

# Child Exploitation:

*A Hidden Crisis*

Barnardo's briefing paper, June 2023  
By Jess Edwards

Believe in  
children  
 Barnardo's

## Background

Barnardo's has a long history of supporting children who have been sexually abused and exploited, both through our specialist services, and by speaking out publicly on these issues. This dates back to the 1990s, when the subject was considered 'taboo' and few others dared to raise it. But by being bold and brave we helped achieve real change – such as when we worked alongside others to reform the law, so that children were no longer defined as 'prostitutes' but instead correctly identified as victims of sexual exploitation.<sup>1</sup>

Today, children face a range of complex and interconnected threats both on and offline – including sexual abuse and exploitation, criminal exploitation, and trafficking.

Barnardo's currently delivers 45 specialist services to support victims of child sexual abuse and exploitation across the UK and hosts the Home Office funded Centre of Expertise on Child Sexual Abuse, which works to reduce the impact of child sexual abuse through improved prevention and better response, and which reaches thousands of professionals through its training and research.<sup>2</sup>

Meanwhile, many of our services across the UK support children who have been criminally exploited or impacted by serious violence. We run a number of specific services that work with criminally exploited children including:

- **The Home Office funded National Counter Trafficking Service** which supports children to cope with the practical and emotional trauma of being trafficked, and helps them to understand and navigate social care services, the police and immigration
- **The Independent Guardian Service in Northern Ireland** which provides guardians for 121 young people who are unaccompanied or separated from a legal guardian and who are at risk of human trafficking
- **ROUTES in Bristol and Somerset**, which works with 8-18-year-olds at high risk of committing or being victims of serious violence.

Whilst changes in attitudes and policies have meant that child sexual and criminal exploitation has been more visible in recent years, these experiences largely remain hidden harms. Consequently, too many children go unidentified and unsupported, missing out on the support that they crucially need. Exploitation is also too often misunderstood, and children can be blamed for their own abuse – in some cases being criminalised rather than offered support.

## What is exploitation?

Exploitation is a hidden harm, but one that many children experience each year. All children are vulnerable to exploitation and Barnardo's is concerned that the cost-of-living crisis will mean that more children could be targeted and exploited – particularly during the summer holidays.

Child sexual exploitation and child criminal exploitation are both forms of child abuse and are often closely interlinked.

Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE) is a form of child sexual abuse. The majority of child sexual abuse takes place within a family setting, with two thirds of all child sexual abuse reported to the police being perpetrated by a family member or somebody close to the child.<sup>3</sup> Child sexual exploitation typically occurs outside of the family.



<sup>1</sup> Serious Crime Act 2015, **Section 68**

<sup>2</sup> Centre of Expertise on Child Sexual Abuse. **Who We Are.**

<sup>3</sup> Centre of Expertise on Child Sexual Abuse, 2018. **Key messages from research on intra-familial child sexual abuse.**

It occurs where an individual or group takes advantage of an imbalance of power to coerce, manipulate or deceive a child or young person under the age of 18 into sexual activity. The victim may have been sexually exploited even if the sexual activity appears consensual. Child sexual exploitation does not always involve physical contact; it can also occur through the use of technology.<sup>4</sup>

Child Criminal Exploitation (CCE) is when a child under the age of 18 is encouraged, expected or required to take part in any activity that constitutes a criminal offence under British law.<sup>5</sup> CCE can take many forms, including 'county lines' (where children and young people are coerced to carry drugs and weapons from one area to another to service complex drug supply chains), stealing or shoplifting to order, including perfumes, alcohol or cars, cannabis cultivation, and forced begging.

Children can be exploited by individuals, who are most often external to the family, or by an organised criminal group. The internationally agreed definition of an organised criminal group is 'a structured group of

three or more persons existing for a period of time and acting in concert with the aim of committing crimes for financial or material benefit.'<sup>6</sup>

Being sexually or criminally exploited in childhood can have a serious, long-term impact.<sup>7</sup> Different children will be impacted by exploitation in different ways, but examples include being threatened, blackmailed, and subjected to physical, emotional, or sexual abuse and serious violence, which can cause physical harm and trauma. It can also result in a child being more likely to go missing from home, being isolated from their family and friends, and missing out on education and training.<sup>8</sup>

Although victims of CSE and CCE experience abuse and coercion, they are often still blamed and criminalised for their 'behaviour' and 'risky actions', rather than appropriately safeguarded.<sup>9</sup> This is because of a lack of understanding of what exploitation is, its complexities, and the level of control exploiters have over children. When children are criminalised rather than recognised as victims and safeguarded, they can get stuck in the criminal justice system.



