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‘Won the Battle but Lost the War?’ ‘County Lines’ and the Quest for Victim Status: Reflections and Challenges

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Abstract

Despite the existence of a seemingly welfare-oriented policy approach, the victim status of criminally exploited children in the United Kingdom remains uncertain in frontline responses, where a culture of criminalisation endures. Drawing upon original research data, this article seeks to unpick and confront some of the complexities and tensions surrounding the assignment of victim status to children who are criminally exploited, specifically via ‘county lines’ drug dealing. It argues for an urgent reconsideration of how ‘county lines’ victimisation is framed in wider discourse, policy documentation and practitioner training, to reflect and acknowledge the experiences of children and young people.

Keywords

child criminal exploitation, county lines, criminalisation, practitioner perspectives, victim status

Introduction

Despite the existence of a seemingly welfare-oriented policy approach, the victim status of criminally exploited children in the United Kingdom remains uncertain and at times non-existent, in frontline responses. Here, a culture of criminalisation endures (Koch, 2021) that leaves children and young people vulnerable to ongoing predation and social exclusion (Children’s Society, 2019; Shaw and Greenhow, 2021; Sturrock and Holmes, 2015). The question of what precipitates acceptance or rejection of victim status is a long-standing one and in respect of child criminal exploitation (CCE), the reasons for this are arguably located in various disparate, yet interconnecting factors. These relate to the actions and characteristics of individual children and young people, along with public perceptions that are, in turn, influenced by the framing of the issue in wider discourse (Walklate, 2011). Drawing upon original research data, the core task of this article is to unpick and confront some of the complexities and tensions surrounding the assignment of

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victim status to children who are criminally exploited specifically via ‘county lines’ drug dealing, with a view to developing more effective responses to this type of offending. In doing so, it pays due regard to the individual, ‘victim specific’ factors, which may influence the reactions of frontline workers. It will consider the juxtaposition of how simplistic representations of the ‘ideal’ exploitation victim (Christie, 1986), often directly contrast with the complex realities of ‘county lines’ exploitation and the problems this presents (Windle et al., 2020; Bouris, 2007; McEvoy and McConnachie, 2012). Connected to such representations are ideas of risk and vulnerability, as well as consent and choice or ‘agency’, which, in turn, have a significant impact upon the assignment of victim status in exploitation cases (Reisel, 2016; Windle et al., 2020). Citing a range of victimological and criminological literature, including that related to child criminal and sexual exploitation, transitional justice, human trafficking and domestic violence, it makes a case for the need to move beyond traditional notions of ‘ideal’ victimhood (Christie, 1986). These maintain a ‘hierarchy’ of blame (Carrabine et al., 2004) that cannot easily accommodate the ‘wilful’ (Moore and Hoffeler, 2019), ‘complex’ (Moffett, 2015) and ‘reluctant’ (Megret, 2018) victims of CCE. As such, they fail to acknowledge the lived realities of children and young people involved in county lines.

Background and Context

‘County lines’ is a UK police term for urban gangs supplying drugs to suburban areas and market and coastal towns using dedicated mobile phone lines or ‘deal lines’. It involves CCE, as suppliers target children (and vulnerable adults) to move drugs and money (Children’s Society, 2019; Dodd, 2019; Home Office, 2018: 2). A report by the Children’s Society warns that while the main age bracket for the criminal exploitation of children is 14–17 years, the age at which children are being targeted for grooming is getting younger (Children’s Society, 2019; Dodd, 2019). Both ‘county lines’ and human trafficking involve the movement and exploitation of vulnerable peoples and ‘county lines’ can therefore be defined as human trafficking under the Palermo Protocol¹ and UK Modern Slavery Act 2015 (Windle et al., 2020: 70).

The involvement of children in ‘county lines’ criminality in the United Kingdom has become a matter of public concern in recent years, both via the publicity surrounding various high-profile court cases and the results of serious case reviews (see Drew, 2020; Stone, 2018). Indeed, Robinson et al. (2019: 4) note that ‘such is the gravity of the use of children in county lines that UK media reports describe working the lines as “the new grooming scandal” hot on the heels of the Rotherham child sexual exploitation catastrophe’. Now acknowledged as a form of child abuse (Home Office, 2018), this situation has inspired a veritable raft of research, policy and practice guidance that has sought to reveal, explore and finally address the issues that contribute to and exacerbate children’s victimisation. From the development of contextual safeguarding (Firmin, 2017) and the National Referral Mechanism² (NRM), through to the use of the Modern Slavery Act, 2015 (Stone, 2018) and various multi-agency initiatives (Shaw and Greenhow, 2021), more attention is being paid to how we might tackle CCE in its various forms, than at any other time in modern history.

