

Circles of analysis: a systemic model of child criminal exploitation

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Abstract

Purpose – *Child criminal exploitation (CCE) emerges from the complex interplay between potential targets, motivated perpetrators and conducive environments. Drawing on contextual safeguarding and rational choice theory. The purpose of this paper is to explain the relational dynamics that lead to CCE in terms of complex systems.*

Design/methodology/approach – *This paper reviews the existing criminological and public health perspectives on CCE and compare against current assessment protocols used to identify child victims of exploitation.*

Findings – *Findings demonstrate a conceptual and empirical flaw in existing practice. This flaw can be understood in terms of a failure to include both environmental conditions and the perpetrator's motivation when trying to prevent CCE.*

Research limitations/implications – *To correct this, this paper develops an original systemic model called circles of analysis. This model builds on contextual safeguarding to overcome this identified flaw by also including perpetrator motivation to develop a Systemic Investigation, Protection and Prosecution Strategy.*

Practical implications – *It is worth considering as to whether our model can be scaled up to look at trafficking of children and adults for modern slavery, servitude, forced and compulsory labour in different contexts and jurisdictions. Alongside this, is there capacity to build perpetrator behaviours into the contextual safeguarding model?*

Social implications – *The potential for further development and alignment with the principles of contextual safeguarding is tantalising, and it is hoped that the contribution to this important special edition will open up new avenues for collaboration with both academics and practitioners who are concerned with protecting children and combatting CCE.*

Originality/value – *This strategy is uniquely designed to improve how police and social workers identify and investigate CCE and safeguard potential victims and survivors.*

Keywords *Public health, Criminology, Complexity theory, Rational choice theory, Contextual safeguarding, Child criminal exploitation*

Paper type *Research paper*

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Introduction: a new model for understanding child criminal exploitation

In this paper, we argue that despite the UK's robust and world-leading set of child-safeguarding systems, along with knowledge and expertise supported by strong and sophisticated civil and criminal legislation, efforts to protect children and prevent exploitation are undermined by false assumptions and reductive responses (Broad, 2018). Contextual safeguarding has enabled both policy and practice to recognise the vulnerabilities and threats to health, welfare and development that are faced and experienced by older children and adolescents to include extra familial relationships and social networks within different domains. This has been a major contribution to improving child safeguarding. We build on this by addressing the motivation and characteristics of those who perpetrate and participate in the recruitment, control and criminal exploitation of children in various contexts (Longfield, 2019).

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Child criminal exploitation (CCE) refers to the selection, recruitment and control of a child in order for the child to commit crimes for and on the behalf of another. The exploitation of the child is dependent upon an imbalance of power in favour of the perpetrator (Beckett and Warrington, 2014) who controls the child in order that they commit crimes “by proxy.”

Whilst not a new phenomenon, CCE has proliferated in recent years, becoming a major cause for concern in relation to children’s safety and welfare. Although more recent, CCE mirrors the rise in concern about child sexual exploitation (CSE) that followed several high-profile controversies (e.g. Rotherham 1997–2013; Oxfordshire 2004–2012), however, to date, responses to CCE have been inconsistent and often contradictory (Longfield, 2019; Children’s Society, 2019). Despite domestic legislation designed to protect the welfare of children; international conventions to prevent trafficking, slavery, servitude, forced labour and exploitation of children; and internationally agreed non-prosecution principles concerning victims of trafficking that have been forced to engage in criminality, children and vulnerable adults are continuing to be arrested, charged and prosecuted rather than protected and supported towards safety and recovery (Burland, 2017b). Consequently, those that are motivated to exploit children by using and controlling them to commit crime remain undetected and free to continue their poly-criminal enterprises with impunity.

CCE is not a single event crime with a simple linear causal pathway by which victims can be identified by fixed lists of indicators and “risk factors.” CCE must be understood as a pattern of behaviour or events that emerge from the relational dynamics between children, motivated perpetrators and the environment that they both share over time (Desai *et al.*, 2002; Hart *et al.*, 2003; Finkelhor, 2008; Douglas *et al.*, 2013; Beckett and Warrington, 2014). By understanding this in terms of complexity, we propose an innovative new approach: The Systemic Investigation Protection and Prosecution Strategy (SIPPS) for CCE. This approach was originally developed by the lead author, along with Caroline Haughey QC in 2014 as an approach to organising and testing evidence in cases of modern slavery. This was an extremely complex trafficking case concerning a 48-count indictment with offences ranging from trafficking to rape to misconduct in public office and blackmail. One of the victims was a particularly vulnerable 21-year-old female who had been locked in a room for a period of about four months and repeatedly raped by the main defendant.

The evolution of SIPPS began with a review of the accounts of the complainant and main defendant. Advice was provided to the prosecuting counsel on the means by which she could most effectively cross-examine both. This advice addressed each issue that gave counsel cause for concern and the subsequent conviction of the defendant led to him receiving a 38-year sentence. This case pre-dated the current vulnerable witness guidelines and the SIPPS approach is credited by Caroline Haughey QC with ensuring the victim’s engagement across two trials.