<sup>4</sup> Department for Education, 2017. **Child Sexual Exploitation: Definition and a guide for practitioners, local leaders and decision makers working to protect children from child sexual exploitation.**

<sup>5</sup> This is Barnardo's and The Children Society's preferred definition for Child Criminal Exploitation. We hope that this will be included by the Government in the Victims and Prisoners Bill.

<sup>6</sup> **United Nations Convention against Transnational Organised Crime and the Protocols Thereto, 2000**

<sup>7</sup> Centre of Expertise on Child Sexual Abuse, 2023. **Key messages from research on the impacts of child sexual abuse**

<sup>8</sup> Barnardo's and Pro Bono Economics, 2011. **An assessment of the potential savings from Barnardo's interventions for young people who have been sexually exploited.**

<sup>9</sup> Barnardo's, 2021. **Exploited and Criminalised: What can the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill do to ensure that children who are criminally exploited receive the care and support they need?**

Due to the secretive and hidden nature of exploitation, it is difficult to get an accurate picture of the scale of CCE and CSE taking place in the UK.<sup>10</sup> In 2021, Barnardo's made a Freedom of Information request to police forces across the UK about CCE.<sup>11</sup> 30 police forces responded, but only one police force was able to provide any data on CCE. Many police forces asked about how CCE is defined, demonstrating how misunderstood CCE is. This can mean that children can go unidentified and unsupported, as well as data about exploitation being inaccurate.

There is often a gendered response to exploitation, with girls often being seen as victims of sexual exploitation, and boys as victims of criminal exploitation. For example, a report by Barnardo's Scotland found that 80% of boys (compared with 25% of girls) who were identified by the research team as likely victims of sexual exploitation had not been identified in official reports as being victims.<sup>12</sup>

As well as meaning that children then don't receive the necessary support, this can skew data sets and therefore undermine our understanding of the scale and nature of abuse and exploitation. Part of the issue is that systems which capture data, such as the National Referral Mechanism, tend to only capture the primary exploitation type, rather than taking into account the layering of exploitation and complexity a child is facing.<sup>13</sup>

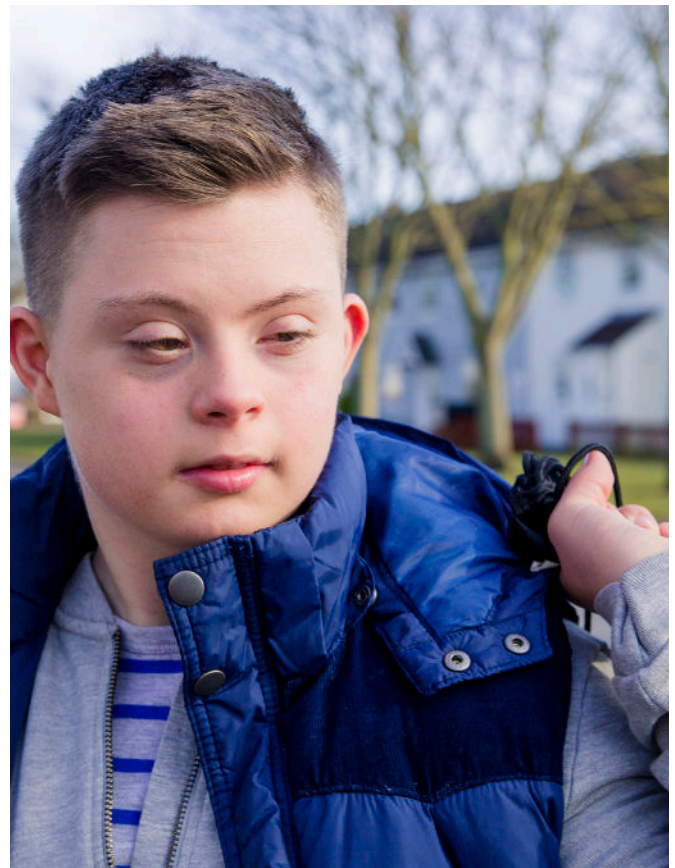
It is difficult to assess the prevalence of CSE because of fundamental flaws in data sets, and the use of different definitions of CSE by various agencies, making it simply not possible to know the full scale of child sexual exploitation in the UK.<sup>14</sup>

Further, victim-blaming attitudes towards child victims of exploitation can persist. For CSE, this can lead to cases being incorrectly identified as

'consensual sexual acts between young people' or as 'inappropriate relationships', rather than CSE.<sup>15</sup>

The data that is available is likely an underestimate, and CSE and CCE occurs to a greater extent than recorded.

