resonated with their own experience, and any elements that were missing. In general, there was broad agreement with the definition:

"[laughs] that's literally what we're saying. That's just a more in depth and complicated of what we're saying...that's perfect" (FG1)

This comment was important in that it confirmed that the definition resonated but also illustrated a need for a child friendly version, accessible to young people. Some omissions were noted in several focus groups. In particular, the lack of reference to the psychological impact and potential trauma associated with exposure to child criminal exploitation.

"If you're abusing a child, there is a psychological impact. It can wreck your whole life. It can impact your mental health more than anything and that's not there" (FG6)

Another comment was made by several young people about why the focus was on those under the age of 18, given that in their experiences it is often young people on the edge of 18 who are most actively involved in criminal activity.

"Can I ask a question? Why is it always over 18 and under 18 you're classified as a child... Someone who is 18 and then turns 19 can be being used too" (FG6)

This question pointed to a logical issue inherent across many CCE responses. In essence, the challenge being posed is around why safeguarding, strategic and cross sectoral responses stop when a young person turns eighteen, when those who are intent on harming don't. Indeed we know that such harm often becomes elevated.

Evidence from this study suggests that there are a range of contextual vulnerabilities that collectively contribute towards contextual harm. These exist across the social system and together contribute to ecological stress. It is also clear that, given the range of vulnerabilities in each community, not all children and young people are at similar risk or engaged in the same exploitative activities. On the contrary, a small number of people who are most acutely affected tend to be older and more chronically engaged in a range of harmful and often dangerous criminal behaviours. Building upon the empirical observations of Densley (2014), it seems that a larger, but still relatively small, number of young people are exploited to intimidate others, sell or move drugs, and conceal goods or weapons.

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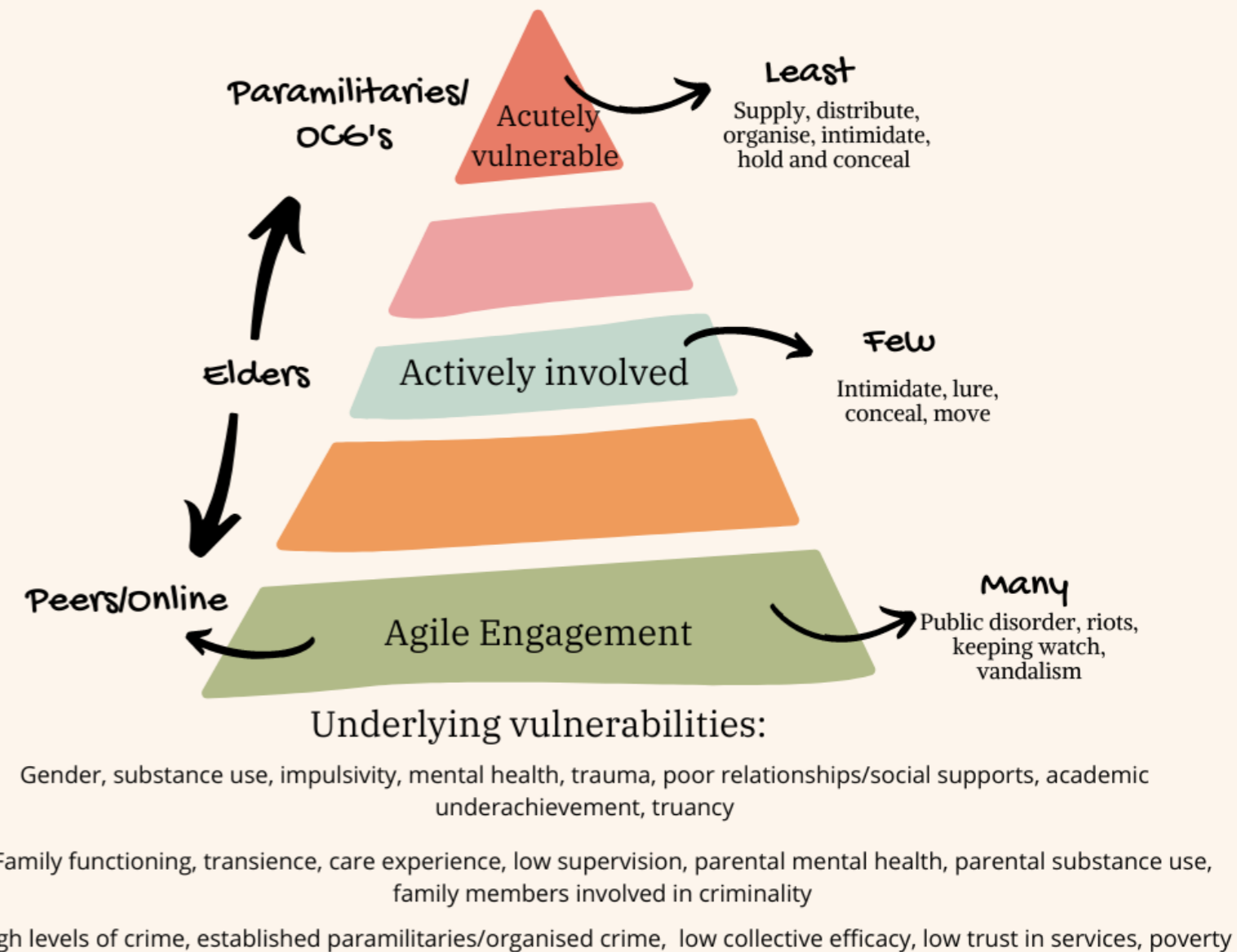
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These young people are also engaged in the exploitation of other young people in what we refer to here as cascading levels of exploitation.