SIPPS was refined and formalised for use in assessing risk for CSE (Barlow, 2017) and is primarily deployed to map the aetiology and complexity of CCE as an emergent pattern of behaviour and its potential harmful impact on children. This strategy is grounded in complex systems theory which advances traditional systems theory by explaining that there are agents of the system who behave in ways that affect one another. According to complexity theory, a system builds upon structures that self-organise by interacting with their environments. They are flexible and adaptive in changing circumstances and can transform small-scale (micro-state) irregularities into large-scale (macro-state) patterns. This makes them robust and resilient over time (Hassett and Stevens, 2014).

The circles of analysis model represents the pattern of criminal exploitation that emerges from the interactions between the child target for exploitation and their environment, the motivated exploiter and the environment and the interactions (relationship) between the targeted child and the motivated exploiter (Jennings, 2014). The model integrates criminological theories of victimology and criminogenesis, offering these as a theoretical

support for contextual safeguarding, public health and situational crime prevention approaches to the protection of children; disruption of organised crime; and the pursuit, prosecution and punishment of the perpetrators. We have found that suitable statutory tools and professional knowledge exists but existing policies and protocols lack a clear theoretical foundation and provide ineffective and unreliable frameworks for practice. The circles of analysis provides the theoretical model for describing and explaining the phenomenon of CCE. The SIPPS provides a theory and evidence-based approach to structured professional judgement and decision-making in the investigation of cases of CCE. This includes disruption, arrest and prosecution of perpetrators; the safeguarding of children at risk – or who have been – victims of exploitation.

Child criminal exploitation and modern slavery: the emergence of county lines

The Modern Slavery Act was introduced into UK legislation in 2015 with the purpose of consolidating existing offences, improving support for victims and ensuring that perpetrators receive suitable punishment. The Act incorporates different aspects of exploitation under the umbrella term “modern slavery,” including human trafficking, slavery, servitude, forced and compulsory labour. While the Act provides parameters as to what constitutes an offence, there continues to be significant academic debate over the terminological choices regarding the use of the word “slavery” to refer to contemporary issues incorporating some degree of exploitation.

One key concern is that the connotations associated with the term “slavery” relate to some of the most serious human rights violations ever experienced throughout history, and that assigning this word to contemporary situations, especially those where the exploitation is less severe, serves to diminish the experiences of those who were enslaved in the past (Beutin, 2017). It is also challenged that there is no clear segregation between the term modern slavery and other forms of exploitation, and thus that it fails to determine a specific category of persons (O’Connell Davidson, 2015).

This is not the space to try and tackle this terminological debate, nor can it adequately examine the potential harms of an Act whose definitional boundaries are not fixed, but one key positive of the broad definitions used within the Modern Slavery Act is the support it affords to those victims who sit on the cusp of so many different forms of exploitation. Where previously they may not have met the criteria to receive statutory support, or their perpetrators’ crimes may not have fit neatly into any specific prosecutorial legislation, the wide remit of the Modern Slavery Act gives them a place where their experiences can be acknowledged.

While modern slavery, like any crime involving exploitation, is notoriously difficult to quantify, statistics are collected through the National Referral Mechanism (NRM) – the UK’s system for identifying and supporting potential victims [1] of modern slavery. Although the data collected by the NRM is flawed in many ways – for example, it only counts those who have been identified, and adults must consent to referral into the NRM, therefore it is not clear how representative the figures are (Cockbain and Bowers, 2019) – it provides the most reliable non-estimated set of statistics relating to modern slavery in the UK. The NRM statistics indicate a significant increase in the numbers of individuals identified as potential victims of modern slavery in the UK over time, as illustrated in Table 1 below.

These statistics might initially raise concern with the habitual annual increase in the numbers; however, this is perhaps less likely to be representative of an increase in potential victims each year, and more likely indicative of an increased awareness of modern slavery and understanding of how it should be recognised and responded to. Modern slavery training has increasingly been included in the training requirements of front-line practitioners from police and social workers to health staff and safeguarding teams. Increased modern slavery training and the resulting improved understanding of the forms of

Table 1 Number of potential victims

Year	No. of potential victims	No. of potential victims who were children
2013 (National Crime Agency, 2014)	1,746	450
2014 (National Crime Agency, 2015)	2,340	671
2015 (National Crime Agency, 2016)	3,266	982
2016 (National Crime Agency, 2017)	3,805	1,278
2017 (National Crime Agency, 2018)	5,145	2,118
2018 (National Crime Agency, 2019)	6,993	3,137
2019 (Home Office, 2020)	10,627	4,550
2020 (Gov.uk, 2021)	10,613 ^a	4,946

Note: ^aA potential reason for the slight decrease in numbers of potential victims in 2020 would relate to the COVID-19 pandemic in which lockdown meant a reduced likelihood of people being identified, rather than a reduction in people being victimised

exploitation it can take could also explain the increase in figures of children identified as caught in situations of criminal exploitation, though it should be acknowledged that an expansion of organised crime gangs (OCGs) operating in certain forms of CCE has been recognised in recent years.