In 2019, the then-Children's Commissioner for England estimated that there were 27,000 children at high risk of exploitation by organised crime gangs.<sup>16</sup> In 2022, the National Referral Mechanism received 7019 referrals relating to children, with the majority – 43% (3,013) – being referred for criminal exploitation.<sup>17</sup>



<sup>10</sup> Barnardo's, 2021. **Exploited and Criminalised: What can the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill do to ensure that children who are criminally exploited receive the care and support they need?**

<sup>11</sup> Barnardo's, 2021. **Exploited and Criminalised: What can the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill do to ensure that children who are criminally exploited receive the care and support they need?**

<sup>12</sup> Barnardo's Scotland, 2020. **Policy Report: Sexual exploitation of children involved in the Children's Hearing System**

<sup>13</sup> House of Commons Education Committee, 2023. **Oral Evidence: Child Exploitation and County Lines**

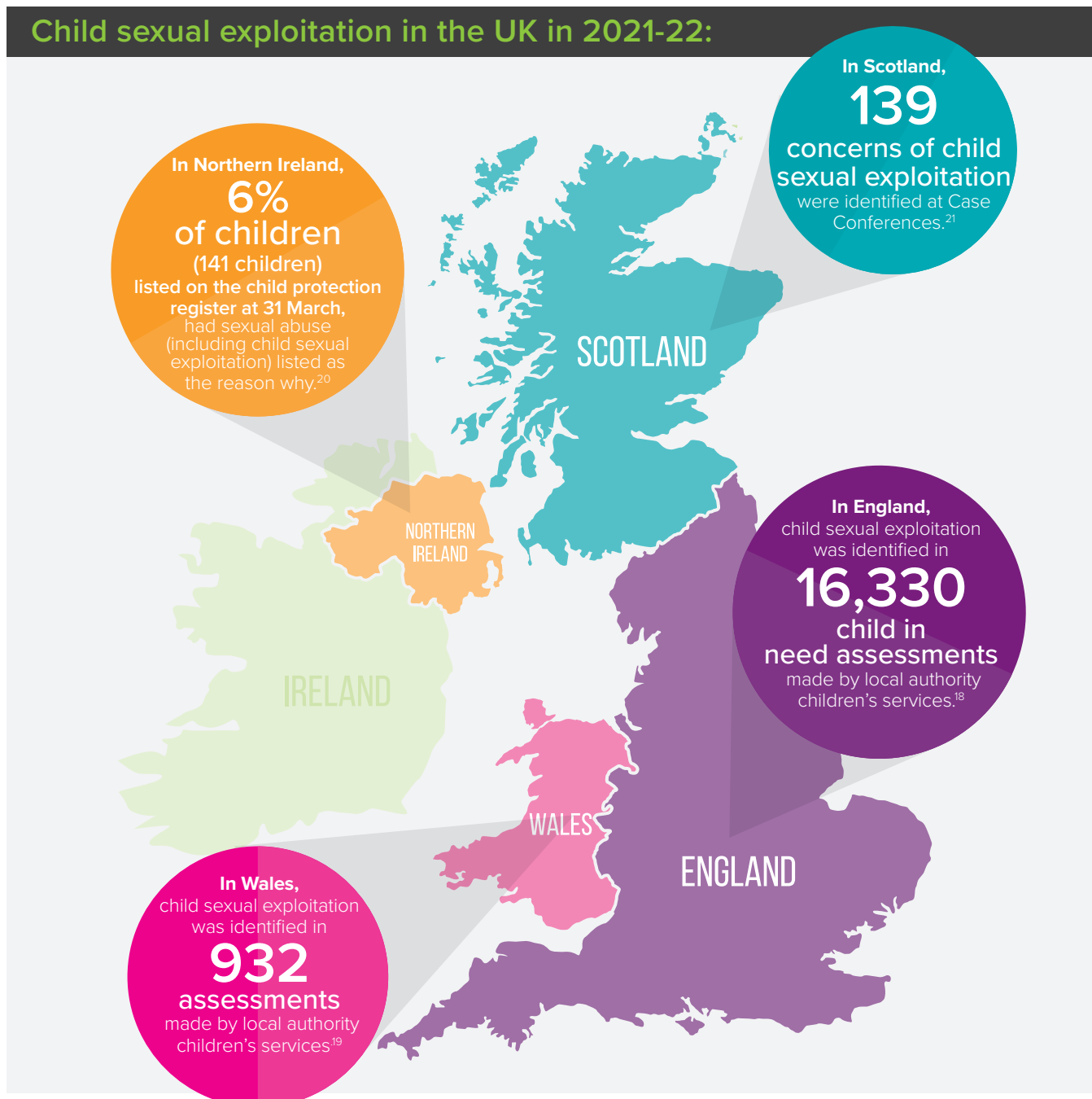
<sup>14</sup> Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse, 2022. **Child sexual exploitation by organised networks: An investigation report.**

