

Recognition and response – police forces in England & Wales’ approach to identifying and addressing the risk of sexual and criminal exploitation of 16- to 25-year-olds

Exploring the police response to sexual and criminal exploitation of 16- to 25-year-olds.

Key details

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Police region	South East
Level of research	PhD
Project start date	February 2021
Date due for completion	August 2026

Research context

The response of police forces and partner agencies to sexual and criminal exploitation have been subject to considerable scrutiny by both national enquiries and also localised reviews of practice following the death or serious harm of individuals exposed to these threat types.

The first aim of this research is to identify police-focused learning and recommendations from these reviews and thematically analyse the findings in order to provide an understanding of current practice knowledge.

The second aim regarding learning from practice reviews focuses on how effective the reviews have been in changing police approaches to addressing sexual and criminal exploitation. Where

possible the research will identify opportunities to improve the operationalisation of learning from such insight into practice.

A further aim is to better understand the tools police forces use to identify and assess risk in regard to sexual and criminal exploitation. While some exploratory work has been carried out on child sexual exploitation assessment tools (Brown and others, 2018), there is a lack of published evaluation on tools that forces are currently using, including vulnerability assessment trackers.

Finally, this proposal seeks to enhance understanding of the bespoke needs of 16- to 25-year-olds who have been victims of exploitation and the subsequent need for a tailored response from policing. Transitional safeguarding approaches (Cocker, Cooper & Holmes 2021) have highlighted the challenges facing this age group and their ambiguity of status. However much of the focus of this work has been on local authority services, not policing.

The focus on this age group within the context of the criminal justice system and policing has mainly been in regard to preventing offending and reoffending, rather than their needs as victims (Neyroud 2018).

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Research methodology

A literature review has begun to understand and evaluate existing knowledge with regards to police responses to adolescents affected by exploitation.

Small scale research project

The researcher aims to focus specifically on practice reviews involving 16- to 25-year-olds affected by extra-familial harms, with the intention of identifying thematic areas of poor police practice identified in the reviews and opportunities for further learning.

The keyword ‘exploitation’ was identified in 153 reviews. The abstracts for each review will be used to identify the age of the child involved to ensure they were aged 16 to 18 and only reviews published since 2010 will be selected.

A thematic analysis of the reviews will be carried out, considering identified poor practice and learning opportunities for policing, as well as promising practice where referenced.

Applied research project

The researcher will conduct an applied research project to build on themes identified from the literature review and small-scale research to develop a deeper understanding of the use of risk assessment tools as part of current police practice in response to extra-familial threats posed to adolescents.

The research will identify tools that are currently being used by forces across England and Wales with regard to both sexual exploitation and criminal exploitation. The researcher will then undertake a comparative analysis of the assessment tools’ characteristics against the features identified in the limited literature.

Focus groups and/or interviews will be carried out with police officers and staff who use the assessment tools to collect qualitative data. The transcripts of these focus groups/interviews will be thematically analysed in order to identify issues that consistently concern officers and staff.