Returning to the theme of agency, non-statutory government guidance stipulates that CCE can occur *even if the activity appears consensual* (author's own emphasis) (Home Office, 2018). Furthermore, in respect of the potential defence to exploitation-related offending available under Section 45 of the 2015 Modern Slavery Act, 'it is not material whether the child was compelled to commit the offence' (Stone, 2018). Here, there appears to be an acknowledgement of the power dynamics inherent in CCE; an awareness of the realities of the grooming process, but also of agency, encapsulated within a more nuanced appreciation of victimisation than has previously been the case. This is long overdue, particularly in the aftermath of several high-profile examples of UK child sexual exploitation (CSE), which highlighted the stark failure of authorities to give due regard to safeguarding children, in part because of professionals' negative judgements regarding their behaviour and subsequent denial of victim status (e.g. Jay, 2014).

Conversely and in contrast to the apparent appreciation of the nuances of such victimisation, official discourse also locates 'county lines' exploitation as being a consequence of debt bondage, 'coercion, intimidation, violence (including sexual violence) and weapons' (HM Government, 2018: 48). This does not acknowledge the 'agency and rational choice (albeit constrained) of exploited children in relation to their involvement' in CCE (Irwin-Rogers, 2019; Moyle, 2019; Wroe, 2021: 40), despite research indicating that many reject the label of victim and receive tangible benefits from their involvement, including money, alcohol, drugs, accommodation and social status (Robinson et al., 2019). In fact, some children proceed to recruit others into exploitative networks or commit gang-related violence, thus blurring the lines between victim and perpetrator (Kotch, 2019; McAlinden, 2014; McLean et al., 2020; Robinson et al., 2019; Shaw and Greenhow, 2021).

Ignoring the role of victim agency in exploitative relationships arguably reflects an awareness of the 'need for a paradigm shift to viewing those involved as victims of abuse rather than criminals exercising free choice' (Dodsworth, 2014: 186). Representations of children involved in 'county lines' as 'deserving' victims, rather than active agents, has created the impetus for legislative and policy changes (Walklate, 2011) intended to encourage safeguarding measures. Nevertheless, in the longer term, this narrative clearly has the potential to be counterproductive in as much as it perpetuates the image of the 'ideal' CCE victim (Christie, 1986), whereby those who present as helpless, intimidated and coerced, yet ultimately cooperative, are assisted and diverted away from criminalisation, while others whose choices may have been likewise constrained by familial, social and economic realities are not (Shaw and Greenhow, 2021).

Indeed, the still ambiguous victim status of criminally exploited children, has been reflected both in the failure of professionals to refer children to the NRM and recent court cases (see ECPAT UK, 2021). In respect of the NRM, this may indicate a lack of understanding about how it should be used (Drew, 2020) and/or a dissatisfaction with its ability to provide timely and appropriate safeguarding (ECPAT UK, 2017), but it has also been found to be contentious to some professionals who view children as making 'lifestyle choices' and in need of criminal justice responses (Windle et al., 2020; Children's Society, 2018). Certainly, Weston and Mythen (2022) report that practitioners frequently construct the risks associated with exploitation through informal means 'with reference to personal experiences and preconceived notions of appropriate and inappropriate behaviour' (p.

619), regardless of their very clear ‘formal understandings of exploitation as expressed through policy and practice guidance’ (ibid).

Concerns have been raised (Home Office, 2019) by stakeholders about the use of the Modern Slavery Act (2015) defence to CCE related offending as a potential ‘loophole’ for offenders identifying as victims, and Gearon (2019: 487) reported the largely victim blaming and punitive frontline practice experienced by a sample of young people who were trafficked into and within England, revealing that the question of whether a child ‘consented’ or was ‘coerced’ became crucial to judgements of victim or offender status. This was despite the problems inherent in ‘face value interpretations’ of such matters, which often failed to acknowledge the complexities of children’s socio-economic, familial and cultural-political experiences (Gearon, 2019: 487). Furthermore, the recent Court of Appeal decision in *R v Brecani* (2021)³ will make it harder for children to establish exploitation in court, thus reflecting an urgent need to ensure that frontline professionals are able to identify it at an earlier stage and are conscious of the possible nuances of exploitative relationships. As such, it is important to explore why professionals may fail to acknowledge the victim status of criminally exploited children, potentially contributing to their re-victimisation.