<sup>15</sup> Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse, 2022. **Child sexual exploitation by organised networks: An investigation report.**

<sup>16</sup> Children's Commissioner for England, 2019. **Keeping Kids Safe: Improving safeguarding responses to gang violence and criminal exploitation.**

<sup>17</sup> Home Office, 2023. **Modern Slavery: National Referral Mechanism and Duty to Notify statistics UK, end of year summary 2022**

## Child sexual exploitation in the UK in 2021-22:



All children are at risk of being targeted and exploited. However, those who exploit children will often target children from particular groups that can be vulnerable because of inadequate protective structures. These include children in poverty, children in care and care leavers, children who have experienced other abuse, including domestic abuse and neglect, unaccompanied asylum seeker children, children not in education, children with additional mental health needs and children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND).<sup>22</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Centre of Expertise on Child Sexual Abuse, 2023. *Child sexual abuse in 2021/22: Trends in official data*

<sup>19</sup> Centre of Expertise on Child Sexual Abuse, 2023. *Child sexual abuse in 2021/22: Trends in official data*

<sup>20</sup> Information Analysis Directorate, 2022. *Children's Social Care Statistics for Northern Ireland 2021/22*

<sup>21</sup> Scottish Government, 2023. *Children's Social Work Statistics Scotland: 2021 to 2022, Additional Tables, Table 1.13*

<sup>22</sup> Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse, 2022. *Child sexual exploitation by organised networks: An investigation report*; Barnardo's, 2021. *Exploited and Criminalised: What can the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill do to ensure that children who are criminally exploited receive the care and support they need?*; Barnardo's, 2023. *Illegal Migration Bill Committee Stage Parliamentary Briefing*; HMCIFRS, HM Inspectorate of Probation, Care Quality Commission, Ofsted, 2018. *Protecting children from criminal exploitation, human trafficking and modern slavery: an addendum*; and Centre of Expertise on Child Sexual Abuse, *Infographics: a snapshot of child sexual abuse*.

# Compounding the crisis: cost-of-living and summer holidays

Additional stresses and pressures can increase the risk of child exploitation, with those who seek to exploit children using adversity to coerce children into criminal and sexual activity. For example, the COVID-19 pandemic and resulting lockdown measures led to an increase in online exploitation, as organised criminal gangs looked for new ways to groom, recruit and exploit children after their traditional methods were disrupted.<sup>23</sup> This increase in online exploitation has continued, even after lockdown measures have ended.<sup>24</sup>

Given mounting financial pressures that families are facing, Barnardo's is concerned that the cost-of-living crisis will have similar effects on child exploitation. As children and families struggle to afford basic goods and pressure on families increases, organised criminal gangs and individuals could look to exploit this, and draw children in to criminal and sexual exploitation.

*'At the current moment in time it is the easiest way for them [young people I work with] to get extra money to have a bit of food, hot food, hot water, to put the electric on is, you know, maybe doing drug dealing.'*

*Barnardo's practitioner*<sup>25</sup>

In a recent survey of Barnardo's practitioners undertaken in February 2023, almost half (45%) of practitioners felt that children and young people are at a greater risk of being sexually and/or criminally exploited due to the cost-of-living crisis.<sup>26</sup> 43% said that financial issues and the cost-of-living crisis are key issues that they are seeing amongst children, young people, and families.<sup>27</sup>



<sup>23</sup> All-Party Parliamentary Group on Child Criminal Exploitation and Knife Crime, 2022. **Online Safety Bill and Child Criminal Exploitation (CCE)**

<sup>24</sup> National Crime Agency, 2021. **National Strategic Assessment of Serious and Organised Crime**

<sup>25</sup> Barnardo's, 2022. **At what cost? The impact of the cost-of-living crisis on children and young people**

<sup>26</sup> Barnardo's Practitioner Survey, February 2023

<sup>27</sup> Barnardo's Practitioner Survey, February 2023

As we approach summer, it's likely that these concerns will increase. When children are out of school and unsupervised, including during school holidays, they may be more vulnerable to exploitation. Evidence shows that even being missing from school for a short amount of time, such as being missing for part of the school day, can increase the risk of both sexual and criminal exploitation.<sup>28</sup>

