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## ORIGINAL ARTICLE



# The exploitation of girls in care: An ongoing struggle for recognition

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## Abstract

Drawing upon original research data, the core task of this article is to explore some of the difficulties experienced by girls in care in England in having their exploitation recognised, along with the challenges faced by professionals from social care and criminal justice agencies in meeting their safeguarding needs. The article provides a unique insight into the ways in which the perceptions and experiences of the two groups compare with the other, as both attempts to negotiate their own set of challenges within the confines of an inadequate and under-resourced system. It considers the sense of disconnect between the needs, expectations and perceptions of care-experienced girls and the care they ultimately receive, emphasising how experiences of stigma intersect with gendered and racialised judgements, creating a situation where they are viewed as less than 'ideal' victims.

## Key Practitioner Messages

- A disconnect exists between the needs, expectations and perceptions of care-experienced girls at risk of exploitation and the care, safeguarding and support they receive.
- The stigma related to care experience, combined with gendered and racialised judgements, continues to contribute towards discriminatory perceptions of victimhood, meaning that 'critical moments' for intervention are missed.
- Systemic deficiencies need to be tackled to ensure that girls are safeguarded effectively.

## KEYWORDS

child criminal exploitation, child sexual exploitation, girls in care, practitioner perspectives, safeguarding, stigma, system deficiencies

## INTRODUCTION

Over the last decade or more, the impact of both child sexual exploitation (CSE) and child criminal exploitation (CCE) upon care-experienced children and young people has been highlighted in the UK and internationally. It has been well established that children in state care are particularly vulnerable to exploitation (e.g., Hallett, 2016; Turner et al., 2019) as the result of various individual factors, situational dynamics, socio-structural forces (Brown, 2019) and systemic deficiencies (Shaw & Greenhow, 2021). Furthermore, gender has long been recognised as contributing both to the risk of exploitation and the type of response received (e.g., see Brown, 2019) and in relation to care-experienced girls more specifically, research has highlighted various issues. This includes a study undertaken in the United States by Hickie and Roe-Sipowitz (2018) that compared the experiences of girls living in residential care (group homes) who were sexually

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exploited, with those in residential care who were not victimised in this way. It found that the victimised group was significantly more likely to report experiences of intimate partner violence and child sexual abuse.

Earlier research by Coy (2009) found that multiple moves within care were profoundly destabilising, impacting upon girls' capacities to develop trusting relationships with others and feel settled, leading to a 'kaleidoscope' (p. 265) of ways in which they became vulnerable to exploitation, a state of affairs later confirmed by the largely female care-experienced participants in Hallett's (2016, p. 2141) research who relayed how 'experiences directly related to their care, or lack thereof', were contributory factors. Furthermore, it has been found that social workers' understandings of girl's agency, and in turn their safeguarding response, are significantly shaped by where and by whom the girl had been abused or exploited. Girls exploited outside of the home were thought to have more choice about whether to be in exploitative situations, whereas girls abused in the family home were understood to have no choice and therefore more of an 'ideal' victim (Lloyd, 2022, p. 536). This has clear implications for girls in care placements who are exploited and abused, particularly when combined with the stigma attached to being in care (Selwyn et al., 2017; Stanley, 2015) and the accompanying negative judgements relating to character. The long-established links between girls' sexual abuse and subsequent offending/justice system involvement (e.g., see Hickie & Roe-Sipowitz, 2018; Siegel & Williams, 2003) provide a further compelling reason to understand how the care experience might contribute to their exploitation and what preventative measures may be most effective. In relation to CCE, a 'culture' of victim criminalisation endures (Koch, 2021), which can have longer term implications for justice system involvement and girls' subsequent life chances (Shaw & Greenhow, 2021).

In terms of exploitation more generally, it has been found that despite an increased awareness of the risks to children and the development of numerous policy and practice initiatives to tackle them (see Shaw & Greenhow, 2021), there remains a persistent deficit in responding to the issues. Long after Jay (2014) highlighted children in care as vulnerable to grooming for the purposes of CSE, the UK Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse (IICSA, 2022) revealed systemic failings in identifying sexually exploited children in care and in taking effective action to protect them, with instances of exploitation continuing when children entered care. Professionals often struggle to keep up with the scale and context of criminal exploitation, with the response from statutory agencies being variable and often coming too late (Turner et al., 2019).