A larger proportion of young people in these communities are then actively engaged in more flexible ways. They perform temporary roles, and their function is to fill agile gaps. Many of these young people are unaware that they are being exploited or even that the behaviours they are engaged in are potentially criminal. Their motivations are highly varied and include the desire to be part of the group, help friends out with personal requests, and simply to have a buzz. These cascading levels of criminal exploitation, as outlined in Fig. 1, are not merely theoretical or illustrative but instructional. This conceptualisation of the ways that young people may be exploited provided insights into the mechanisms, but also opportunities for prevention and interruption. This model recognises the contextual harms that young people experience; well established risks that increase exposure to criminal harm.

This study supports and qualifies the fact that ecological stressors are experienced by some young people. These stressors, particularly when experienced in multiples and over time, create fractures that can be exploited by those engaged in organised crime. The 'business model' requires the exploitation of young people through existing relationships –often peer relations. On this rung young people may be unaware of the motivations of others and, as their role is often dynamic and short-lived, may never consider their role to have been the result of exploitation. A case in point was the Spring 2021 riots. It was widely reported at the time that young people were being exploited, and at the same time we can conclude that most went back to their normal lives without engaging in further violence after those riots. However, a smaller number of young people are more actively and persistently engaged in exploitative practices. Whilst the motivations may be similar (safety, status and belonging), these victims are more likely to have direct contact with individuals known to be actively engaged in organised crime, and exploited to perform specific functions, such as the concealment of drugs/weapons or the intimidation of others. On this rung it is more difficult for young people to maintain a non-criminal normal. They are required as individuals, as opposed to peer groups, to comply, and even where the 'request' appears to be benevolent failure to courteously comply is associated with some degree of risk. On the top rung young people are intimately connected to paramilitary members and organised crime groups. They are acutely vulnerable to a range of harms and actively engaged in criminal practices such as the supply and distribution of drugs. Given the different levels of need, distinct forms of identification and support may be required. This aligns well with the public health approach to violence prevention which generally focuses on three levels: primary, secondary and tertiary (Banyard and Hamby, 2022).

CASCADING LEVELS OF CHILD CRIMINAL EXPLOITATION
Perceptions of young people in NI

Paramilitaries/OCG's

Acutely vulnerable — **Least**
Supply, distribute, organise, intimidate, hold and conceal

Elders

Actively involved — **Few**
Intimidate, lure, conceal, move

Peers/Online

Agile Engagement — **Many**
Public disorder, riots, keeping watch, vandalism

Underlying vulnerabilities:

Gender, substance use, impulsivity, mental health, trauma, poor relationships/social supports, academic underachievement, truancy

Family functioning, transience, care experience, low supervision, parental mental health, parental substance use, family members involved in criminality

High levels of crime, established paramilitaries/organised crime, low collective efficacy, low trust in services, poverty

Prevention and support

Young people described the impact of CCE in a range of ways. Contextually, the presence of multiple organised crime groups contributed towards **ecological stress** whereby the entire community was affected both directly and indirectly. This **contextual harm** also elevated individual young people's **vulnerability** relative to others who did not live in such circumstances. The influence of paramilitaries and other organised criminal networks for instance permeated across many areas of life, and with members so embedded within the community the impact was that there was often an enduring – but generally unspecified – threat.

"You know people are watching you–it's not nice like and you just don't know when they're going to come after you" (FG5)

There has been increasing interest in the public health approach to the broad field of violence prevention (Williams and Donnelly, 2014), which is in many ways informed by an appreciation of social ecological perspectives on understanding complex human behaviour and interaction (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). This recognises that no single factor can explain why some people are at greater risk of violence than others, but rather that this occurs through a complex interplay of factors at different levels of society (Beaglehole and Yach, 2003). Specifically, individual, family, peer, community, school and wider macro structural and cultural factors are at play (Banyard and Hamby, 2022). The framework provides a direction in terms of policy and practice through primary, secondary and tertiary level interventions.

Primary
Primary prevention requires that through the use of administrative and empirical data, as well as community wisdom, risk and protective factors are well understood and directly targeted. This level of intervention and support is widely implemented and can engage a universal audience. The aim is to instil buffers against the vulnerabilities created by contextual harm and to prevent ecological stress and psychological strain from increasing the risk of criminal harm. Other frameworks provide guidance on the types of primary level support that could be useful, and this study certainly confirms the role of norms and values in the context of CCE in Northern Ireland. Young people live amongst, and have in many cases adopted, attitudes that normalise violence, intimidation, drug use and the presence of some organised criminal groups. Their beliefs however are often contradictory and therefore this could be an area ripe for primary level intervention.

There is promise in challenging the contradictions that permeate communities and contribute towards the pandemic of attitudes that endorse criminality and ultimately the criminal exploitation of children. The evidence from this study illustrates that young people have few safe spaces to critically engage with these thematic issues but are very willing participants with experience and ideas. Given the opportunity, young people can actively engage in meaningful ways with the issues affecting their lives, and become aware of the complexities around dominant assumptions. For example, whilst it was clear that some young people believed that one form of organised criminal network existed in part to keep their communities safe, the reality was that their communities were not safe.

"How do you explain, you've got these groups and they're working to get drugs out and police the area and keep the area safe, but you're also saying that there are a lot of drugs in the area?" (FG6)

By engaging with these contradictions young people are faced with cognitive tensions that could contribute towards new forms of understanding. Having access to safe spaces and positive role models may be one of the most cost effective and sustainable primary level interventions. The young people who took part in this study described in significant detail the ecological stress that contributed towards individual strains and a myriad of difficulties, referred to in the clinical literature as externalising challenges (Kar, 2019; Dodd et al., 2022) and in the criminological literature as criminal coping (Agnew, 1992). By reducing the amount of ecological stress through the provision of safe spaces, access and opportunity may be reduced.