Such responses to exploitation are not unique to the United Kingdom and indeed, despite the existence of legislation and practice guidance designed to offer protection, a victim blaming approach can be found in several international examples (Beckett, 2011; Renzetti et al., 2015). Research in the United States has revealed a reluctance by local law enforcement officers to acknowledge the existence of human trafficking for the purposes of criminal and sexual exploitation in their jurisdictions, despite the federal government’s prioritisation of such cases and the identification of instances that clearly meet legislative criteria for the offence (Renzetti et al., 2015). It was found that participation in training produced positive, but limited effects (Renzetti et al., 2015), highlighting the need for wider cultural, political and systemic changes in approaching the issues. A more recent, qualitative study of practising criminal justice professionals and victim service providers in Spain revealed how participants ‘cherished stereotypes about who could be a human trafficking victim that conditioned their ability to identify such victims’ (Villacampa and Torres, 2017: 401). It was further found that ‘the divergence between the two notions – that of the pure or ‘ideal’ victim and that of the criminal-victim – often prevents the latter from being identified as victims, because they do not match the professionals’ images of what a victim should be’ (Villacampa and Torres, 2017: 401). Indeed, the ‘ideal’ victim narrative (Christie, 1986) is a pervasive one, and its attendant expectations in terms of attitude and behaviour has direct implications for criminally exploited children.

Methodology

The preliminary research findings drawn upon in this article derive from a small qualitative pilot study. As qualitative research is generally about examining people’s experiences in rich detail (Smith, 2017: 138–139), participants are often chosen through purposive or purposeful sampling strategies (Braun and Clarke, 2013; Sparkes and Smith, 2014) that enable the research to focus on individuals and issues that are directly relevant to its stated

aims and objectives. Fifteen semi-structured interviews ranging from 40 to 90 minutes in duration, were undertaken with professionals who engage with child victims of criminal exploitation in both individual organisational and multi-agency settings. The professionals worked in five different town and city areas in the north and south of England. Five of the participants were employed by children's social services, three worked for youth offending teams, three were senior ranking police officers, three worked for third-sector organisations⁴ (national charities) and one for the National Health Services (NHS). While this constitutes a small number of individuals with a specific interest in CCE, thus limiting the wider generalisability of the findings, the small-scale nature of qualitative pilot studies can be a useful means of uncovering depth and meaning (Wincup, 2017) as well as highlighting themes for future exploration among a wider cohort.

The participants possessed differing levels of seniority within their respective organisations. Some held managerial posts, while others were 'frontline' practitioners. However, they all had experience of working with exploited children and other safeguarding agencies, for periods of between approximately 3 and 20+ years. They were recruited both via a 'snowball' sampling strategy (Parker et al., 2019) that began with the existing contacts of the researcher, and through a call for participants over social media. During the interviews, participants were asked to consider what factors contribute to perceptions of children as victims of criminal exploitation or otherwise and how policy and practice might more effectively address the criminalisation of CCE victims. The author thematically analysed the data (Braun and Clarke, 2006), reflecting critically upon how it does or does not accord with pre-existing research and associated theoretical perspectives (Mason, 2018). In accordance with the British Society of Criminology (BSC, 2015) guidelines, informed consent was obtained to both undertake the interviews and disseminate the findings. Pseudonyms have been assigned to specific organisations and geographical areas referred to, and the professionals are referred to by their job title with any identifying information removed from quotations. Approval to undertake the project was obtained from the Liverpool John Moores University Ethics Committee.

Findings

Denial of victimisation and lack of cooperation

Participants reported that children who denied being exploited were less likely to be seen as victims:

A lot of the kids will tell you that they're not being exploited, that they're choosing to do this; that it's a good way for them to make money. Some professionals will take that as, 'Well he's told me that he's alright. So he's alright'. (Children's Services 2)

A clear example of the 'wilful' victim (Moore and Hoffeler, 2019), where individuals display resilience and reject victim status, this accords with previous research findings that report the assertion of agency by criminally exploited children (e.g. Robinson et al., 2019; Wroe, 2021). There are numerous reasons for this, including the fact that for those young people who might otherwise be 'segregated from mainstream cultural and