Drawing upon original research data, the core task of this article is to explore some of the challenges experienced by girls in care in having their exploitation recognised, as well as those encountered by social work and criminal justice practitioners in meeting their safeguarding needs. In doing so, it considers the sense of disconnect between the needs, expectations and perceptions of care-experienced girls and the care they ultimately receive. It emphasises how some experience stigma (Stanley, 2015) that can intersect with gendered and racialised judgements, to create a situation where they are viewed as less than 'ideal' victims (Christie, 1986). The article aims to contribute to the growing body of literature that considers how the provision of care, and the practices of child protection, may contribute to the continuance of girls' sexual and criminal exploitation (e.g., Hallett, 2016; Shaw & Greenhow, 2021) and what may be done to improve practice outcomes. Often, CCE and CSE are explored separately in the available academic literature, yet as care-experienced girls have been found to be at risk of both forms of exploitation for often interconnecting reasons, it made sense to consider our participants' experiences together.

## METHODS

The interview data discussed here were collected as part of a larger English study, completed in 2022 and funded by the Nuffield Foundation (Fitzpatrick et al., 2022). The study included 94 interviews that sought the perspectives of both care-experienced girls and women who had been in trouble with the law, and practitioners stemming from across a range of professional spheres, with a view to learning from their accounts and improving practice responses. Its overall aim was to examine how to disrupt the connection between experiences of the state childcare system (e.g., foster and residential care) and later involvement in the criminal justice system. Thirty-seven care-experienced women from across three prisons in England were interviewed between October 2019 and February 2020. Between January 2020 and March 2021, interviews were carried out with 17 care-experienced girls and young women across England who had also had youth justice involvement. Interviews were also undertaken with 40 professionals between February 2020 and February 2021, including front-line practitioners and senior policy leads from children's services, police, youth justice, probation, prisons and the judiciary. Participants were selected via purposive sampling strategies (Braun & Clarke, 2013) that enabled the research to focus on individuals and issues that were directly relevant to its stated aims and objectives.

Recent statistics highlight that of the almost 84,000 children currently accommodated in different placement types in England, the majority (68 %) are in foster care placements, with approximately 17% in 'secure placements, children's homes or semi-independent living accommodation' (Gov.uk, 2023, online). For the purposes of the article, the terms

'care-experience' and 'state care' refer to both experience of children's home (group-home) and foster care placements (residence in a 'conventional' family setting). Whilst the risk of exploitation in England has long been associated with children's homes (e.g., see Munro, 2004), the girls and women referred to had between them experienced exploitation whilst in both types of placements. The exploitative experiences referred to took place when they were in their early to mid-teens, although many were unable to recall exact dates.

Although the 94 participants were not specifically asked about exploitation during their interviews, the sub-group of 28 individuals discussed here raised the issue, and their valuable insights raise significant questions in relation to current and future practice. These include three care-experienced women in prison, two of whom identified as white-British and one mixed race-British, aged 26, 32 and 43. There were also four care-experienced, criminal or youth justice-involved girls and young women in the community, aged 16, 17, 23 and 26. Three identified as White-British and one British-Arab. Twenty-one professionals from across the range of agencies referred to previously also provided insights. The ages of the professionals spanned 26 and 69. Most identified as being White, with three from other ethnic backgrounds (Fitzpatrick et al., 2022).

Guided by the five level Qualitative Data Analysis (QDA) method advocated by Woolf and Silver (2018), our interviews were analysed thematically using NVivo 12, which involves the application of codes, references and memos to manage and explore the data. This research was approved by the Lancaster University Ethics Committee. In accordance with ethical procedure (BSC, 2015, p. 5), we prioritised the 'rights, interests, sensitivities and privacy' of our participants. We were at pains to ensure that participant identities were protected through the assignment of pseudonyms and changing the names of locations and establishments. We also obtained the written consent of all participants to use the data collected in their interviews.

## RESULTS

The following section presents key interview findings, drawing upon a combination of the professional and care-experienced participants' experiences. Four distinct areas are highlighted relating firstly to the under-surveillance of girls' victimisation and the challenges in protecting them from risk. Professional responses to exploitation are then explored, followed by the impact of stigma on girls, and the re-emergence of inappropriate attitudes amongst some professionals.