Despite the overall slight reduction in the total number of potential victims referred into the NRM in 2020 (illustrated in Table i above), the number of referrals for child potential victims actually increased from 2019 to 2020. In total 51% of those children identified in 2020 were victims of criminal exploitation, and 93% of those were male (Gov.uk, 2021).

CCE fits the Modern Slavery Act's definition of modern slavery; however, this is not to say that any child embroiled in criminal activity is a victim, as there are instances in which children commit criminal acts of their own volition (Robinson *et al.*, 2018). CCE can take many forms, including forced begging, shoplifting, cannabis cultivation and "county lines." County lines is a form of drug dealing used by OCGs, where gangs "typically use children and young people as runners to move drugs and money to and from the urban area and this often involves them being exploited through deception, intimidation, violence, debt bondage, grooming and/or trafficking by the gang" (Whittaker *et al.*, 2018, p. 96). Of children identified as potential victims of modern slavery in the UK in 2020, criminal exploitation was the most common form of exploitation suffered (Gov.uk, 2021). The statistical breakdown of these potential victims shows that 40% of children (1,544) identified as potential victims of criminal exploitation in 2020 had been exploited in situations of county lines; 81% of whom were male.

While CCE is not new, the ways in which it transpires evolve in response to the opportunities and environments at play. Children and vulnerable adults are often targeted because they are easy to manipulate and control, less likely to be detected and are cheap to employ (Williams and Finlay, 2018). CCE often involves grooming through which the perpetrator gains the trust and complicity of the victim; this might be through providing affection, gifts or money and the perpetrator maintains complicity by withdrawing those rewards, threatening or committing violence should the child indicate a reluctance to commit, or continue committing, the criminal acts (Densley, 2012; Stone, 2018). In such a situation, the child is both entirely reliant on, and terrified of, their perpetrator which leads to a paradoxical attachment to the person controlling them (Cantor and Price, 2007). When a child is so completely attached to their perpetrator, successful safeguarding interventions can be incredibly difficult.

Child poverty: child criminal exploitation, drugs and public health

Public health is rooted in the philosophy of providing the maximum benefit for the most people. A public health approach to reducing levels of criminal exploitation requires developing insights into the "causes of the causes" of criminality, offending and victimisation. This goes beyond situating the problem with the child and their family, to

investigating the opportunities that allow for such criminality and identifying where organised abuse is occurring. A way to achieve this is through examining and aligning key data on the social determinants of health alongside characteristics of criminally exploited young people to establish correlative patterns which (if identified) enable early intervention to break the cycles that lead to crime. CCE, by nature, is covert and its victims are often hidden. Children and young people that have been exploited do not necessarily recognise themselves as victims, and if they do, may feel ashamed of their predicament with little trust in statutory agencies to report their situation. Indeed, CCE victims have often been arrested numerous times for other offences such as public order offences and petty crime.

As one form of CCE, county lines is a growing social issue in the UK that, in recent years, has dominated the discourse on CCE. The availability of drugs is at an all-time high (Black, 2020) which only exacerbates further the threat of criminal exploitation for children and vulnerable adults through the county lines model of drug trafficking. Described as an epidemic (Pitts, 2020), county lines has been heralded as the next big grooming scandal (Calouri, 2017), with children and young people forced into involvement through manipulation, coercion, fear and violence (Children's Society, 2019).

The level of violent coercion used by those that traffic and exploit children and young people is often underestimated. Fear of retribution from perpetrators prevents disclosure and often causes victims to deny that they have been exploited. The hidden nature of trafficking and criminal exploitation means that victims are kept in isolation and are often trapped by, or dependent upon the perpetrators. Those trafficked from outside the country may be transported illegally and find themselves treated as illegal immigrants by police and border agencies before their real situation is realised. Other vulnerabilities, such as physical, cognitive, psychiatric and emotional impairment, as well as language barriers can preclude trafficked people seeking help (Haughey *et al.*, 2020).

There are no fixed variables that increase a child's vulnerability to exploitation, making it difficult to identify *which* children are at increased risk and *why*, which requires analysis of the effects of socioeconomic inequality in the UK, the criminogenic effects of public policy and legislation and the far-reaching consequences these have on outcomes for young people (Marmot *et al.*, 2020). Recent data indicates a deterioration in child health in England as social conditions worsen. Increasing inequalities lead to higher levels of need and deprivation, resulting in the lives of those "towards the bottom of the social hierarchy" becoming more difficult (Marmot *et al.*, 2020, p. 149). Children and young people within these social strata are at increased vulnerability to gang involvement and CCE (Children's Society, 2019).

The significant impact that poverty has on children and young people is well established, altering their life course and setting in motion a disadvantaged path of socioeconomic and health outcomes (The Children's Society, 2017; Ayre, 2016). The 10 million children living in poverty in England (Department for Work and Pensions, 2019) are significantly more likely to experience other adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) than their peers higher on the social gradient (Felitti *et al.*, 1998; Social Mobility Commission, 2017). ACEs include exposure to domestic abuse, child abuse and neglect, substance misuse, criminality, mental health issues and becoming a looked after child, characteristics which are also considered factors of vulnerability to criminal exploitation (Children's Society, 2019; Longfield, 2019). The relationship between poverty and CCE is unsurprising when considering how perpetrators identify a child's needs or aspirations, and recruit and ensnare the child by tapping those needs.