Other children's charities and organisations have warned of the risks during holiday periods to exploitation and other harm. The Childhood Trust found that almost two thirds (62%) of children in

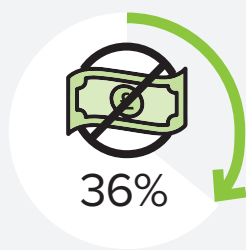
London are 'frightened' of being attacked or sexually exploited during the summer holidays.<sup>29</sup> Further, the IWF previously launched a campaign around summer holidays and online child sexual abuse and exploitation.<sup>30</sup> Cleveland Police Force have also previously issued warnings that organised criminal gangs could try and recruit children for CCE, including county lines, over the school summer holidays.<sup>31</sup>

Barnardo's commissioned new polling by YouGov of a representative group of 1,191 parents and 729 children across Great Britain.

### Polling conducted by YouGov on behalf of Barnardo's indicates that



**more than half of children** are already worried about being bored and having nothing to do over the summer



**1 in 3 children** are worried about not having money for activities this summer



almost **1 in 4** are concerned about not having a friend to see or talk to over the holiday

*YouGov survey of children: Total sample size was 729 children aged 11-17. Fieldwork was undertaken between 18th-22nd May 2023. The survey was carried out online. The figures have been weighted and are representative of all GB kids aged 11-17.*

Whilst alone these findings do not indicate exploitation, they do demonstrate the unmet needs that many children and young people will have over the summer holidays, which organised criminal gangs will target and exploit.

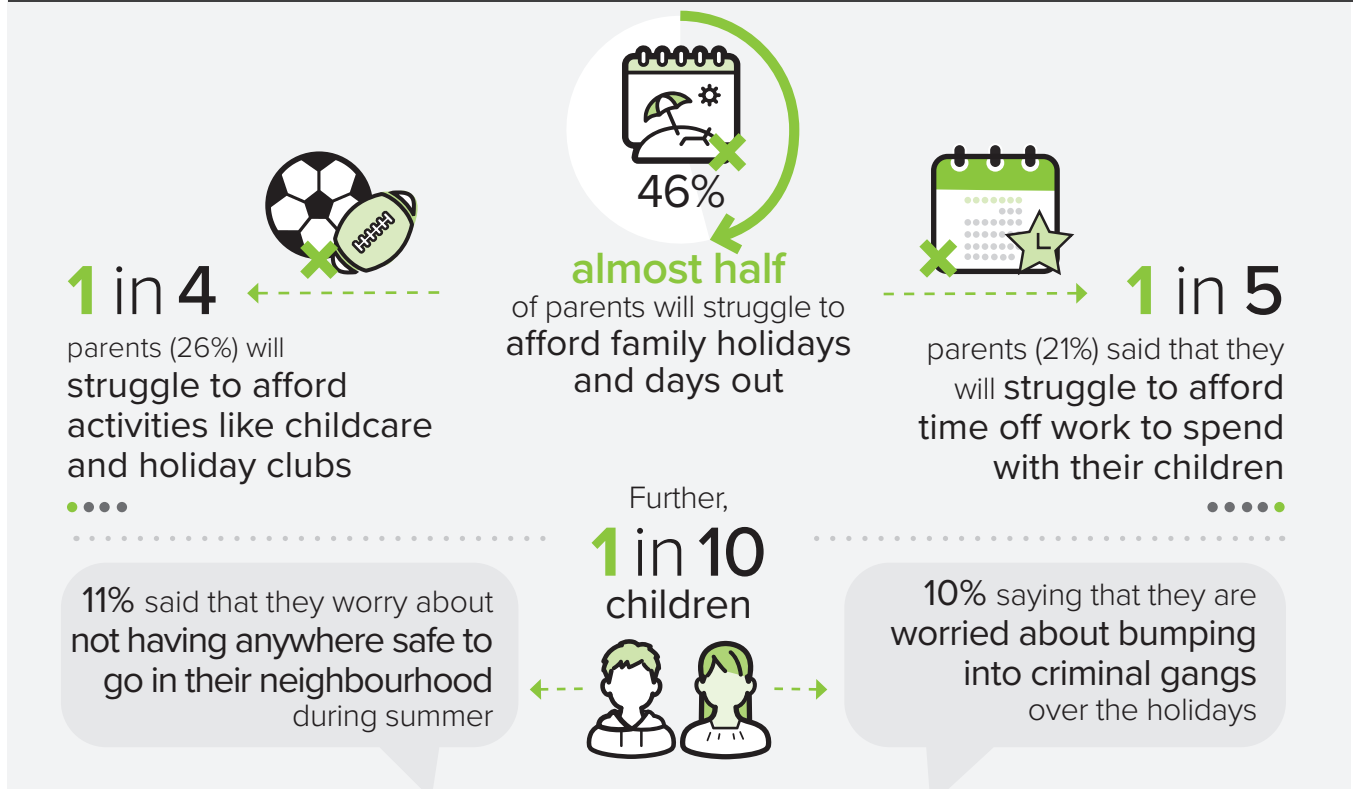
<sup>28</sup> HMICFRS, HM Inspectorate of Probation, Care Quality Commission, Ofsted, 2018. **Protecting children from criminal exploitation, human trafficking and modern slavery: an addendum**