"See in Belfast in particular, people of a young age don't get it. There is no good role models. In youth clubs and that you'll see people who are role models" (FG6)

Youth clubs may be the most obvious place, but it is also well established that the level of engagement in mainstream youth provision reduces significantly as young people progress through adolescence. Therefore there is a challenge for youth services at a community level, as well as for other sectors, to reflect on how best to actively engage vulnerable children and young people in pro-social and developmental activities, whilst at the same time providing safe spaces in the community.

Secondary
Secondary level interventions are more targeted in their nature and identify those most at risk of CCE and related harms. Using data and insights from those 'on the ground', secondary level interventions are most effective when they are underpinned by a clear theory of change, defined by measurable outcomes and activities informed by evidence. These responses require greater skill and specialism on the part of practitioners, as well as a recognition of the level of vulnerability among the target group. The challenges here are at least two-fold. On the one hand, there is the challenge of what to implement and how. On the other, there is an issue around identifying the most appropriate staff to lead on these actions. Both of these were apparent during the study.

In terms of what to implement, there was general interest in young people contributing to critical conversations on the issues that affect them (Walsh and Harland, 2019). All young people indicated that they benefited from the conversations they had during the focus groups:

"Be good to be made aware of the dangers of being trapped by people involved in it"

"You don't really talk about this. Even after X got killed, you don't really talk about it" (FG3)

"It's actually scaldy like. Yeah, it's nice. I was told this would be nothing but I like talking about this stuff..." (FG1)

Despite several groups indicating that they enjoyed taking part in the focus groups, which provided a space for them to engage in critical conversations regarding criminal exploitation of young people and the structures that facilitated that exploitation, there was a sense that school may not be the most appropriate place – principally because staff were resistant to this. However, others believed that if trained youth workers were accessible in school they could help to increase awareness of crime and criminal exploitation.

However, it appeared that something to also consider is the capacity and confidence of staff who facilitate such discussions. There was evidence from multiple focus groups that some staff lack the confidence to engage young people in critical conversations around criminal harm, with many also believing that young people were unmotivated to engage in such conversations.

"X told us this was going to be boring"

"Is this something that you would normally think about or talk about?"

"No" (FG1)

There was a general sense that in the case of serious risk nothing can be done. This was in part because of a lack of services, but mostly to do with a lack of confidence in existing services to materially affect change. Even if services were available, young people would balance any decision to engage with them alongside the potential harm to reputation, and even the risk of physical harm within the community.

"If paramilitaries find out that you're getting support then nobody will like them. Nobody likes a tout"

"You can't trust people to not say anything–even a social worker. The more people that know the more risk you're at. The group could find out. There's more chance. I know people who associate with those sorts of people and say it's always worse. I'm not sure what it's about. They don't want to get in trouble and want it to go to plan and don't want police to know. Even if you did tell, there's no point. There's so many people that would take their place and you put yourself at risk" (FG5)

For other young people, a conduit that could connect them to the services intended to support them may come in the form of credible messengers with credible messages. The young people who took part in this study provided counterfactual examples that were well intended but failed to have an impact.

"See going and sitting in a class and hearing about the dangers of drugs like–that doesn't help. It just doesn't help...There's people that come in here and talk to us about drugs and they think that it's going to be good but it bores the life out of you" (FG1)

This failure was in part related to the passive nature of the approach – young people believed that they were not asked about their lives, but just told what to do. It was also about the level of confidence that they had in the people presenting the message, and the lack of relationship that the messengers had with young people.

"It would be good for X and X to organise for people to come in who have experience in these things and that might tell young people what exploitation is" (FG5)

"You can't just sit someone down and ask them about selling drugs. You need to build up trust over weeks and weeks. People need alternatives" (FG6)

Within primary and secondary level interventions there is clear potential to leverage the role of youth workers who are often well placed to engage young people within a community setting – even within the school context (Thapar, 2021). However, young people also believed that whilst the youth worker could be a gatekeeper there was a need for other services wrapped around that therapeutic relationship. Although young people did not name this, what they appeared to be referring to was the idea of multidisciplinary supports with the youth and community worker providing access. Indeed, several young people believed that the concept of a 'service' physically housing a multi-disciplinary team was a good idea, insofar as it could potentially provide easy access to the services and support that young people require. However, initial optimism was tempered by the realities of living in a community where people police each other against the standards set by organised criminal groups.

"That would be good. That would be good. Actually... the people would talk like 'why are you going in there'...that would make it well worse" (FG1)

There was no consensus as to what this would look like in practice. For some, existing services were not credible supports and there was a lack of agreement on what specific activities could be useful.

"[existing services] don't work. People just need to stay away or just stay in for a while..." (FG1)

For others, it was less about the type of service and more about the barriers to accessing that service. For example, most young people did not believe that a community situated service would be appropriate, not least because the community would know that anyone attending could be 'touting'. The alternative would be to take the service out of the community and ensure that, as far as possible, practitioners were not identifiable as professionals.

"Better if it was out of the area. Better if people wore plain clothes so they just look like a 'family member'" (FG1)

Tertiary

There was a clear mental health impact, contributing to elevated psychological stress, which in turn created incentives for criminal coping. For several young people this extended beyond a vague description or general nod to the vernacular way in which mental health has become discussed in many communities. Many young people accurately described key constructs associated with diagnosable mental health conditions such as hyperarousal, reliving, and avoidant behaviours.

"This happened last year. For a while I was constantly thinking about it. I used to get real paranoid. They were seriously looking to hurt me. I got out. One of the guys who was involved drove past...and that really freaked me out" (FG5)

All of these symptoms have been implicated in criminal coping. That is, young people who experience significant and prolonged psychological stress and strain are at elevated risk of engaging in behaviours that are intended to mitigate risk and/or reduce such strain.

