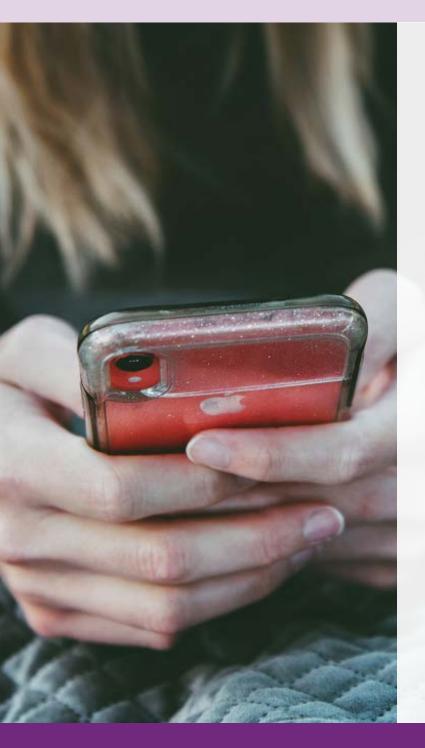**Vulnerability &
Policing Futures**
Research Centre

Social media–facilitated trafficking of children and young people

Key points

- Offenders use social media across all crime stages, from the identification and recruitment of victims to their exploitation and control. Different apps and social media tools are used at different stages and for different purposes.

- The lack of engagement by social media companies with stakeholders presents a key challenge to effectively identifying and safeguarding at-risk children and young people.

- Legal and regulatory frameworks governing online platforms' responsibilities and responses to trafficking-related activities remain insufficient and fragmented.

Summary

Social media platforms can be used for exploitative activities. This poses significant challenges to the safety and wellbeing of children and young people (CYP).

Despite increased focus on the use of social media among young people, its role in facilitating exploitation has been largely absent from current research. This report presents key findings from exploratory research that aimed to better understand the use of social media in exploiting CYP, as well as stakeholders' preparedness to respond to it.

The report draws on evidence from practitioners across England and Wales. It provides an overview of the problem and identifies specific areas where further research is needed to inform policy and practice.

The project was funded by the ESRC Vulnerability & Policing Futures Research Centre's Early Career Researcher Development Fund.

Background

Social media has become a fundamental part of children's and young people's lives in the UK, with most households with children aged 0-18 having internet access.

This widespread availability of the internet has led to an increase in social media usage, which has significantly complicated the task of ensuring children and young people remain safe online. Social media platforms are increasingly being used for exploitative purposes, making it difficult to implement effective prevention and intervention strategies. The expanded connectivity brings increased risks of online exploitation. The rapid communication enabled by these platforms allows traffickers to quickly recruit, groom, and exploit vulnerable children and young people.

Furthermore, the constantly changing nature of online spaces and social media usage among children and young people presents ongoing challenges for professionals tasked with combating child exploitation, affecting their ability to detect, investigate, and prosecute cases effectively. Key challenges include the anonymity offered by online platforms, legal constraints, encryption technologies, and the lack of collaboration between social media companies and law enforcement agencies.

The issue of social media's role in child exploitation has come under increased scrutiny due to the UK's Online Safety Act 2023. This legislation places new responsibilities on social media platforms to identify, report, and mitigate online harms, including child exploitation and trafficking. The Act's emphasis on holding tech companies accountable has brought renewed attention to the ways these platforms are used to exploit children and the need for stricter safety measures. Yet, despite the increasing academic attention on the internet's contributions to human trafficking and exploitation, the specific role that social media plays in the exploitation of children and young people is still not well understood.

What we did

The study employed a mixed-method methodology.

This included case reviews, surveys, a focus group, and consultations with a steering group consisting of policy makers, representatives from non-governmental organisations (NGOs) supporting exploited victims, and law enforcement agencies. The research team also consulted with people with lived experience of exploitation.

A qualitative survey was designed, piloted, and distributed through targeted networks across England and Wales. Fifty-one participants from law enforcement agencies, governmental organisations and NGOs completed it. The survey included a mix of closed questions exploring the nature and prevalence of social media use in the trafficking of CYP and organisational preparedness to respond to it. Open questions gathering participants' views on challenges and needs to respond to the social media-facilitated trafficking of CYP were also included. Five case files (from two different NGOs) involving the exploitation of CYP were analysed using crime script analysis. To complement insights and contextualise findings from the survey and the case files, a focus group was conducted with eight representatives from NGOs and law-enforcement agencies.