CCE is contingent on the purposeful targeting of vulnerable groups considered as "easier" to manipulate and coerce, therefore for children with Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) who (generally) have a reduced capacity to process factual and contextual information to make informed decisions, rendering them especially vulnerable.

Children with SEND constitute 40% of criminally exploited children, with reports that perpetrators are known to specifically target local special educational facilities (Longfield, 2019; Children's Society, 2019, p. 34). Evidence also suggests that criminally exploited children and gang-associated children are more likely to have undiagnosed learning needs.

There have been well-documented links between absences from mainstream education and safeguarding concerns, and data from recent years show a rapid increase of permanent exclusions (71% since 2012/2013). Excluded children face increased risk of exploitation in comparison to their non-excluded peers (even those with ACEs) (Black, 2020). Young people out of mainstream education are at particular risk of exploitation, both because of the ACEs leading to the exclusion and because, practically, they are more accessible to groups striving to exploit them, with pupil referral units often being targeted by perpetrators (The Children's Society, 2019). Children who self-identify as gang members are over five times more likely to be excluded from mainstream education compared to their equivalent non-gang affiliated peers (16% vs 3%) (Office for National Statistics, 2019). At an already increased risk of exploitation, excluded children are ten times more likely to suffer from a mental health condition, making them prime targets for grooming (Gill *et al.*, 2017), alongside being twice as likely to self-harm, possibly illustrating the extent of their trauma (Longfield, 2019). Mental health issues are consistently overrepresented among gang-associated young people, proffered as a result of living in a violent environment and exposure to the criminal justice system (World Health Organisation, 2019).

CCE requires a comprehensive safeguarding response rooted in the public health ethos of early intervention and prevention that duly incorporates and acknowledges the systemic predisposing preconditions for both victims and perpetrators and the duality of these roles. This approach highlights the nuances of victimisation; however, the identification of characteristics of children vulnerable to exploitation is not enough in isolation to equip us to protect them. The contextual safeguarding approach enables us to have a wider perspective and insight of the situations and relationships in which CCE is likely to manifest. Public health and social care responses to CCE do not converge with the criminal justice response which runs in parallel, to a different agenda: linear criminal justice approaches reduce youth offending to identification of the offence and the perpetrator, but fail to explore the offence as symptomatic of other causes including social pressures or coercive control by organised crime (Shaw and Greenhow, 2020; Sturrock and Holmes, 2015).

Closing the child criminal exploitation circle: introducing the perpetrator to contextual safeguarding

Having established the relationship between health inequalities, child deprivation and child exploitation, we now explore the safeguarding landscape to demonstrate an important conceptual and empirical gap in current theory and practice. Although contextual safeguarding goes a long way towards filling this gap, we argue that to develop a full ecosystem for understanding CCE and child protection, the perpetrator must also be included. Contextual safeguarding is fully discussed and justified by Firmin (2020) and other articles in this special edition, so we shall not engage in a full exposition again, but instead opt for a rudimentary distillation of safeguarding policy and practice. At its most simplistic level, standard child safeguarding focuses on the child's home, family and close acquaintances. Risks are understood at this level, and the response is usually via social work intervention with the family or, as an ultimate intervention, legal proceedings leading to removal of the child from the home. Contextual safeguarding brings something else to the table when thinking about child protection, which is the role of the wider community of peers, neighbourhoods, social media and schools. Contextual safeguarding therefore provides a more comprehensive approach to understanding the risks to child safety that exist beyond the home. This also includes the capacity of this wider network to provide

meaningful safeguarding that focuses not only on the child's immediate home setting but also the wider environment (or context) in which the child lives.

Contextual safeguarding extends the *locus* of child protection thinking from the “home” to include the “environment.” The effect of this strategy is to draw crime prevention and community safety approaches into safeguarding thinking and practice. Crime prevention and community safety approaches rely heavily on rational choice (Becker, 1968; Clarke and Felson, 1993; Cornish and Clarke, 1986) and routine activity theories (Cohen and Felson, 1979; Felson, 1998) to explain the mechanisms by which reductions in crime and anti-social behaviour can be achieved. Rational choice theory explains perpetrator behaviour using a broadly economic “costs-benefits” analysis, arguing that if the benefits outweigh the costs, an offence will be committed. Similarly, routine activity theory identifies the pre-requisites necessary for a crime to occur. These revolve around the intersection of a motivated perpetrator, suitable target and absence of capable guardians (e.g. police, parents, neighbours, park wardens). Routine activity contains an element of lifestyle theory (Hindelang *et al.*, 1978) insofar as it explains changes in the crime rate in relation to changes in where people spend their time (e.g. more women in paid employment leads to fewer capable guardians in residential neighbourhoods during office hours, leading to a corresponding rise in burglary) (Cohen and Felson, 1979). These elements of lifestyle theory speak directly to the principles of contextual safeguarding and our model, as both rely heavily upon the relational and interactional context in which risks to children emerge and are managed. However, rational choice and routine activity theories essentially presume the existence of perpetrators and provide no causal explanation for why some people turn to criminality. Instead, they proffer the underpinning change mechanism for crime prevention and community safety interventions that seek to “target harden” [2] buildings and people, thereby increasing the effort and risk and reducing the reward involved in committing an offence, deterring perpetrators as costs begin to outweigh benefits.