"Young people retreating to their own homes and excluding friends and missing school or leaving the area altogether. That's so sad" (FG1

"Would you say you were traumatised?"

"Oh yeah, yeah. See the first three or so days trying to sleep. What else can you do other than deal with it? Fegs and wee bit of drink. Relaxes you so it does" (FG5)

Studies on trauma have suggested that among the predictors of the onset of psychological stress are peri–trauma factors, including the presence or absence of social supports (Trickey et al., 2010; Duffy et al., 2021). Across this sample it was evident that when faced with significant stress and serious strain few had access to positive social supports and as a result would be at greater risk of developing some of the symptoms they described themselves.

"You can't go to your teachers. I don't know why people would think you could go to the teachers or your school. Nobody would do that"

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Indeed most of the young people were fatalistic in their attitudes towards services. Whilst most indicated that they were generally unaware of any such services that could meaningfully support them, they also reported being reluctant to access them should they exist.

"Just try to deal with it yourself. That just puts pressure and feeling like you can't do anything about it but that's because I don't know about the options. If there was options, maybe I would go, I don't know" (FG4)

"There is no services to get out of it–there's no point–there is no way out of it" (FG2)

"Well they're not going to do it independently, there's not going to be like 'fuck. I need to go to that service', you need that push" (FG4)

"You don't trust anyone. Even if you wanted to tell people, people would think you're a tout" (FG2)

"The more people know, the more you'll get in trouble. You need to have one person that you trust and tell them" (FG5)

Another reason was due to the perceived power of organised crime networks over young people. Young people did not perceive themselves as having any material agency, but instead as passive recipients of the harm decided upon by those engaged in the organised crime networks.
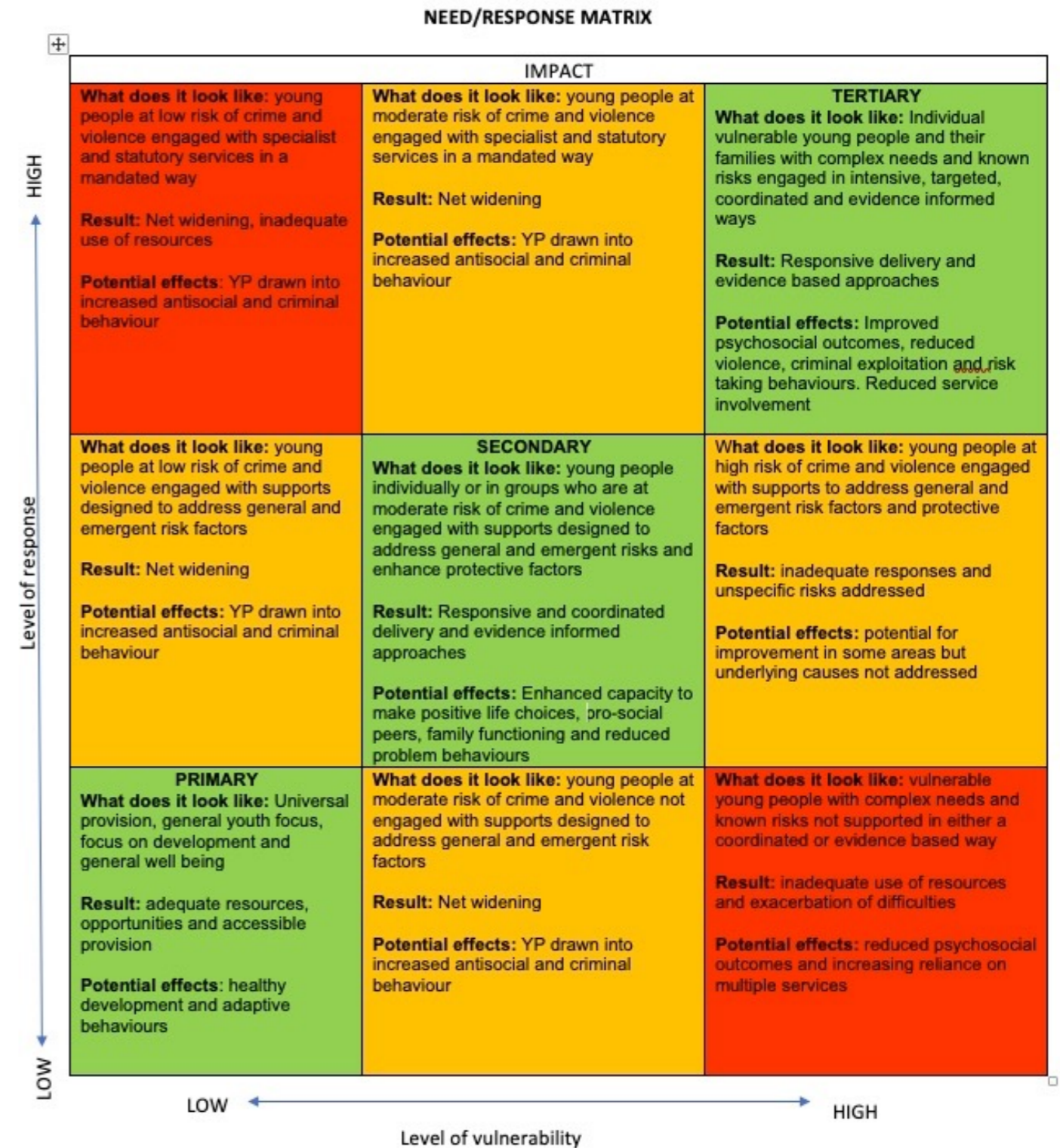
"Once that they've decided to do what they want to, there's nothing you can do. Never really reached out. Maybe mental health services would be useful" (FG4)

When the possibility of a service (not yet defined) was broached, several young people laughed about the prospect of being able to interrupt the plans of organised criminal networks.