<sup>29</sup> The Childhood Trust, 2017. **62% of children are 'frightened' of being attacked or sexually exploited during the summer holidays.**

<sup>30</sup> IWF, 2021. **Campaigners push to stop this being 'the summer of online sexual abuse' against children.**

<sup>31</sup> Cleveland Police, 2020. **Parents warned as drug gangs try and recruit children for county lines over school holidays**

The YouGov polling indicates that:



YouGov survey of parents: Total sample size was 1191 All GB parents of kids under 18. Fieldwork was undertaken between 17th - 19th May 2023. The survey was carried out online. The figures have been weighted and are representative of all GB parents.

The cost-of-living crisis means that many children will be left unsupervised, as families are unable to afford to pay for holiday activities and will need to leave their children unattended when at work.

A Barnardo's CSE service in London told us that *'it's the case that parents are having to leave children unsupervised and unattended... they potentially can't afford the childcare. They can't afford to put them in after school club.'*

The cost-of-living crisis and a reduction in funding has meant that free and affordable holiday activities and youth clubs are few and far between. The Government do invest more than £200 million each year in the Holiday Food and Activities Programme, which provides support to children in receipt of free school meals through holiday periods. However, the reach of this is limited just to children in receipt of free school meals, meaning that many children miss out.

According to research by the YMCA, between 2010/11 and 2020/21, there was a £1.1 billion cut in youth service funding in England and Wales.<sup>32</sup> In seven local authorities, no money had been allocated to youth services in 2020/21.<sup>33</sup> Research by CORAM found that the average price of holiday childcare was £148 per week in Britain in 2022.<sup>34</sup>

*'Youth Clubs. That's what we need. Youth club used to be sick and then one day they just disappeared fam. There was bare youth clubs... they just want the kids to be on the streets now. They don't have nothing.'*

*young person supported by Barnardo's*

<sup>32</sup> YMCA, 2022. Devalued – A decade of cuts to youth services: A report examining local authority expenditure on youth services in England and Wales

<sup>33</sup> YMCA, 2022. Devalued – A decade of cuts to youth services: A report examining local authority expenditure on youth services in England and Wales

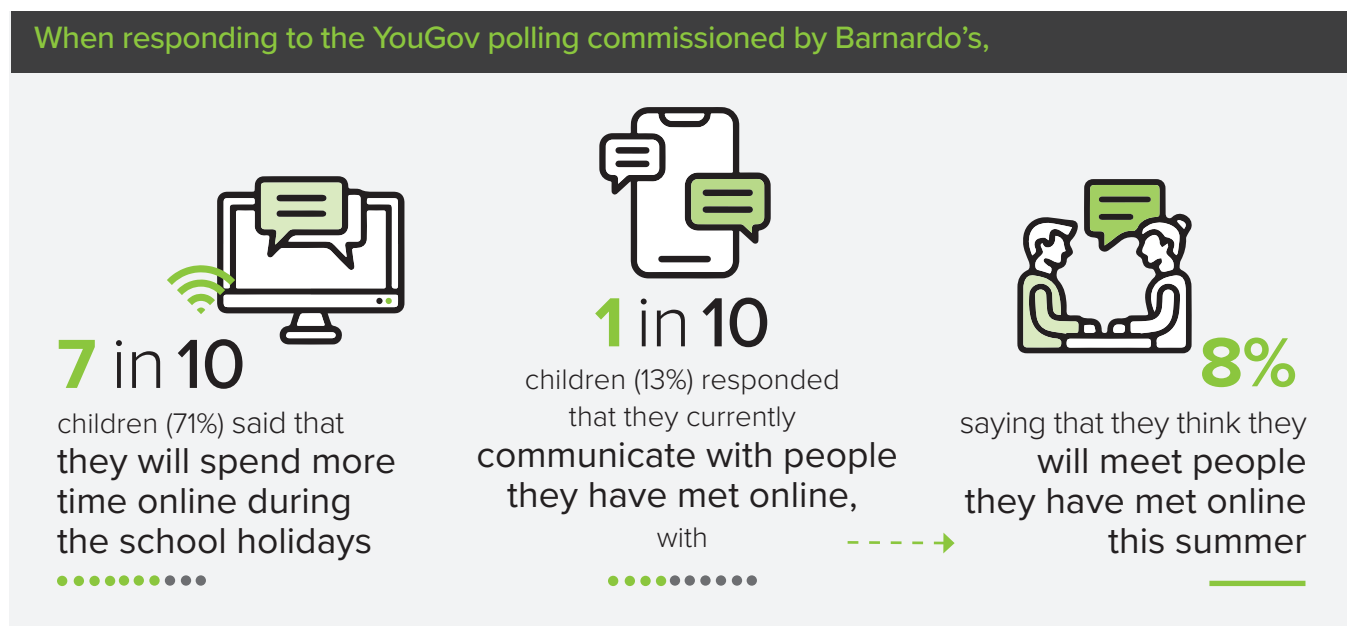
<sup>34</sup> CORAM, 2022. Holiday Childcare Survey 2022