The significance of this is that it locates contextual safeguarding strategies within a theoretical framework that foregrounds situational and social crime prevention strategies that say nothing about *why* people offend. This is not a criticism of contextual safeguarding (though is a well-established critique of rational choice and routine activity theories), which we have already stated adds considerably to the concept and practice of child protection by developing a systemic model that moves beyond the child to include their wider environment. However, our model goes a step further, adding the perpetrator alongside the child and the environment. The purpose of this is to provide an innovative theoretical model to address this missing component in understanding and responding to CCE. We do not propose a causal explanation for child exploitation (though there are clearly financial motives) in the manner of most criminological and victimological theories that locate the reasons for criminal behaviour as biologically, psychologically or socially determined. Instead, our model focuses on the relational dynamics between suitable target (child), motivated offender (perpetrator) and conducive environment (context). Consequently, the model does not replace any existing causal theory of offending but sits alongside them with an explicit emphasis on the spaces where child, perpetrator and context converge. The model is therefore conceived in systemic, interactional and relational terms, designed to provide child services, criminal justice agencies, public health organisations and legal professionals with a common tool for understanding why perpetrators target certain children in certain spaces. In doing so, our model fills a conceptual and empirical void in current child safeguarding approaches, namely, a framework for understanding perpetrator behaviour and decision-making in relation to the grooming and recruitment of children for the purposes of criminal exploitation.

Our model is primarily concerned with understanding the interactional and relational dynamics that lead some children to be targeted by perpetrators some of the time, in some places. It is therefore not a general safeguarding tool as contextual safeguarding is, but

specific to a subset of child abuse that we have framed in the context of exploitative, modern slavery practices and organised crime networks. Yet it shares a common antecedent with contextual safeguarding: providing a way to understand child protection systemically. Our model therefore takes inspiration and instruction from contextual safeguarding with regards to the inclusion of the wider environment, but expands it by adding the perpetrator and contains elements that are specific to providing an integrated multiagency approach for investigating, protecting and prosecuting cases of CCE.

A systemic perspective on child criminal exploitation

The UK Civil and Criminal justice systems provide a statutory framework that has potential to support systemic, multi-model responses to CCE, particularly the safeguarding of older children and adolescents. The contextual safeguarding approach and its underpinning theoretical principles has made important headway addressing this. The rest of this paper outlines our new theory and highlights how this expands upon contextual safeguarding to understand all aspects at play in situations of CCE: the victim(s), the environment and the perpetrator(s).

CCE occurs in the context of a sophisticated system comprising many people, including protective agencies, with different roles and functions. Tackling CCE therefore requires understanding of the nature of the problem from a systemic perspective; actions in any part of that system or network will have an effect throughout the whole of the network. Existing procedures are reactive, relying upon the identification or disclosure of exploitation, an identifiable victim and perpetrator. Investigation and intervention then follows a “top down” process to explain what happened, how it happened and how it will be remedied.

Patterns of CCE change and adapt to new pressures and opportunities but simultaneously maintain a cohesion: the various elements adjust to fit together to meet the needs and goals of the group perpetrating the exploitation with implications for all agencies working to identify, prevent, investigate and prosecute cases of CCE.

An effective response therefore promotes movements or perturbations in the entire system, identifies the effects and reveals the next relevant step in the enquiry (Dallos, 1992) requiring an approach that is more exploratory, looking for connections, themes and dependencies. Gradually, as the reality of the case becomes clear, key members and mechanisms of the network are identified (be they perpetrators or victims), relationships and dependencies are understood, and motivations and *modus operandi* emerge. Thus, we can simultaneously protect actual and potential victims; identify, disrupt and remove perpetrators; improve safeguarding and prosecutorial outcomes; and reduce the risk of re-victimisation.

Motivated perpetrators

Modern slavery is often described as existing at the nexus of supply and demand, and criminals dealing in illicit goods and services, are not seen to be any great threat to the stability and well-being of society. Organised crime, however, is perilous because of vast profits acquired from the sale of illicit goods and services, or forced begging, then being reinvested in further activities and enterprises that are both licit and illicit, benefitting from the corruption of economic and political domains (Cressey, 1969).

Research relating to youth violence and gang involvement (Bennett and Holloway, 2004; Pitts, 2020; Cottrell-Boyce, 2013); recruitment to county lines (Harding, 2020); and CSE (Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre, 2011; Beckett and Warrington, 2014; Hallet, 2016) indicates that similar patterns of recruitment and victimology exist across these crime types in England and Wales. In these contexts, there is an emerging chain of perpetrators who gain different results and opportunities through their use of child victims.