"Like a protection plan against the UDA [laughs]. If they want you, they'll get you...you can't stop exploiters. You have to bring exploiters to the table" (FG2)

These comments reflect the challenge that service providers face. It is important but insufficient to find resources and create 'a service' that in theory could improve outcomes in this space. Instead, what these young people are challenging service designers to consider are the barriers facing them with respect to accessing services. Firstly, there are awareness level barriers. If young people are unaware of the presence and nature of services, they will not easily access them. Secondly, community norms moderate the extent to which young people will voluntarily engage in provision. If services are marred by rumour and the threat of reprisal young people will be afraid to engage. Thirdly, many of those most affected by violent criminal exploitation are young men. It is important to understand the lives and experiences of these young men in the context they live in. Help seeking is often construed as weakness and something that could distinguish them from the group. Locally constructed forms of masculinity prize strength and appear to reward stoicism. Services intended to engage those most acutely affected by criminal exploitation should take these gender norms into account and find ways to place less emphasis on vulnerability.

This graded approach to intervention (i.e. the use of primary, secondary and tertiary interventions) is useful as it both avoids the unnecessary 'net widening' effect of drawing in those who do not need or require specialist or mandated supports and helps to ensure that those in need are not merely offered universal services that are unlikely to improve outcomes. Indeed, without an appropriate understanding of need, responses cannot be matched to that need, and the absence of services could be as damaging and counterproductive as misaligned services. As Fig. 2 illustrates there is a need to consider this in service design and delivery.

NEED/RESPONSE MATRIX

	IMPACT	
What does it look like: young people at low risk of crime and violence engaged with specialist and statutory services in a mandated way **Result:** Net widening, inadequate use of resources **Potential effects:** YP drawn into increased antisocial and criminal behaviour	**What does it look like:** young people at moderate risk of crime and violence engaged with specialist and statutory services in a mandated way **Result:** Net widening **Potential effects:** YP drawn into increased antisocial and criminal behaviour	**TERTIARY** **What does it look like:** Individual vulnerable young people and their families with complex needs and known risks engaged in intensive, targeted, coordinated and evidence informed ways **Result:** Responsive delivery and evidence based approaches **Potential effects:** Improved psychosocial outcomes, reduced violence, criminal exploitation and risk taking behaviours. Reduced service involvement
What does it look like: young people at low risk of crime and violence engaged with supports designed to address general and emergent risk factors **Result:** Net widening **Potential effects:** YP drawn into increased antisocial and criminal behaviour	**SECONDARY** **What does it look like:** young people individually or in groups who are at moderate risk of crime and violence engaged with supports designed to address general and emergent risks and enhance protective factors **Result:** Responsive and coordinated delivery and evidence informed approaches **Potential effects:** Enhanced capacity to make positive life choices, pro-social peers, family functioning and reduced problem behaviours	**What does it look like:** young people at high risk of crime and violence engaged with supports to address general and emergent risk factors and protective factors **Result:** inadequate responses and unspecific risks addressed **Potential effects:** potential for improvement in some areas but underlying causes not addressed
PRIMARY **What does it look like:** Universal provision, general youth focus, focus on development and general well being **Result:** adequate resources, opportunities and accessible provision **Potential effects:** healthy development and adaptive behaviours	**What does it look like:** young people at moderate risk of crime and violence not engaged with supports designed to address general and emergent risk factors **Result:** Net widening **Potential effects:** YP drawn into increased antisocial and criminal behaviour	**What does it look like:** vulnerable young people with complex needs and known risks not supported in either a coordinated or evidence based way **Result:** inadequate use of resources and exacerbation of difficulties **Potential effects:** reduced psychosocial outcomes and increasing reliance on multiple services

Level of response — HIGH / LOW

Level of vulnerability — LOW ← → HIGH

Conclusions

Violence is one of the most pressing and pervasive trauma-inducing issues facing children and young people (Walsh, Doherty and Best, 2021). We know that in the context of Northern Ireland interpersonal violence is the most experienced form of adversity among young people (Bunting et al., 2020). Understanding and addressing the various forms of violence against children and young people is a public health priority given its prevalence and the inherent harms to society (Kieselbach and Butchart, 2015; Walsh, Doherty and Best, 2021). Child Criminal Exploitation is a specific manifestation of violence, directed through a collection of individuals for the perceived benefit of the group. Despite burgeoning evidence about its prevalence in other parts of the UK, the evidence base remains immature (Maxwell et al., 2019) - even more so in the context of NI. Whilst conscious efforts have been made to document young people's exposure to organised crime and paramilitary related harms in NI, there have been few attempts to situate, quantify and qualify this harm in the wider context and to include those exploitative practices that are often employed.

This study aimed to amplify the voices of young people living in areas characterised as being exposed to elevated rates of organised crime, who are therefore more vulnerable to child criminal exploitation. Through focus groups the perceptions and experiences of these young people around child criminal exploitation were documented and a number of important themes emerged for consideration.

Despite the prevalence of organised crime, violence, threat and intimidation in communities, young people were generally unaware of the ways in which organised criminal networks leverage the vulnerabilities of children for their own gain. It is clear that young people have few safe spaces to critically reflect on issues of violence and exploitation, but that they appreciated having the time to discuss issues that affect their lives during the focus groups. Through these focus groups young people described violent and criminally exploitative experience and observations. Through verbalising their experiences young people appeared to be become more aware of the nature of these experiences. Several indicated that they would engage in similar sessions where issues that affect them are discussed. Most believed that youth services could facilitate this, with schools also providing some potential. However, it was evident that few of these young people had positive learning experiences. This is a challenge to all sectors given the range of ecological stressors facing those young people most at risk of CCE.