### Under-surveillance

It became apparent that, at times, the excessive scrutiny of girls' own behaviour in care that often leads to criminalisation (Fitzpatrick et al., 2022) contrasted sharply with an under-surveillance their victimisation and exploitation. For example, one of the care-experienced participants, Isla (26), talked about how she experienced a sexually, physically and emotionally abusive relationship whilst in care, which was overlooked by staff in her children's home, despite the presentation of obvious outward signs, including bruising. Looking back on her time in care, Isla felt very let down by the lack of response to her abuse and believed that the staff in her children's home did not care:

I was going through a lot of domestic violence with a partner. I used to come home with bruises and stuff. And you know it was just kind of like 'if she walks past the office and don't say nothing, we haven't seen it so there isn't a problem' ... So it was overlooked quite a lot.

(Isla, 26)

A lack of safeguarding intervention was also described by Hannah (26), who explained how she challenged staff over her concerns about another young girl:

In the care [children's] home that we were in, I kept telling the staff: 'Are you \*\*\*\*ing serious? Are you letting her go? She's ... 14, like you're letting her go with these old men that are picking her up'. And all they kept saying to me was, 'we've reported it and the police are aware of it'.

(Hannah, 26)

In a similar vein, Lucy (23) described gravitating towards gangs, violence and the distribution of drugs and living a very dangerous lifestyle after she went into care at the age of 14. She described getting an early bus every morning to go to see people in connection with gang business. She was out all day, every day, but because she always followed the rules, came home to sleep in her bed and did not cause her foster carers any trouble by going missing, she was not a focus for social worker attention:

I'd get up; I'd get on the first bus, and I'd go and then I had a curfew, so the very last bus I'd get on and make sure I was back .... I hadn't broken any of their rules, they didn't ask me what I was doing, they didn't ask me what I'd spent my money on or to give them a detailed account of where I'd been, they just asked me to be in at that time and I was, I slept in my bed.

(Lucy, 23)

Lucy firmly believed that social services were aware of what was going on, yet it was only when she later went to prison that she was finally removed from the situation. Lucy stated that she 'knew exactly how to play the system', yet it appears that the overstretched system made it easy for her to slip through the cracks, with the 'protective elements' (Radcliffe et al., 2020) that should be present for children in care, being absent in her case. It has been highlighted how 'gangs capitalise on the relative invisibility of girls to advance their economic interests and stay below police radar' (Havard et al., 2023, p. 313; Shaw, 2023), something that may have a particular resonance for those in care. Indeed, the experiences described accord with other research findings, where girls described an absence of trusting relationships in care placements, considering themselves to be ignored, unwanted and feeling 'invisible' to those who should care for them and want to help (Hallett, 2016, p. 2141). Such failings have a lasting impact upon children's future relationships and ongoing lack of trust in those in positions of authority (e.g., Fitzpatrick et al., 2022; IICSA, 2022; Stanley, 2015).

## Challenges in protecting children

Moreover, police participants highlighted recurrent difficulties of securing exploitation convictions and achieving appropriate safeguarding, with one stating that the 'investigations are difficult in themselves simply due to the form of the exploitation' (*Police Participant 3*). This includes the fact that girls at risk of harm do not always consider themselves vulnerable 'victims' but rather willing participants, with some feeling that they are capable and independent, able to flourish in times of adversity (Ellis, 2018):

I'd found my place, I'd found my belonging ... I know that sounds crazy, but I was good at it, I was good at being a criminal, I was feared, I was respected, I had money ... I'd found a purpose, and it was brilliant.

(Lucy 23)

Lucy's explanation reflects her self-view as someone who was capable and independent but also highlights a need for care, purpose and belonging that permeated the women and girls' explanations for their involvement in both sexual and criminal exploitation, with the relationships and activities appearing to go some way towards meeting those needs:

They put me into care and during this time I'd met an older man who I thought was brilliant ... he's the only person that cared for me.

(Hannah, 26)

This reflects other CSE-related research, which found that some girls' needs were being met in some ways by those who take advantage of them (Hallett, 2016, p. 2143) and makes sense in the context of feeling that nobody really cares and that they do not belong. Whilst this issue is problematic for all exploited children, it may be particularly pertinent for some girls in care, who may welcome offers of love, friendship, material inducements and/or a sense of belonging, if they have previously experienced abuse, neglect, rejection or indifference in the context of often wider poverty and disadvantage.

## Responses to exploitation

Because of the perceived investigatory difficulties inherent in exploitation offences, *Police Participant 2* felt that good practice should involve exploring the dynamic around the alleged offence and by implication, the alleged victim, rather than simply relying upon the cooperation of vulnerable children. She also stressed the necessity of taking such offences seriously and exercising *professional curiosity* to uncover exploitation that might not be immediately apparent when detaining girls for other offences (*Police Interview 2*). Another police participant felt that the police are becoming much more *enlightened* about the time that is needed to build trust and develop rapport with victims of sexual exploitation (*Police 4*), thus conveying recognition of the importance of identifying and acting upon exploitation.