There is therefore no single, typical perpetrator of CCE. Instead, there are diverse individuals (in terms of age, gender, ethnicity, social and economic backgrounds), with a range of motivations who may be connected to each other through complex social networks. These individuals may in turn gain directly or indirectly through the exploitation of child and may be willing or unwitting facilitators of the exploitation. Individual perpetrators and facilitators may not know others within the network but will be aware of the connection. Thus, motivated perpetrators may have specific or multiple roles (e.g. recruitment, enforcement, transport, accommodation, direction, control, etc.), and these may include the child's peers, relatives, older youths and adults and patterns of CCE may exhibit varying degrees of organisation and complexity.

The perpetrator(s) with control of the child(ren) may in some instances be considered the first-order beneficiary or user of the victim, but there may be a system of second-order beneficiaries who act as facilitators, suppliers of the children or the suppliers of licit and illicit goods and services. They all profit from the criminal activities. Indeed, criminal exploitation may be the lucrative tip of a criminal iceberg, its earnings funding both criminal and legal activities and creating the opportunity for co-operative activities between criminals. There are different degrees of organisation of CCE and therefore potentially different opportunities for intervention to stop or disrupt it by integrating criminal and family law.

CCE incorporates acts of violence and intimidation, varying in respect to such things as relationship to the victim(s), severity of physical or psychological harm, use of weapons and implements, motivations, etc. This can include implicit threats. The focus should then be on decision-making about what the perpetrators were trying to achieve in their intention to exploit the child (even if this objective was not achieved) and not simply what happened. The professionals' task is to understand how and why a child has come to be exploited or how someone has come to exploit them, map emergent patterns and contexts of criminal exploitation and identify victims and perpetrators.

CCE victims may initially be dealt with as suspects of crime who, following arrest, are taken to a police station, presenting an important opportunity for early identification which is, unfortunately, all too often missed (Bird *et al.*, 2020). Patterns of behaviour, circumstances of the arrest, characteristics of the child, their demeanour, cognitive functioning and emotional state may all be consistent with known patterns of victimology, victim accessing and recruitment, control and exploitation.

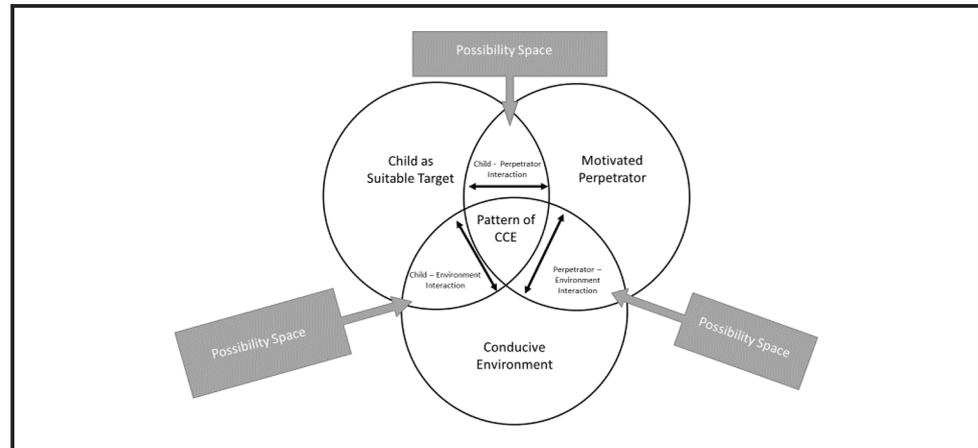
Circles of analysis: a new systemic model of child criminal exploitation

CCE is a pattern of events and behaviours that emerge from, and are maintained by, interactions between a complex of systems. Each of these individual systems act as elements of the exploitation system and can be defined and described separately as the child system, perpetrator system and environment system, each with their own attributes. The exploitation system can exist only at the intersection of the other three but will vary depending upon the configuration of the attributes of the other elements and their relationships with each other.

Any single intervention will trigger responses throughout the systems that will resist the intervention or accommodate it. In this way the system maintains stability so that the abuse and exploitation continue and evolve. All interventions must therefore target all three intersections simultaneously and must take account of how the system has responded in the past to anticipate how it will respond in the present and the immediate future. The targets for intervention are the three relationships, the points of interaction which may be referred to as the possibility spaces (Figure 1).

Crimes in which children are working on the behalf of criminals are an output of the exploitation process. The nature of these crimes is immaterial to understanding the criminal

Figure 1 Circles of analysis



exploitation of children; it is the process and mechanisms that are important. The mechanisms of exploitation are all forms of child maltreatment (physical abuse, emotional abuse, sexual abuse and neglect) without which exploitation cannot occur. Understanding the phenomenon of criminal exploitation of children is therefore a “bottom up” approach that starts from recognising patterns of child maltreatment.

Child maltreatment occurs in the context of a relationship in which there is a substantial imbalance of power that is misused by the stronger person (usually the adult but may also include peers or older youths) to control and harm the weaker (usually the child) for some form of gain. The nature and extent of the abuse together with the degree of harm will vary according to the following:

- the needs, objectives and aims of the perpetrator(s);
- the characteristics of the child and what these represent to the perpetrator(s); and
- the environments from which the child and perpetrators emerge and in which the abuse occurs.