institutional life by virtue of age, class, race, or community' (Robinson et al., 2019: 698) 'working the lines' can represent an achievable form of success (Sharkey et al., 2011). Furthermore, Robinson et al. (2019: 706) report that the mostly male victims of CCE in their study attempted to uphold their perceived masculine status by routinely rejecting the victim label to profess that drug dealing was their own choice. Certainly, those who come to the attention of the criminal justice system because of CCE involvement, are often socio-economically disadvantaged young people, experiencing a lack of protective 'guardianship' (*Police Officer 3*) from either their birth families (who may be instrumental in their exploitation) or the state. They may be 'enmeshed in hyper-masculine road cultures where signs of vulnerability signal to friends and foes alike that they are open to victimisation and predation' (Windle et al., 2020: 73). Let us not forget that 'the stereotypical qualities of a victim are less than alluring and include, for example, weakness, vulnerability, frailty and fear' (Fohring, 2018: 1). The rejection of such vulnerability can serve to belie the victim status and 'deservedness' of some CCE affected children and young people (Walklate, 2011), yet it represents an entirely logical and understandable response to both prior experiences and current social circumstances. This includes the fact that like any other form of organised crime, those who become involved in 'county lines', at various levels of the hierarchy, are required to deal with the everyday requirements of self-preservation.

Nevertheless, those who do not display the fullest cooperation with services are more likely to be perceived as a 'streetwise' perpetrator, rather than exploited victim (Strobl, 2004). Aggression and/or 'failure to engage' was a commonly cited reason for professional withdrawal and subsequent criminalisation:

If they're perceived as aggressive or hard to reach, for example. I hear all the time 'hard to reach', but I really don't like that. (*Third Sector 3*)

Yet such actions are again entirely understandable from children and young people who may have little reason to trust and cooperate with state agencies, perhaps because of prior negative experiences, including those whilst in the care of the state or within their own families (Shaw and Greenhow, 2021), the grooming process (Beckett, 2011) and fear of reprisals:

It can be difficult to engage them at first. They're fearful of repercussions. They might have loyalty to their perpetrators for various reasons linked to the grooming process. They often don't recognise their experiences as grooming and exploitation and all of that creates barriers to the process. They've had a lot of messaging from perpetrators to tell them to be fearful. Not to share information or they will be harmed. The people out there who care about them can be harmed. (*Third Sector 3*)

We've had kids that have been stabbed, slashed, shot. We've had arson attacks on homes, on parents' vehicles and God knows how many windows have been put through . . . Parents sometimes put pressure on them to retract what's been said because they don't want the trouble coming to their door . . . They're forced to live there. They're not moved. So, they must live with the consequences of their actions, including if they drop the local drug dealer in it. (*Children's Services 2*)

Certainly, child victims of exploitation often present as frustratingly unwilling to act to prevent their own victimisation and have an ongoing relationship with perpetrators (Beckett, 2011; Robinson et al., 2019), particularly those directly above them in the organisational hierarchy, who may be friends, family or other members of their local community. They very often refuse to name their handlers and associates (Stone, 2018) or cooperate with social work interventions (Beckett, 2011; Shaw and Greenhow, 2021). Consequently, while exhibiting clearly understandable behaviour, exploited children who do not cooperate with authorities are more likely to be criminalised. Clear examples of the ‘reluctant victim’ (Megret, 2018), such children may find it safer to suffer the censure of the criminal justice system than seeking its protection from those who have offended against them. Indeed, another participant (*Children’s Services 1*) highlighted how a service-user had expressed that he would rather be known as a ‘nonce [child abuser] than a grass [police informant]’, such would be the repercussions within his community, including others involved in ‘county lines,’ if he were to claim exploitation and name his handlers. Some participants reported how this is not helped by the fact that the measures to protect young people who cooperate with authorities are very often inadequate, leaving them and/or their families vulnerable in the same communities. Furthermore, cooperation with authorities may result in ‘the loss of all of that friendship and belonging for young people who’ve maybe never fit in anywhere and that might have been the first acceptance that they’ve ever had’ (*Children’s Services 2*). Nevertheless, a label of ‘vulnerable victim’ and related assistance can often be contingent on how children and their families live up to the ideal that they should be ‘helpless but cooperative – ever open to assistance to alleviate their risks’ (Brown, 2019; Shaw, 2014; Stanley and Monod de Froiderville, 2020: 529). Given practitioner responses towards those children who deny exploitation and appear to be reaping benefits from their involvement in ‘county lines’ CCE, it is clearly necessary to reemphasise that the presence of ostensible agency may not tell the full story and that young people’s actions should be considered ‘in the light of the wider context of personal and structural vulnerability, a power imbalance in favour of abusers and a frequent absence of other viable alternatives’ (Beckett, 2011: 5). As such, material gain and/or a lack of cooperation does not necessarily mean that criminalisation should be the default response.