Young people involved in targeted youth interventions and living across Northern Ireland were engaged as part of this study into perceptions and experiences of CCE. Despite being generally positive about their communities, young people described being exposed to a variety of ecological stressors that in combination contribute towards contextual harm. Living in areas with higher rates of contextual harm also appeared to be associated with elevated levels of paramilitary and organised crime activity. Interestingly, most young people distinguished between paramilitary related activity and other forms of organised crime. This compartmentalisation appeared to contribute towards mutually reinforcing these structures. For example, the greater the risk of harm from drug dealers, the greater the need for paramilitaries in communities to 'control' the supply and distribution.

Compared with criminal networks elsewhere, it appeared that the network's sphere of influence was pervasive, impacting on socio-cultural, political and economic areas of life. Whilst the risk factors associated with being more vulnerable to criminal exploitation in NI appear to be similar to those in other parts of the UK and Ireland, the contexts differs, as does the business model - the processes by which children and young people are exploited and to what end (see Table 3). For example, it was noted during the focus groups that, unlike organised crime networks in other areas, the potential reach of paramilitary and organised crime structures in Northern Ireland is wider. This has implications. As one young person noted, if a young person was 'under threat' of harm from a gang in England they could move to another community not under the control of that group. Whilst this is partially true of Northern Ireland, networks extend much wider, and if a particular group wanted to identify and harm a particular young person these young people believed that there were few places that could offer full protection. Another distinction was the perception that gangs in other areas are solely concerned with the functioning and growth of the 'business'. Conversely, these young people believed that the functions of paramilitary and organised crime groups were much broader in Northern Ireland, with influence extending into social and cultural life. This has implications for how we understand CCE and design responses to both reduce exposure and mitigate its effects.

Table 3: Key features of CCE in NI

	Other areas	NI
Geography	Leadership is limited to specific and often contested hyper-local areas	Whilst contested, wider network of larger communities
Risks	Systemic	Systemic
Degree of influence	Often limited to members and those benefitting from the supply of drugs and weapons	Influence extends to a range of areas across the community (culturally, socially, politically, economically)
Purpose and function	Primarily material gain and often through supply/distribution of drugs	Whilst material gain is believed to be important for one structure, not considered the main purpose of the other. Functionally, paramilitary OCGs are sometimes believed to provide a policing function
Facilitators	Poverty, material and symbolic reward, deprivation, threat and intimidation	Poverty, material and symbolic reward, deprivation, threat and intimidation. History of family involvement and attitudes that endorse violence and criminal harm Perception of purpose (e.g. protect the community)
Structures	Drug enterprises	The creation and illusion of distinct networks of paramilitary and drug enterprises that are mutually reinforcing Cascading levels of influence and exploitation

Although the evidence continues to develop, what appears to be true of the organised crime business models in other parts of the UK is that, despite the harm caused, their reach and influence into and across multiple domains of community life is relatively limited. Their primary motivation appears to be largely for material gain, but their strategic influence is often limited to specific geographical areas. Conversely, the influence of paramilitaries as one of the most enduring criminal networks in Northern Ireland, exists within a networked social ecology of harm, such that they are maybe not best considered as distinct entities, but rather embedded groups that respond to, as well as create, community norms. These norms can drive and sustain violent and exploitative behaviours. Rather than solely seeking to influence and exploit young people for material gain (for instance through drug supply), paramilitaries can simultaneously endorse and exclude various forms of criminal activity. Within this hierarchy certain types of organised crime are not only approved of but facilitated. The evidence from these focus groups is that this approval contributes to wider community norms, reflective of the long arm of paramilitarism. In some areas their activity can impact on multiple domains of life and on whole sections of the community. They create a narrative that, in the absence of trust in public bodies, they purport to perform a community function. They benefit entirely from questioning policing tactics, and as communities become more insular – more suspicious, the function they perform includes an increased sense of safety, status and belonging. Of course for victims this is not the case. If community norms in part drive and sustain them, then it is important but insufficient to target the networks alone. Communities within which these networks are embedded must be engaged to coproduce new and non-violent norms.

The risk factors associated with becoming a victim of child criminal exploitation are often the same as those for being vulnerable to other forms of violence. CCE cannot be disentangled from these, but instead should be seen as a specific manifestation situated on the spectrum of violence experienced in communities that have endured transgenerational violence. If risk factors can be organised within young people's nested relationships (family, peer, school community, state), then so too can protective factors (Craig et al., 2017). Evidence from this study suggests that many of the antecedents of CCE could be modifiable, with active targeting of protective factors at an individual, peer, family and community level showing most promise (Kovalenko et al., 2020). The UN provide a cluster of expert informed strategies to respond to and prevent violence against children and young people. The seven INSPIRE strategies include:

1. The implementation and enforcement of laws
2. Norms and values
3. Safe environments
4. Parents and caregiver support
5. Income and economic strengthening
6. Response and support services
7. Education and life skills

In terms of primary and secondary level responses, evidence from this study illustrates that person centered and thematically focussed youth services can provide a natural environment to engage young people in multiple INSPIRE strategies, provide safe environments that enable young people to critically engage in thematic conversations, and increase their awareness of criminal exploitation. They can also provide pathways for young people to actively engage in activities that buffer the effects of community level risks, and increase leadership opportunities for young people to engage their peers as credible messengers. Drawing on the best available evidence, Table 4 illustrates a range of primary, secondary and tertiary level interventions implemented across multiple systems.