Each intersection between the child, motivated perpetrators and the shared environment is an emergent micro-state that can be understood in terms of the biographical histories of each of the agents within the system. In addition, the nature and characteristics of geographical locations either promote or inhibit the patterns of behaviour that occur during the interactions. These intersections are therefore described as “possibility spaces” in which the target/environment microstate generates the needs or goals of the target (i.e. the child). Similarly, the perpetrator/environment microstate generates the needs or goals of the motivated exploiter(s). The target/perpetrator micro-state indicates a congruity of goals or needs between both agents. It is the congruence of these goals that causes the interaction in the space in which both agents exist together over time.

The pattern of criminal exploitation is maintained as a stable relationship between the perpetrator and victim within a shared, conducive environment in which the perpetrator’s needs are gratified. This will likely destabilise as disturbances occur in any of the possibility spaces. The pattern of behaviour will then cease (as no longer functional to goal achievement) in response to the new stimulant. These micro-states or relationships represent the possibility of child abuse and exploitation, as well as the possibility to prevent or disrupt exploitation and support children towards safety and recovery.

The different degrees of organisation of CCE indicate that different levels of intervention are required depending on the needs of the child, their relationship to the perpetrator(s) and the context in which they both exist as the pattern of criminal exploitation emerges (Figure 2).

Different levels of intervention require contiguous, coextensive and cooperative multi-agency working. The circles of analysis is a theoretical framework that takes account of the different professional disciplines and theoretical traditions that have informed praxis (Schneider, 1992) and accounts for the relational dynamics of CCE.

From theoretical model to a systemic approach – Systemic Investigation, Protections and Prosecution Strategy

The SIPPS was originally developed by the lead author, along with Caroline Haughey QC in 2014 as an approach to organising and testing evidence in cases of modern slavery. It was refined and formalised for use in assessing risk for CSE and offered here to map the aetiology and complexity of CCE as an emergent pattern of behaviour and its potential harmful impact on children.

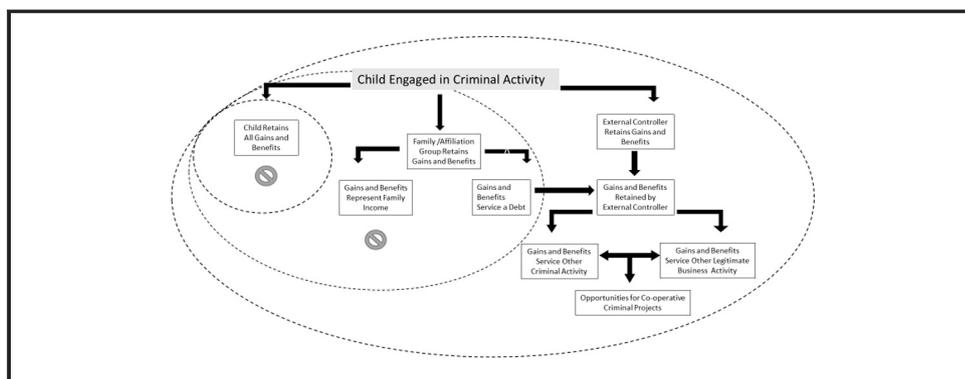
The SIPPS framework is a method of operationalising the circles of analysis theory, where the attributes of child(ren), perpetrator(s) and conducive environments are empirically derived correlates for various modalities of CCE, expanding on contextual safeguarding by incorporating the perpetrator. However, correlation does not equal causation and their presence, absence or configuration may fluctuate over time and in response to changes within the environmental context. Therefore, these empirically derived attributes are organised into the following sets:

- home/environment;
- behaviour;
- education/training/employment;
- psychological health; and
- physical health.

To capture the other important controlling factor, time, these sets are subdivided as follows:

- Historical conditional factors: These are unchangeable in that they cannot be influenced by new circumstances or interventions. They are mostly historic, e.g. history of violence, prior convictions and poly-criminality, previous experiences of victimisation, age and so on.

Figure 2 Degrees of organisation



- Current conditional factors: These are dynamic, i.e. they change over time and can be aspects of the individual or their environment and social context. Because they are changeable, these factors are more amenable to intervention and management.
- Current consequential factors: Associated terms include acute dynamic risk factors or “triggers” (Department of Health, 2007). Because these factors change rapidly, their influence on risk may be short lived but require a rapid response (Hart *et al.*, 2003) and may indicate criminal exploitation (victim accessing behaviour, criminal associates, presence or use of weapons).

The framework facilitates gathering information from a wide range of sources to make decisions regarding the likelihood of any agent in the system being victimised, re-victimised or being perpetrators or facilitators of the exploitation (Hart *et al.*, 2003). The presence or absence of these factors is established through careful review of qualitative and quantitative data such as witness statements, forensic evidence, collateral sources (e.g. health and social care records, previous assessment reports, etc.), forensic history, records of interview, direct interview and observation.