Recruiting other children, previous convictions and the impact of age. It has been highlighted how the harm that children might pose to others is central to the new way of seeing risk (Vaughn, 2019). Even if ‘groomed’, a child will be unlikely to receive the safeguarding interventions linked to designation of victim status if perceived to be acting in a ‘threatening’ manner, viewed as potentially dangerous (Vaughn, 2019). Indeed, another reason given for disregard of a child’s victim status was when they involved other children in criminal exploitation networks, undertaking the role of ‘alpha victim’:⁵

He’s been actively recruiting other young people, which has resulted in them being exploited. He’s one of the ones that would probably be more difficult for people to see as a victim, because he appears to be making informed choices and enjoying some of the rewards of what is going on around him. (*Children’s Services 2*)

Such individuals are clear examples of ‘complex victims’ (Moffett, 2015: 150) whose actions mean that they do not fit into ‘neat, distinct, morally acceptable categories’ (Moffett, 2015: 150). Nevertheless, while these actions clearly run counter to the ‘innocence’ required of the ‘ideal’ exploitation victim (Christie, 1986), they again arguably reflect a natural response to the situations experienced by CCE involved children:

He’s 15 years old. What has he come from? What’s happened to him? How long has this been going on for him and is he recruiting other people because it makes him safer? Is he doing this as his own safety planning? Is he mitigating his own risks by pushing other people into doing things that he didn’t want to do? Sometimes the only way that they can deal with the situation is to try to protect themselves the only way that they know. Which is by sticking somebody else in the firing line. (Children’s Services 2)

Other possibilities, given the financial and status rewards derived from ‘county lines’ activity (Harding, 2012), as well as the sense of belonging or ‘family’ experienced by some participants (Robinson et al., 2019), is that children’s decisions to involve others occur from a desire to ‘do them a favour’ (*Children’s Services 4*) in much the same way as one might extend a lawful opportunity to a friend or acquaintance. Indeed, the lived realities of many CCE involved children and young people growing up in socio-economically deprived communities, at times lacking familial protection and/or having experienced trauma (Shaw and Greenhow, 2021), means that their actions/decisions may not correspond with accepted, legitimate norms, yet may be entirely logical within their own milieu.

The ages of individual children, along with their previous criminal convictions, were proffered as further reasons why they might not be viewed as real victims, as illustrated by this participant’s perception of how the police in his area categorise children and young people involved in ‘county lines’:

If they’re under 16, probably a victim. Sixteen and 17, no drugs, no previous convictions, maybe a victim, 16 and 17, drugs or previous convictions, probably a perpetrator. Seventeen and above, all dodgy [dishonest/dangerous]. (Third Sector 1)

Many of the participants felt that the establishment of informal, arbitrary categories delineating victim status served to disregard the individual circumstances of children and young people and had direct implications for safeguarding responses and other practical interventions. Nevertheless, the idea that older children cannot really be victims was expressed by a Children’s Services participant:

It’s like, ‘okay, he’s doing that now at 16, why weren’t we doing something about it when he was 12?’ . . . Because that’s when he was exploited, that’s when he was groomed. (Children’s Services 3)

While this participant (*Children’s Services 3*) makes an important point in that ideally the exploitation of this particular child should have been noticed and acted upon sooner, the assertion that now he is 16, it is unlikely that he is being exploited and groomed, displays a lack of appreciation both of the stages of the grooming process, which can

commence at any point in a person's life and continue over a substantial time-period (Beckett, 2011) and that as a 16-year-old child, he should still be afforded all the CCE-related protections that come with that status (HM Government, 2018). This in turn, is reflective of how invariably, the perceived 'innocence' of children declines the nearer they move towards legal adulthood (McAlinden, 2014) and indeed, dangerous inconsistencies in UK law mean that vulnerable 16- and 17-year-olds receive neither the same basic protections as younger children to keep them safe, nor the same rights as adults (Children's Society, 2015). Furthermore, many criminally exploited children may have accrued previous convictions by the time professionals make any connection with possible exploitation. This is particularly so for young people in care, who are more likely to experience ongoing criminalization resulting from systemic failings (Shaw, 2014; Shaw and Greenhow, 2021). They are in turn especially vulnerable to exploitation as the result of a variety of pre- and in-care factors such as a history of abuse and neglect, placement with exploited peers, missing episodes, perpetrators targeting residential units and an unfortunate lack of 'guardianship' (Caluori, 2020; Shaw and Greenhow, 2021). This means that such children are already at a disadvantage when being assessed by professionals, potentially let down by the care, youth justice and wider safeguarding systems, in a continuum of structural and state indifference. Such experiences can result in an understandable lack of trust of the professionals with whom they come into contact and a consequent resistance to further intervention (Shaw, 2014; Shaw and Greenhow, 2021).