Table 4: Illustrative example of systemic public health interventions

Setting	Target	Mode of delivery	Level	Secondary Outcome	Primary Outcome
Home	Family functioning Parenting capacity Child development	Individual	Primary Secondary Tertiary	Alternatives to violence	Elimination of CCE
School	Educational and vocational attainment Life-skills Conflict resolution Pro social engagement Peer relations	Peer/group	Primary Secondary	Life, cognitive and emotional skills Cultural and behavioural norms Risk/harm reduction	
Community	Pro social engagement Conflict resolution Harm reduction Social supports Hot spot policing Cultural norms	Family Community	Primary Secondary Tertiary	Change in routine activities Environment modification Improved wellbeing	
Clinical	Reduction in distress and morbidity		Secondary Tertiary		

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Recent evaluations from services commissioned within the Tackling Paramilitarism and Organised Crime Programme have demonstrated the effectiveness of INSPIRE related strategies and their contribution to addressing complex challenges (Walsh, 2022). However, not all delivery is equal, and there is evidence of several implementation barriers that should also be consciously considered as part of a strategic response. This includes workers' own attitudes towards criminal exploitation and their level of confidence in engaging children and young people around the issue. There is a need to increase worker capacity to engage vulnerable young people in discussion of the thematic areas of violence and criminal exploitation.

Furthermore, the criminogenic effects of increasing political uncertainty, economic pressures, lack of trust in key statutory agencies including law enforcement, and the exacerbation of pre-existing mental health issues are all likely to increase incentives for organised criminal networks to extend their operations in the pursuit of greater control and/or material gain, whilst at the same time contributing towards increasing incentives for children and young people to find safety, status and belonging.

Despite some claims that girls are being overlooked and underrepresented with respect to the nature, rate and impact of criminal exploitation (National Crime Agency, 2017; Wedlock and Melina, 2020), it seems that the processes at play in other parts of the UK differ from NI and the types of activities that these young people were aware of appeared to suggest that young women's criminal exploitation rarely extends to violence, intimidation, vandalism and/or the distribution of drugs in the way that boys and young men would be groomed. Girls and young women are instead more likely to be victims of sexual violence, and as the degree of influence increases to become more engaged in criminal activity, including luring victims to specified areas to be physically harmed.

In terms of a response, there is currently little in the way of best practice - certainly not responses that have been tested and demonstrated to contribute to any material reduction in child criminal exploitation or any alleviation of the harms produced. However, there is emerging evidence from the Tackling Paramilitarism and Organised Crime Programme around the harms of paramilitary violence and how interventions are contributing to reducing both the prevalence and impact of such harms. These efforts are informed by the public health framework, which is underpinned by the collation and sharing of reliable data, joined up planning and multi-pronged approaches, and has significant utility (Krug et al., 2002). In the context of CCE this framework, which places emphasis on an 'upstream/downstream' approach (McKinlay, 1979), could be operationalised at a local level using approaches such as 'Common Purpose' (see for example Walsh, 2021), which can help partners to forensically understand issues and connect those issues to the best available evidence.

On a very broad level, despite their often-fatalistic attitudes, these young people believed that a number of approaches could be beneficial. At the primary level the provision of safe spaces and positive social supports could buffer against contextual harm (Trickey et al., 2010; Craig et al., 2017). At a secondary level equipping specialist practitioners to engage young people in critical conversations that expose the lies of organised criminal networks and challenge the norms that drive and sustain criminal harm could be useful. Indeed, the young people in this study reported that they would be keen to talk about issues such as this, which reflect their lived experiences, which they do not routinely get the opportunity to do. At a tertiary level it is clear that even among this group there are probable psychological stresses, personal strains and diagnosable mental health disorders which could exacerbate contextual harm to facilitate criminal harm. These young people, living within communities characterised as having elevated rates of ecological stress, are also impacted by a range of other systemic factors, which when combined increase individual level strains.

These strains can contribute towards stress responses including criminal coping, made even more possible in the absence of positive social supports and in the presence of organised crime groups. In the context of strains and ecological stressors, vulnerable children and young people are at elevated risk of being exploited by criminals and engaging in criminal behaviour themselves, thus transitioning between the spheres of vulnerability and culpability (see Fig. 3). One of the difficulties is that those engaged in criminality (through exploitative pathways) can become further strained, and whilst culpable, actually become more vulnerable over time, neutralising the harm caused to others. Young people living in a context of chronic contextual harm, with multiple ecological stressors and without adequate social supports to buffer against those risks, are motivated by three core concerns: the need for safety; the need for a sense of belonging; and the desire for status. Anchored to these motivations are similarly motivated groups intent on implementing their business model, which, through exploitative practices increases the strains on already vulnerable young people. As they become more strained, research demonstrates that there are significant criminogenic effects, as young people 'criminally cope' with the criminal harm they are now exposed to. The more chronically involved they become, and the more acutely they are exploited, the more young people may try to neutralise the harm to themselves as well as the harm caused to others. Again, without adequate social and other therapeutic supports, the contextual harm that young people live in is likely to become increasingly elevated. This conceptualisation, based on combined insights from focus groups and research evidence, also suggests that the process may be cyclical, with many opportunities to intervene, interrupt harm and improve outcomes.