Conversely, a general concern was expressed by others that, instead of trying to tackle issues of sexual and criminal exploitation in situ, exploited care-experienced children of both genders are often moved to other areas to minimise perceived risk. Some suggested that this might reflect a desire to move the problem elsewhere, a default option precipitated

by the lack of time and resources to both prevent and tackle the presenting issues, rather than being the best option for those at risk:

Children's social care might argue it's for their own protection, but I would suggest that sometimes it's to move the problem elsewhere ... they can't actually cope with the needs of the child, and they are literally dumped into another part of the country.

(Youth Offending Team 7)

Some participants highlighted the lack of adequate local care provision and the concentration of private children's homes in more deprived areas due to the availability of cheaper housing, and local opposition in more affluent areas from residents influenced by negative perceptions of children in care (Jones, 2022). The result is the accommodation of young people with various needs in proximity (in the same or a nearby placement) who then gravitate towards each other, along with various negative influences in the communities in which they have been placed. Interviewees acknowledged the pressure on social workers to find placements for children and young people in an inadequately resourced system but felt that a more 'thoughtful' risk assessment could reduce the risk of exploitation. Indeed, it was also stated that 'the preventative side of safeguarding should be as important as the reactive element' (*Police Interview 2*). This would clearly have benefits for girls in care who are at risk of exploitation, yet in overstretched and underfunded social care and criminal justice systems, it has been shown that this is far from the reality of current practice (Shaw & Greenhow, 2021).

## Stigma and inappropriate attitudes

In contrast to the more positive perceptions of the police participants in the study, who felt that the police service was becoming more enlightened in its approach to exploitation, other participants felt that the struggle to have exploitation recognised is very much ongoing, despite various high-profile cases (e.g., Jay, 2014; Peel, 2019) and clear policy intent to tackle and improve responses. As discussed by interviewees, care-experienced girls are vulnerable because of a confluence of pre-care and in-care factors (Staines, 2016); they are also subject to additional stigma that comes with care experience (Selwyn et al., 2017; Stanley, 2015) and the accompanying negative judgements relating to character. For example, one interviewee said:

It's seen as 'oh you're a child in care, oh you've been hanging round these taxi drivers' ... It must be so frustrating for them not to be able to have someone to listen to them ... just because there's a stigma ... they're in care.

(Magistrate 2)

This accords with prior research that expressed how participants felt that their experiences of care gave them a feeling of 'difference' of not being like 'normal' children (Hallett, 2016, p. 2141). Other accounts have seen care-experienced children stigmatised as 'lesser beings', tainted as 'trouble' and in turn internalising the negative attitudes towards them, feeling inferior and unlovable (Stanley, 2015, p. 1151). Certainly, the 'othering' of care-experienced children as 'streetwise' (Shaw, 2014) and lacking the innocence of 'normal' children can feed into discriminatory and judgemental attitudes, low expectations and a lack of appropriate safeguarding for girls:

I sometimes think that we overlook what I would call actually abusive relationships and sexually harmful relationships as boyfriends, because they're children in care.

(Children's Services 2)

The impact of stigma was present throughout our wider research study and builds upon extant knowledge to further develop our understanding of an area that remains extremely difficult to address. Indeed, alongside the stigma attached to care-experience, a participant spoke of a worrying re-emergence of inappropriate gendered attitudes to CSE amongst professionals:

An awful lot of professionals have reverted to significantly inappropriate language and views about young females. The number of times now we are hearing that girls are 'putting themselves at risk,' it is a 'lifestyle choice', back into that narrative that we had in the nineties and the early 2000s. There is a lot of blaming of young girls in terms of exploitation and I'm hearing it a lot within my own circles which makes me very, very angry.

(Children's Services 3)

The language of a police participant directly reflected such attitudes when he talked about a care-experienced victim of CSE:

The child becomes much more sexualised, and sex is a commodity that she's able to provide in order to achieve the goals that she wants to achieve.