In relation to CCE-affected children more generally, it is essential to appreciate the challenging context of their lived experiences, where both victimisation and offending in the context of socio-economic deprivation and parental, structural and systemic neglect, are very often an interchangeable reality (Cunneen and Goldson, 2015), such that the 'child's 'offender self' and 'victim self' are invariably intrinsically intertwined in complex forms that deny neat compartmentalisation and dichotomised classification' (p. 12). Despite this, a charity manager reported that the lack of 'ideal' victim status can impact negatively upon both safeguarding intervention and service provision in respect of 'county lines' affected children and young people:

Where I'm really, really concerned about is whether the debate around 'county lines' has won a battle but lost a war, and what I mean by that is lots more people now are willing to accept that a 15-year-old arrested at a cuckooed property with a pocket full of crack is a victim much more than ten years ago. And that's great, that's a result, but what seems to have happened is. . . there's got to be an establishment of sort of pristine victim status and then you get a service. So if you look at the profile of our referrals, it's predominantly 15, that's the highest age, yet if you look at police profiles of the people that have been involved in 'county lines' activity, it peaks at 18, 19. So, why don't we get referrals? And the reason is because people are not prepared to accept they're victims. (Third Sector 1)

The participant (*Third Sector 1*) contrasted this approach with work he had previously undertaken with children and young people involved in so-called gang activity, where it was accepted that although they had committed criminal acts, they were still amenable to change and should be worked with regardless. Such attitudes have the unfortunate impact of excluding vulnerable young people from help that might otherwise have been available and abandoning them to the criminal justice system.

Race and gender. Victim status was felt by some to be predicated not only upon individual behaviour, but also race and gender. A participant made the point that in her experience, children and young people from minority ethnic groups, particularly Black boys, or men, were less likely to be seen as victims of exploitation and more as perpetrators. Because of this, they tended to be criminalised and referred to supportive services much later than white children:

A lot of my work is with young men from minority ethnic groups. I see them where referrals are coming in from other services. I see them referred much later. . . ‘But they’re perpetrating crimes’ is often what we hear in referrals, whereas young white men that I’ve worked with, I see getting referred in much earlier and signs [of exploitation] identified much quicker. (Third Sector 3)

The presumption of BAME individuals being more likely to be offenders than victims is longstanding (Gunter, 2015; Long, 2021), often negating any claim to worthy or legitimate victim status (Christie, 1986). Indeed, it has been highlighted how the routine over-policing of Black people, limits the power of such victims to make their case known (Long, 2021), with the ‘racialized relationship between police and Black communities’ acting as the ‘counter-power’ to them being heard and taken seriously as victims of crime (Christie, 1986; Long, 2021).

It was also felt by three participants that designation of victim status can reflect professionals’ gendered practices and rationalities (Henricksen, 2018). They considered that (vulnerability to ‘cuckooing’⁶ notwithstanding) CCE is perceived among many practitioners as a male issue, and while girls are more readily identified as being victims of sexual exploitation, links do not seem to be made to CCE until later, even though a connection has long been established between sexual and criminal exploitation (DfE, 2017; Jago et al., 2011):

I think that there is still this perception that girls don’t do this or girls aren’t being used in the way to carry drugs, haul drugs, or go and sell, that the image that we have is that as a society is of young men, boys, doing this and so, we do find that girls can come to us a bit later saying they’ve already been involved for quite a while because they’ve fallen under the radar because they don’t get stopped and searched. (Third Sector 2)

While this may result in the postponement of girls being drawn into the criminal justice system, it also has clear implications for their likelihood of receiving safeguarding/supportive services and is something that will be of note to ‘county lines’ recruiters, who may be more inclined to target them for exploitation.

Discussion and Conclusion

The title of this article poses the question of whether we have won the battle, but lost the war, in terms of how the United Kingdom currently responds to victims of ‘county lines’ CCE. The answer appears to be that the fight is ongoing. The preceding section makes it clear that while policy developments now explicitly acknowledge different types of

victimisations that include the seemingly agentic child as a victim of exploitation and abuse, they do not consider how practitioner interpretations of culpability, vulnerability and risk, as mediated by ingrained perceptions of the ‘ideal’ exploitation victim (Christie, 1986), may subvert policy intent. Indeed, although legislation and practice guidance are clear that CCE can occur even if the activity appears consensual (Home Office, 2018) and lacking apparent coercion (Sec 45 Modern Slavery Act 2015), the participants provided accounts of how frontline responses continue to disregard this (Weston and Mythen, 2022).