Children can be more at risk of online exploitation during school holidays, too. In 2004, Barnardo's published the first report publication in the UK to address growing concerns amongst professionals about the ways in which children may be at risk online.<sup>35</sup> Since then, access to technology has grown at a rate and in ways that were unpredicted, with Ofcom finding that 97% of homes with children had access to the internet in 2022.<sup>36</sup>

When children are out of school, they spend more time online. More than three quarters of children spend three or more hours online a day at the weekend, with one in five spending seven or more hours a day online at the weekend.<sup>37</sup>

Whilst the online world, including social media, can offer a space for children and young people to express themselves and make connections, it also has the potential to act as a source of harm for children and young people, including through exploitation.

Greater investment is needed in youth services, and we are calling for access to the Holiday Food and Activities Programme to be expanded to all families in receipt of Universal Credit. Having access to supervised places and activities that give children something to do with a trusted adult present – such as a youth worker - can help to keep them safe and give them somebody to talk to about concerns, including regarding exploitation.



<sup>35</sup> Barnardo's, 2004. Just one click: sexual abuse of children and young people through the internet and mobile phone technology.

<sup>36</sup> Ofcom, 2023. Children and Parents: Media use and attitudes

<sup>37</sup> Office for National Statistics, 2021. Children's online behaviour in England and Wales: year ending March 2020.

## Investment in specialist services to support and safeguard child victims

Specialist services play a vital role in supporting and safeguarding children who are at risk of experiencing or have experienced sexual and/ or criminal exploitation. These services include therapeutic and counselling services, mental health services, and advocacy services.

Specialist services help to support and safeguard children who have faced exploitation, harm and abuse. Increasingly, in Barnardo's own CSE and CCE services, we are supporting children and young people through police investigations and court cases, and the associated trauma that they bring. Barnardo's services also provide support to the families of children who have experienced exploitation.

Research indicates that specialist services are best placed to meet the needs of victims or survivors, with many children preferring to receive support from third sector organisations and NGOs.<sup>38</sup> In its final report,

the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse recommended that the UK and Welsh Government should guarantee that all child victims of sexual abuse will be offered specialist and accredited therapeutic support.<sup>39</sup>

Having access to specialist services can reduce future harms, including tackling the sources of harm, going missing from home, alcohol and drug abuse, accommodation and housing needs and interaction with the criminal justice system, and instead can mean a child is kept safe and supported, and is supported to access education, training and employment.<sup>40</sup> Evidence from 2011 shows that for every £1 invested in specialist services for child sexual exploitation, it can save the taxpayer up to £12.<sup>41</sup>

New research suggests that the majority of parents think that child victims of exploitation should have access to specialist support services.

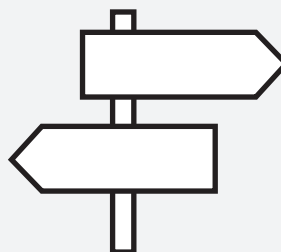


In the YouGov polling commissioned by Barnardo's,



**82%**

of parents said that they support victims of exploitation having a right to access support to help them recover



<sup>38</sup> The Centre for Social Justice, 2021. *Unsafe children: Driving up our country's response to child sexual abuse and exploitation*

<sup>39</sup> Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse, 2022. *The Report of the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse*.