(Police 3)

Weston and Mythen (2022) report that whilst practitioners can often articulate very clearly their formal understandings of exploitation as expressed through policy and practice guidance, they nevertheless 'frequently construct the risks ... through informal means, with reference to personal experiences and preconceived notions of appropriate and inappropriate behaviour' (Weston & Mythen, 2022, p. 619). This kind of indirect victim blaming becomes even more potent when combined with racial stereotypes, as evidenced when the same police participant talked about 'over-sexualised' nature of a Black girl he had encountered:

The other thing was how she spoke and referred to herself and others ... referring to herself as a bitch ... almost putting [her boyfriend] on this pedestal. I don't know if that was because of her ethnic background or if that was because of perhaps a culture that she was trying to relate to ... What I'm sort of thinking about is just how sexualised that child was.

(Police 3)

Another participant felt that some professionals held this view of Black girls, stating that they are Over sexualised from a very young age ... a lot of things are projected onto them that they're adults long before they are.

(Children's Services 3).

Such perceptions will have detrimental implications for Black care-experienced exploitation victims, who face the intersecting disadvantages of stigma related to being in care and racial stereotypes. They are often the subject of 'adulthood', which is when 'notions of innocence and vulnerability are not afforded to certain children', as 'determined by people and institutions who hold power over them' (Davis & Marsh, 2020, cited in Davis, 2022, p. 5). This was not mentioned in relation to other ethnic groups, thus reflecting recent research that indicates it is more common in relation to Black children (Davis, 2022).

## DISCUSSION

Brown (2019, p. 25) argues that, to respond effectively to vulnerability, there is a need to move 'towards an understanding of intersectional social divisions, social marginality, "critical moments" and how these shape the investments and actions of young people'. We found these sentiments to be particularly pertinent to the experiences discussed in this article, highlighting as it does a series of individual and contextual challenges in protecting care-experienced girls from sexual and criminal exploitation.

Amongst the issues that presented most starkly was a sense of disconnect between the needs, expectations and perceptions of the care-experienced girls and women and the care they received. They described feeling unseen and ignored by those that were charged with their well-being (Hallett, 2016). 'Critical moments' (Brown, 2019) for intervention were missed, as both physical and behavioural signs of exploitation were not acted upon. These inadequate responses may in part have been reflective of a lack of confidence in dealing with exploitation, as well as the pressures inherent in an under-resourced system where social care staff report a lack of training, resources, support and supervision (Kwhali et al., 2016; Shaw & Greenhow, 2021). Unfortunately, these issues endure, despite the passage of time since the experiences reported by our care-experienced participants, meaning that children will continue to be placed at risk and inviting the question of what it will take for such persistent issues to be seriously addressed.

Another concern is the perennial issue of victim blaming, and, indeed, there is a serious need to address the link between stigma and risk of abuse and exploitation against care-experienced girls. Many do not fit with societal or professional expectations of the 'ideal' exploitation victim (Christie, 1986) and consequently may be denied the safeguarding interventions and services they need and deserve. Our findings on the re-emergence of inappropriate gendered language amongst professionals when talking about CSE are particularly worrying. The participants' comments shed some light on the processes that enable the exploitation of children to persist over time despite well publicised case reviews (e.g., see Jay, 2014; Peel, 2019) and changes in policy and practice guidance that stress how exploitation can occur despite seemingly consensual activity (Department for Education, 2017; Home Office, 2018). In relation specifically to girls in care, such perceptions become even more potent when combined with the enduring stigma often attached to those who are care-experienced (Hallett, 2016; Shaw, 2014; Stanley, 2015), resulting in low expectations and negative judgements. Added to all this is the impact of racial stereotypes, which see Black children subject to adulthood and misunderstanding (Davis, 2022). Whilst more widespread training and education are clearly needed to

counteract such misconceptions, training can only go so far in tackling engrained, preconceived ideas (Weston & Mythen, 2022), pointing to the need for wider cultural, political and systemic changes in approaching the issues.

Our research highlighted a continued tension between the safeguarding requirements for girls in care and the ability of professionals to deliver this effectively. For example, whilst care-experienced participant Hannah bemoaned the apparent lack of response by children's home staff and social services to the clear exploitation of a fellow resident, some of the professional participants reflected on the challenges in responding to such issues, particularly when children do not see themselves as victims of exploitation (Gilligan, 2016). This echoes the long-recognised 'tensions that invariably arise when approaches taken to protect a child, such as taking away mobile phones, policing the internet, and using secure accommodation, may transgress wishes, autonomy and freedom and destroy trust in the professional system' (LeFevre et al., 2017, p. 2465). They may also give girls a message of blame and punishment, particularly when they see how rarely perpetrators are prosecuted (LeFevre et al., 2017, p. 2468; Aussems et al., 2020).