Participants reflected upon experiences whereby exploitation was not always recognised and acted upon, including a reluctance to accord victim status to children who deny exploitation and appear to be making active choices, those ‘wilful’, ‘complex’ and ‘reluctant’ victims (Megret, 2018; Moffett, 2015; Moore and Hoffeler, 2019) who do not wish to cooperate with authorities, are older, have a criminal history and/or recruit others. Running contrary to the ‘innocence’, ‘legitimate’ activity and cooperation required of the ‘ideal’ and ‘worthy’ victim (Carrabine et al., 2004; Christie, 1986), such factors are nonetheless common among CCE victims who come to the attention of authorities, reflecting their lived realities. Being Black and/or female were further factors cited as contributing to the diminution of victim status, as Black people have traditionally been viewed as offenders, rather than victims of CCE (Long, 2021), while through the gendered lens of practitioner perceptions, girls are more readily associated with sexual exploitation (Henricksen, 2018).

When considering why professionals may fail to recognise the underlying vulnerability of criminally exploited children, it is useful to revisit how the issue is framed in wider discourse. Certainly, the content of much UK child exploitation-related media coverage from high-profile CSE scandals onwards, has centred on a racialised, gendered and gang-focused portrayal of the power and characteristics of certain offenders, thus marginalising the experiences of child victims (Patel, 2018; Spicer, 2021), who in turn, are framed as being coerced and intimidated into involvement by violent means (HM Government, 2018). Such discourse has also diverted attention away from the structural drivers behind the prevalence of this supply model and the underlying reasons for young people’s involvement, ‘most prominently, experiences of intensified relative deprivation and social exclusion’ (Robinson et al., 2019; Shaw and Greenhow, 2021; Spicer, 2021: 4). In fact, while ‘county lines’ discourse acknowledges the social stressors and insecurities experienced by many children and their families (Koch, 2021; Parton, 1985), this is ultimately subsumed by an individualising approach that encourages a binary perception of ‘victims’ and ‘offenders’. This, in turn, inhibits understanding and substitutes unrealistic behavioural expectations (McAlinden, 2014; Parton, 1985) that often do not reflect the lived realities of many exploitation victims (Windle et al., 2020; Brown, 2019). Certainly, it is not difficult to understand why socially, and economically marginalised children and young people might become involved in ‘county lines’, yet a non-criminalising response is beyond the expectations of many (Shaw and Greenhow, 2021). In turn, ‘the processes of criminalisation play a significant part in the reproduction of social marginalisation and the intensification of exclusion’ (Cunneen and Goldson, 2015: 12) for criminally exploited children and young people who are denied assistance via referral to supportive services.

Indeed, it is also important to acknowledge that children involved in CCE may be reluctant to either classify themselves as victims or cooperate with authorities to secure

the prosecution of those who have offended against them, precisely because they may be affected problematically by the imposition of 'justice' in several ways (Megret, 2018). Given that many children do not view themselves as victims of exploitation, or as the sort of victim they are made into by dominant 'county lines' discourse, that seeks to portray them as vulnerable and intimidated, criminal justice may seek to constitute CCE victims in ways that do not match their understanding of self (Megret, 2018: 446). Furthermore, criminal justice processes have the potential to 'disrupt family or community relations that victims would like to maintain or at least have considered' (Megret, 2018: 446). Participants in the current study mentioned children being introduced to 'county lines' networks via family members, friends or acquaintances that they may wish to protect and/or be afraid of, alluding the threat of violent reprisals, as a result of being perceived as a 'grass' [police informant] within their local community and/or by their handlers further up the supply chain. Consequently, child victims may be caught in the unenviable position of either being blamed and targeted for having triggered criminal justice processes (Megret, 2018) or suffering the impact of criminalisation and exclusion because of failing to cooperate with state agencies. Indeed, Megret (2018) claims that the criminal justice system 'constructs' the victim that it needs and their presumed enthusiasm for the solutions proposed in their name, which leaves little room for those who do not conform to an acceptable narrative of victimisation.