Figure 3: A strain and ecological stress model of CCE

CCE: A Strain & Ecological Stress Model
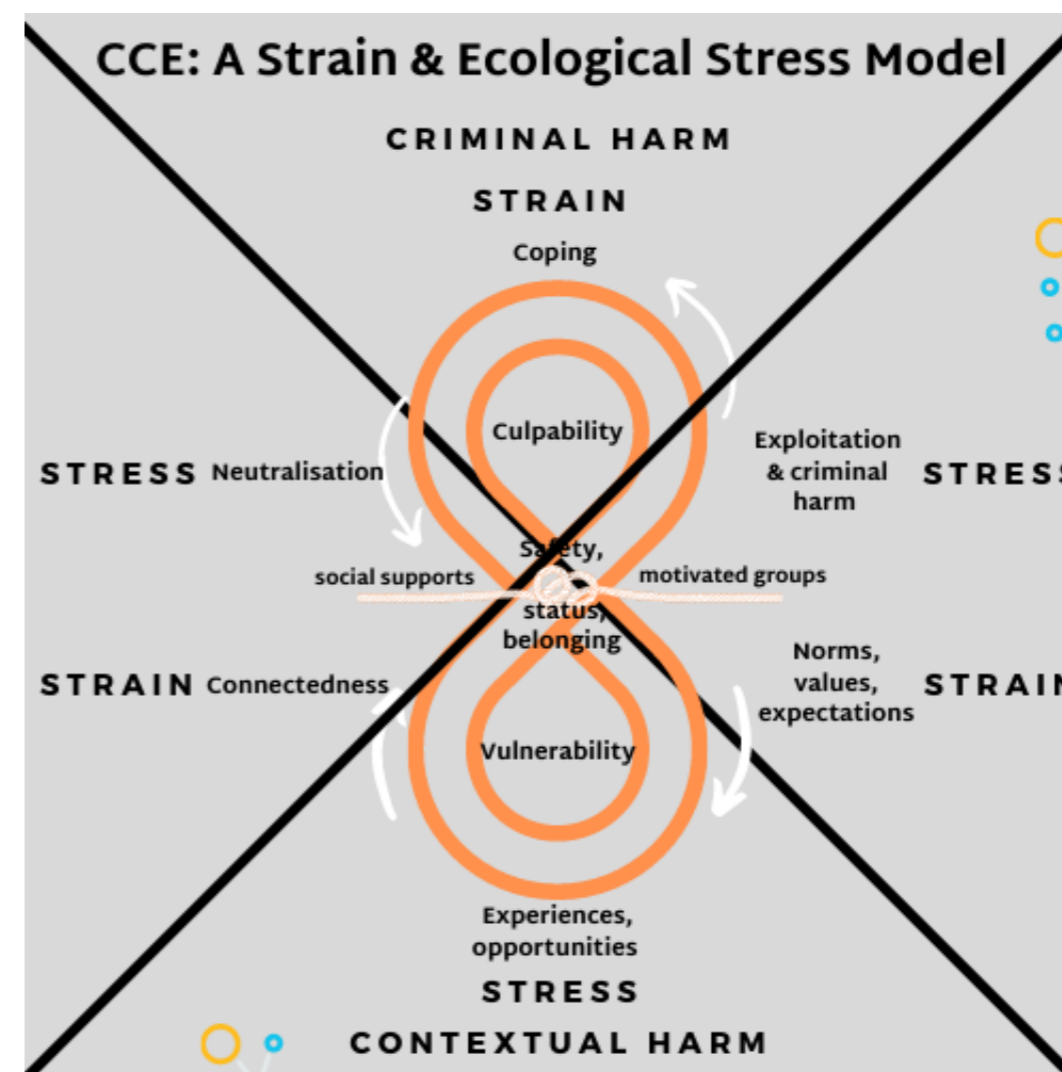
Future directions

This study suggests that there is a need for a specific emphasis on understanding young people's exposure to child criminal exploitation and the harms that it contributes to in the context of NI through high quality and reliable research. Whilst this research points in this direction it does not conclusively estimate prevalence nor fully capture the harms using validated measures.

Young people agree with the working definition of the Task and Finish Group, but several participants suggested including additional elements, including the psychological impact of CCE. Further, there was a recommendation to develop a child friendly version of the definition.

Young people have a desire to engage in critical conversations about issues that affect their lives. This desire is enshrined in the UNCRC and regionally anchored to several high-level policy frameworks. Despite this, many young people do not have the opportunity to reflect on and discuss significant issues such as CCE. It is recommended that efforts are made to facilitate safe spaces for young people to critically engage with sensitive issues such as CCE and other forms of violence. Youth services and schools may provide environments conducive to this, but it must be recognised that many of those who are most vulnerable may not be actively involved in school or routinely engaged in mainstream youth provision. Targeted youth services may help to bridge this challenge, and efforts through the Tackling Paramilitarism Programme could be reviewed, adapted and scaled to the context of CCE.

The effects of community violence, organised crime and CCE are variable in terms of frequency and impact. There is utility in employing a public health response to CCE which ensures the delivery of a suite of provision across primary, secondary, tertiary and suppression levels. There are existing examples of good practice which could be leveraged in any response to CCE. Related to this is the need for awareness raising at a primary level to increase young people's understanding of violence and criminal exploitation; targeted supports within areas most affected by organised crime to increase the protective factors which are most likely to buffer against other ecological stress factors, and the provision of specialist and therapeutic services for those most acutely affected.

INSPIRE strategies for violence prevention seem particularly well suited to addressing risk factors. In particular, the community norms and narratives appear to facilitate the sustained and enduring presence of organised criminal networks and enable them to operate with relative impunity. Challenging these community narratives and fostering change narratives could be particularly useful.

Whilst responses are yet to be tested, there is a need to focus on agreeing well-defined and measurable outcomes and evaluating those responses in order to prevent exposure and related harms. Responses could be most beneficial when they target the **etiology** or causes of harm; the **behaviours** associated with CCE; and the **implementation** of those responses.

Risks exist across the social ecology, such that a concerted and truly connected effort across systems is required. This may require leveraging existing strategic structures to support cross-sector working using tested process frameworks such as Common Purpose.

The risk factors are well established, including educational underachievement. Whilst this study once again points to the potential harm of this, there is a pressing need to move beyond describing the risks to developing and testing responses that address them.

This study suggests that, whilst widespread, the ways in which children are exploited are differentiated by gender. A gender conscious approach should be applied in any policy or practical response.

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