Whilst these factors in no way excuse inaction and a lack of safeguarding, they also give a flavour of the often-competing considerations and challenges faced by practitioners when responding to exploitation. The idea that police investigations should involve exploring the dynamic around the offence, rather than outcomes being dependent on the cooperation/testimony of exploited children, is an interesting one and may counter some of the more negative aspects of engagement with the criminal justice process (Beckett & Warrington, 2015). However, whilst girls are enmeshed in a risk-averse care system that perpetuates stigma rather than empowerment, the conviction of perpetrators will not guarantee an end to their exploitation in the longer term. Indeed, for some of the care-experienced participants, the exploitative relationships and activities described met clear needs for affection, care, acceptance and achievement (Hallett, 2016; Robinson et al., 2018) that were not met either in their families of origin or by the system and placements in which they found themselves. This highlights the importance of preventative work with families, and care placements where workers are supported and trained to spot signs of exploitation and encouraged to establish protective, trusting relationships, unimpeded by a lack of resources and large caseloads (Kwhali et al., 2016). There is the clear need for a care system that promotes nurturing, acceptance and achievement. However, whilst some 'child-centred' placements can be extremely effective in meeting girls' needs, this is unfortunately not the case for all, with provision being of inconsistent quality and at times geared towards a male majority (see Shaw, 2014; Staines, 2016). This, coupled with the tendency to respond to the risk of exploitation by moving children elsewhere, means that their best interests are not always well served. Research demonstrates that where timely and skilled intervention exists, it can make a positive contribution to abused children and their carers (Kwhali et al., 2016, p. 2208–2213), so the absence of therapeutic, trauma responsive support will continue to disadvantage vulnerable girls (Fitzpatrick et al., 2022; Kwhali et al., 2016).

This paper draws on a subsection of data from a larger study about care-criminalisation and there is clearly scope for further, dedicated exploration of the identified issues amongst a larger group of both practitioners and girls who are currently in care, including those who are not involved with the justice system. The small sample of participants cited in the article refers to ongoing systemic deficits that continue to place girls at risk of harm, and whilst reasons for becoming involved in exploitation are personal to everyone, the need for belonging, acceptance and achievement are universal and timeless.

## CONCLUSION

Considering the accounts of both care-experienced women and girls and the professionals who work with them provides a unique insight into the ways in which the perceptions and experiences of one group compare with the other. It demonstrates how both groups attempt to negotiate their own set of challenges within the confines of an inadequate and under-resourced system, often without the benefit of clear guidance and support. In turn, the perceptions of the different groups of professionals varied between the cautious optimism of the police that exploitation is being increasingly recognised and more effectively responded to, to frustration on the part of some in children's services and youth offending teams at the re-emergence of inappropriate attitudes and inadequate, harmful responses. Such differences are reflective of wider dissonance at policy level, as exemplified by the current government's recent rejection of several of the recommendations made by the UK Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse (IICSA, 2022). In a joint statement with an expert panel representing survivors, the head of the Inquiry, Alexis Jay, stated this would fail to protect children (Samuel, 2023, online).

Indeed, it has become increasingly clear that, despite some important policy and practice developments, there is still a long way to go in achieving and sustaining consistent and effective safeguarding and support for those in care who are at risk of exploitation. This article illustrates situational, attitudinal and systemic reasons for this, including some of the intersectional social divisions that impact upon girl's experiences and the challenges they face. It considers the ways in which some care-experienced girls suffer the combined weight of stigma related to care-experience, gendered and racialised judgements, all whilst navigating a system that struggles to meet their needs and features in the problem of

exploitation itself (Hallett, 2016; Shaw & Greenhow, 2021). A major challenge here is how to ensure that these issues remain firmly on the agenda for social workers, carers, and other practitioners, so often working in overstretched systems, to ensure that ‘critical moments’ (Brown, 2019) for intervention are not missed.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

There is no identified conflict of interest.

## ETHICS STATEMENT

The research referred to in this article was undertaken with the understanding and written consent of each participant, and in accordance with ethical procedure outlined by the British Society of Criminology (BSC, 2015, p. 5), we aimed to ensure the ‘rights, interests, sensitivities and privacy’ of our participants. We aimed for a flexible, courteous and respectful approach always and were at pains to ensure that participant identities were protected through the assignment of pseudonyms and changing the names of locations and establishments. This research was approved by the Lancaster University Ethics Committee.

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