An assertion of agency and lack of cooperation by criminally exploited children may reflect an entirely logical response to their situation, which requires the exercise of greater professional 'curiosity' and understanding (HM Inspectorate of Probation, 2022) to see beyond. Indeed, Bouris (2007) remarks that rather than holding the victim up to a 'nearly unreachable standard of pure good and pure innocence' (p. 7) it is better to embrace the complexities and contradictions of the victim identity to better recognise and respond to their needs. Nevertheless, with official attention focused in reductionist fashion upon individual behaviour or characteristics (including race and gender) or more latterly via contextual safeguarding, the influence of peer groups, social media, neighbourhoods and schools (Firmin, 2017; HM Government, 2018), and neglecting the wider societal and systemic factors of poverty, criminalisation and exclusion (Barry, 2007; Goldson, 2009; Shaw and Greenhow, 2021); simplistic notions of guilt and innocence are not challenged as effectively as they should be. Consequently, the needs of vulnerable children remain unmet.

Many of the participants highlighted the need for greater awareness and training among practitioners as a means of tackling failures to ascribe victim status. A number had proactively undertaken independent research into CCE, feeling that it would help them to better perform their job role and because it was a subject of personal interest to them. However, they had not been provided with much by way of training via their employers and felt that wider knowledge levels were generally low. Clearly then, there is a need to raise awareness about the lived realities of CCE affected children and the dynamics of exploitation, in a way that might make them more readily recognisable as victims. Yet unless this is accompanied by systemic and cultural change intended to override deep-seated preconceptions of 'true' victimhood (Weston and Mythen, 2022), then such initiatives can only achieve so much (Renzetti et al., 2015; Weston and Mythen, 2022) and children will continue to be criminalised and denied safeguarding interventions.

An interesting development in terms of changing police culture was highlighted when a police participant spoke of the potential value of CCE prosecutions that are not reliant on victim testimony, but rather explore ‘what’s going on around the child. . .investigating the individual, not just the events they’ve committed’ (*Police Officer 1*). While evidence-based prosecutions are not currently routine, a recent example of where they have been utilised to encouraging effect, can be found in the ‘county lines’-related Operation Tylluan. Here, the adult exploiters of a 14-year-old care-experienced child, were jailed for human trafficking offences under Section 2 of the 2015 Modern Slavery Act, despite the child refusing to cooperate with the police and maintaining that he was not a victim. The child was not prosecuted, and safeguarding procedures were implemented (Sidney, 2023). Whilst this option will not assist all children in this situation due to limitations that are beyond this article to discuss, it may prove to be a positive development for some exploited children. Certainly, the case illustrates a direct contrast to previous practice (Stone, 2018) and marks a shift in thinking away from assigning blame to children who do not meet the criteria of ‘ideal’, cooperative victim (Strobl, 2004) that would have been unthinkable until relatively recently. The challenge is to encourage a wider application of such thinking in relation to vulnerable children.

Drawing on data from a small pilot study, there is clearly scope for further exploration of the identified issues among a larger group of practitioners, along with an urgent reconsideration of how ‘county lines’ victimisation should be framed in wider discourse, policy documentation and practitioner training, to reflect and acknowledge the experiences of children and young people. To do this, there is a need to move beyond traditional notions of ‘ideal’ victimhood to accommodate ‘wilful’ (Moore and Hoffeler, 2019), ‘complex’ (Moffett, 2015) and ‘reluctant’ (Megret, 2018) exploitation victims. Until this is achieved, the quest for victim status will continue.

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Notes

1. The Palermo Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, Supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organised Crime: Adopted and Opened for signature, ratification and accession by General Assembly Resolution 55/25 of 15 November 2000.
2. The National Referral Mechanism is a UK framework for identifying and referring potential victims of modern slavery or human trafficking. Guidance states that if the potential victim is under 18, or may be under 18, an NRM referral is compulsory. Child victims do not have to consent to being referred into the NRM and must first be safeguarded and then referred into the NRM process. After a referral, the Single Competent Authority make a Conclusive Grounds Decision regarding whether they consider that the individual is a victim of exploitation.
3. After a referral via the National Referral Mechanism, the Single Competent Authority make a Conclusive Grounds Decision about whether they consider that an individual is a victim of exploitation. However,

R v Breani (2021) ruled that the Single Competent Authority are not experts in human trafficking or modern slavery (whether generally or in respect of specified countries) and for that reason cannot give opinion evidence in a trial on whether an individual was trafficked or exploited. This has important implications for a child's legal defence and the ease with which exploitation can be established.

4. The term 'third sector' relates to organisations that are not for profit and non-governmental, in contrast to the public and private sectors.
5. The term 'alpha victim' is a UK police designation for children who are groomed into recruiting other children into criminal activity. While the designation 'alpha victim' implies some acknowledgement of victim status, this is often disregarded in designation of criminal culpability.
6. In the context of 'county lines', 'cuckooing' is the practice of taking over the home of a vulnerable person to establish a base for illegal drug dealing and related activities.

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