Key findings

Social media usage and prevalence in the exploitation of CYP

- Social media is used across all phases of the exploitation process.

- Offenders use social media in active and passive capacities. This includes the purposeful targeting of potential victims or the glamorization of lifestyles that may attract them.

- When CYP are criminally exploited, including through county lines drug supply networks, social media is used to exercise control through constant messaging (including sending threatening videos and images).

- Different participant groups perceived the prevalence of social media differently. Law enforcement agencies reported higher rates of usage than NGOs.

- Participants agreed that different apps are utilised for different crime stages and purposes, such as YouTube for glamorization and Snapchat for continuous control.

- Participants agreed that social media prevalence in CYP exploitation is due to its low effort and low-risk nature, offering offenders access to potential victims globally with minimal cost and monitoring. The sense of anonymity and difficulty in tracking activities further reduces the risk of identification and prosecution.

- Access and affordability contribute to the widespread use of social media, providing CYP opportunities for communication and increasing exposure to violence. This, coupled with CYP's low perception of risks online, increases their vulnerability to exploitation.

Preparedness to respond

- Most participants viewed their organisations as ill-prepared to respond to the threat that social media presents for the exploitation of CYP.

- Participants highlighted the lack of (institutional) professional awareness and the limited professional expertise available on social media-facilitated trafficking.

- Participants agreed on the lack of effective legislation, viewing the Online Safety Bill as insufficient and ineffective in targeting CYP exploitation.

- Participants highlighted the need for a statutory definition of child criminal exploitation to promote understanding of child criminal exploitation and help better data management and recording.

- The lack of engagement with social media companies was identified as a key challenge to effectively identifying and safeguarding at-risk CYP.

Next steps

There needs to be further collaborative research in the following areas to inform responses to the exploitation of CYP facilitated by social media.

1. Better insight into social media usage

The findings revealed some differences in the way social media is used in cases of sexual exploitation compared to criminal exploitation and highlighted the evolving nature and use of apps. Future research and strategies for prevention and disruption need to examine and acknowledge differences in social media usage based on exploitation type and provide evidence-based knowledge on social media apps' features that are most frequently used in the crime commission, including further insight into how social media is used to target CYP.

A young person-centred perspective is needed when developing preventive strategies and conducting research that examines digital vulnerabilities so that CYP's views, needs, concerns and aptitude towards digital tools are acknowledged and recognised. A more in-depth examination of practitioners' understanding of social media usage in the commission of crime is required to educate them and inform awareness-raising campaigns and training packages to different professionals.

2. Engagement with social media companies

The widespread adoption of social media among CYP, together with the lack of engagement of social media companies in preventive and safeguarding responses, exacerbates CYP's risk of exploitation. Furthermore, the legal and regulatory frameworks governing online platforms' responsibilities and responses to trafficking-related activities remain insufficient and fragmented.

Addressing this requires collaborative effort, with tech companies acknowledging their responsibility to safeguard CYP from online harm and developing effective detection and prevention technologies. Policymakers, Ofcom, practitioners, and researchers need to explore mechanisms and opportunities for effective working agreements with tech companies. Further research on legal frameworks and digital vulnerability is also needed to inform online platforms' terms and conditions, legislation, and regulations to prevent exploitation and minimise vulnerabilities online.

3. Early-identification mechanisms

Policymakers, practitioners, and researchers should explore opportunities for better engagement and collaboration with schools and service providers to identify CYP at risk more effectively and quickly. Few participants discussed the need for reporting mechanisms and information-sharing platforms. Future research should explore possibilities and constraints for implementing such strategies.

Despite social media companies' corporate responsibility to create safer online environments, further opportunities need to be explored to create safe environments where CYP can discuss their online interactions with guardians and capable adults. Future research should explore interventions that promote resilience and reduce the risk of exploitation.

For further information

Read more about this project at:
vulnerabilitypolicing.org.uk/social-media-trafficking

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