The presence or absence of historical conditional factors, current conditional factors and current consequential factors in each of the five domains enables the evaluator to identify emergent patterns that are, or are not, consistent with definitions of slavery, servitude, forced or compulsory labour and human trafficking and formulate collaborative strategies for intervention by safeguarding agencies, law enforcement agencies and the civil and criminal justice systems.

The SIPPS provides a framework for not only gathering and organising evidence but also for analysing emergent patterns of relationships and behaviour over time and in different contexts (home, social environment, education/employment). This analysis is informed by empirical CCE insights while also allowing professionals to add unique, case specific factors. This process of evidence gathering and organisation highlights information gaps and areas of uncertainty. The final stage draws upon the identified historic conditional factors, current conditional factors and current consequential factors to formulate plausible scenarios in which the exploitation is occurring or likely to occur. This enables professionals to work collaboratively and strategically to develop multi-agency responses to address each of the possibility spaces simultaneously. This approach means that child safeguarding, law enforcement, civil and criminal justice interventions can be implemented contiguously to not only identify potential exploitation (and investigate other possible causes for patterns of behaviour) but also prevent exploitation, protect victims, reduce the risk of re-victimisation, disrupt, arrest and prosecute perpetrators and dismantle organised crime groups and networks.

Applications of the Systemic Investigation Protection and Prosecution Strategy approach

In R-v-PA (2019), the SIPPS approach was used to assist in the raising of the statutory defence (s45 Modern Slavery Act 2015) for a child that had been recruited for the sale of Class A Drugs. HHJ Evans QC ruled that the evidence which related to the background to the offences and the specific relevant characteristics of PA were admissible. The case formulation was put before the jury and tested under cross examination which Defence Counsel said greatly assisted PA's case.

The Adapted SIPPS for CSE was rolled out in a South London Borough. One senior manager wrote:

The SIPPS has been invaluable in the complex area of Child Sexual Exploitation [. . .]. The SIPPS has the multi-faceted dimension of drawing the practitioners' attention to issues of trafficking, exploitation, modern slavery in addition to risk of or actual sexual exploitation.

The SIPPS enables the objective analysis of behaviour and information to create multiple hypotheses for a young person. The SIPPS training provides an advanced level of knowledge regarding the legal options that the Police might use to disrupt the behaviour and encourages Social Work staff to make suggestions using this knowledge to their Police colleagues.

A social worker in the same borough commented:

Exploring the different possible risk factors for CSE enabled me to identify which areas of my intervention with the young person should be prioritised. The tool also helped in working with other professionals on the case, I used the tool the tool to structure a strategy meeting and I think that this eased the anxiety of some of the other professionals because it enabled them to understand what Children's Services were doing and why, it also helped in being clear about the level of current risk to the young person rather than speculation which had previously led to professionals anxiously seemingly over-estimating the current level of risk to the young person (Barlow, 2017).

Conclusion: protecting children, combatting child criminal exploitation

We have presented an innovative new model for understanding and investigating CCE. SIPPS is the practical framework for the theoretical circles of analysis and provides a tool for investigators, child protectors and prosecutors. Our model is intended to be used by practitioners working at the coalface of child protection. Its development has been "road tested" with police officers, social workers and legal professionals and refined in line with their feedback. The innovativeness of the model is that it provides a common frame of reference for understanding CCE, bridging the divide between investigation, child protection and prosecution responsibilities. By providing a theoretically robust systemic model for identifying and responding to CCE, this model is designed to act as the lynchpin between agencies and deliver genuine multiagency cooperation that improves the safeguarding of children and the prosecution of perpetrators.

Our model is uniquely situated between three distinct bodies of knowledge: modern slavery, public health and criminological theory. These provide the bedrock of knowledge and theory from which we have developed the triumvirate of child, perpetrator and environment that are the constituent elements in which CCE occurs. Conceptually, our model owes much to contextual safeguarding which provides a fundamental expansion of our understanding about how to protect children. Contextual safeguarding highlights the importance of environmental and crime prevention strategies and provides a new lens for practitioners to enhance and mobilise how the wider community engages with child protection. Our model takes a similar step forward and weaves the perpetrator into the picture to develop the first truly holistic approach to combatting CCE.

It is worth consideration as to whether our model can be scaled up to look at trafficking of children and adults for modern slavery, servitude, forced and compulsory labour in different contexts and jurisdictions. Alongside this, we ask if there is capacity to build perpetrator behaviours into the contextual safeguarding model. The potential for further development and alignment with the principles of contextual safeguarding is tantalising, and we hope that our contribution to this important special edition will open up new avenues for collaboration with both academics and practitioners who are concerned with protecting children and combatting CCE.

Notes

1. The term "potential victim" is applied as individuals believed to be victims are referred into the National Referral Mechanism, but then go through a two-tier decision-making process before confirmation of victim status. The numbers referenced within NRM most commonly relate to those referred into the system (i.e. potential victims) rather than those who have been through the decision-making process. For more insight into this issue, see Burland (2017a).

2. "Target-Hardening": Refers to measures that protect a person or property and build resilience against criminals that might otherwise consider the person or property a suitable target for damage, abuse, crime or exploitation.

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