<sup>40</sup> Pro Bono Economics and Barnardo's, 2011. *An assessment of the potential savings from Barnardo's interventions for young people who have been sexually exploited*

<sup>41</sup> Pro Bono Economics and Barnardo's, 2011. *An assessment of the potential savings from Barnardo's interventions for young people who have been sexually exploited*

Despite this, specialist services for victims of CSE and CCE are stretched and inconsistent, meaning that many have little or no support.<sup>42</sup> In September 2021, the Ministry of Justice acknowledged that research conducted to date indicated that ‘availability of specialist provision for children and young people is not sufficient to meet the level of need’.<sup>43</sup>

Local authorities and police and crime commissioners are having to work with reduced funds - the Local Government Association estimated that, with inflation, increasing demand and wage increases, local authorities are facing a 3.4 billion total funding gap in 2023/24, rising to £4.5 billion in 2024/25.<sup>44</sup>

## A service story

### Preston’s Story

**Preston\*, 19, is on a mission to go far in life and is defying the odds which have been stacked against him. Over the past three years, he’s been able to turn his life around with help from Barnardo’s.**

‘When I was born, I grew up in a trap house which is basically a home where drug dealing takes place’, Preston explains. ‘Trap is exactly the right word for it because that’s the reality, you’re trapped into a never-ending cycle.

‘When people say this lifestyle can be horrific, it really is. My best friend was killed in an attack that was meant for someone else. You end up trusting no one and never feel truly safe. I realised growing up that I was never going to be in a position where I could rely on having parents to look after me, but that also extended to the professionals involved in my life too.

‘When I ended up going into care, it certainly wasn’t the positive experience that it can be for some children and young people. For me it made everything worse and reinforced the view that nobody really cared. The care system is a conveyor belt. I was failed across the board.’

Life started to improve for Preston when he was referred to a Barnardo’s service which supports children and young people who are at risk or impacted by child criminal exploitation (CCE), child sexual exploitation (CSE) or who go missing.



Image posed by a model

In 2019 the service launched a project which aims to help young people to create legal forms of enterprise by developing and marketing their own brands and products, whether that’s through clothing, art or music.



<sup>42</sup> Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse, 2020. **Support services for victims and survivors of child sexual abuse**; and The Children’s Society, 2019. **Counting Lives: Responding to children who are criminally exploited.**

<sup>43</sup> Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse, 2021. **Witness Statement of Melissa Case, of the Ministry of Justice.**

<sup>44</sup> Local Government Association, 2022. **Chancellor must act to protect local services from threat of spiralling costs - LGA**

# Recommendations

- Expand and invest in specialist services for victims of child sexual exploitation and child criminal exploitation. This should include a ring-fenced fund for local authorities and, in England and Wales, for police and crime commissioners.
- Use the Victims and Prisoners Bill to introduce a statutory definition of child criminal exploitation in England to better help professionals to identify victims, and make sure that they are supported appropriately.
- Require service commissioners to build effective locally informed joint commissioning strategies which meet the needs of children who are being exploited in their areas by strengthening the duty to collaborate in the Victims and Prisoners Bill.
- Use the opportunity of the Online Safety Bill to strengthen protection for children online, including by naming child criminal exploitation as a harm on the face of the Bill.
- Expand and invest in support for children and young people to help to protect them and prevent exploitation. This should include increased investment in youth services and expanding access to the Holiday Food and Activities Programme to all families in receipt of Universal Credit.
- Ensure Mental Health Support Teams (MHSTs) in schools have funding to continue to support children across holiday periods in England and Wales.
- Provide enhanced training and support, pre- and post-qualification, for all professionals working with children, so that they have the knowledge and confidence that they need to better protect children by identifying signs of and responding to child sexual abuse, exploitation and child criminal exploitation.
- Roll out the Independent Child Trafficking Guardian (ICTG) service nationally across all of England and Wales to enable all children that have been identified as trafficked to have specialist support, as underpinned by Section 48 of the Modern Slavery Act 2015.

## Scotland recommendations

- The Scottish Government should publish an updated national action plan to tackle exploitation of children and young people, including CSE and CCE.
- Invest in Scotland-specific research on the scale and nature of CSE and CCE.





## About Barnardo's

Barnardo's is the UK's largest national children's charity. Our ambition is to achieve better outcomes for more children by building stronger families, safer childhoods and positive futures. In 2021-2022, Barnardo's supported 357,276 children, young people, parents, and carers through 794 services and partnerships throughout the UK.

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Barnardo's Registered Charity Nos.216250 and SC037605 24189H23