

An inspection of the effectiveness of the police and law enforcement bodies' response to group-based child sexual exploitation in England and Wales

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Foreword

Group-based child sexual exploitation has a devastating effect on children and their families. It shouldn't be underestimated how complex and challenging these crimes are to prevent and investigate, and the police can't tackle them alone. The police, law enforcement bodies, government departments and child protection agencies need to work together effectively to protect children from harm and bring offenders to justice.

The purpose of this inspection was to establish how well the police and law enforcement bodies understand and respond to group-based child sexual exploitation. We found that challenges previously identified in academic literature and reported through public inquiries persisted. We also found that the police, law enforcement bodies and the Government still didn't have a full understanding of the nature or scale of these crimes. This needs to change.

Over the years, the police and law enforcement bodies have improved how they support [victims](#) and understand their needs. However, child sexual exploitation is still under-reported. It is therefore the responsibility of the police to work proactively with [safeguarding](#) partners to identify these crimes and give victims and their families the confidence to report them. The police must make it a priority to make sure that victims feel heard.

After we had finished this inspection, the Government announced that it intended to establish a new [child sexual exploitation task force](#). The objective of the task force is to improve how the police respond to and tackle group-based child sexual exploitation and abuse. This is a welcome development.

In this report, we identify one [area for improvement](#) and make nine recommendations that are intended to support the work of the task force and lead to improvements. I hope these recommendations are taken seriously and acted on swiftly.

Summary

The progress towards improvement

The police service has taken steps to improve its response to child sexual exploitation over the years. Police forces know more about the wider context in which cases of child abuse occur. Many forces now undertake [strategic assessments](#) of specific child protection issues, such as child [sexual abuse](#), [grooming](#) and indecent images of children. These assessments help senior leaders to understand the nature and scale of these issues in order to inform the development of force priorities.

However, progress remains slow. We found that an accurate view of group-based child sexual exploitation still wasn't available to the police service as data collection is unreliable and [intelligence](#) gathering isn't prioritised. These concerns are exacerbated by the absence of a common definition of group-based child sexual exploitation.

The police service has problems identifying group-based child sexual exploitation because there is no clear definition of it

We found that forces were using different definitions to tackle group-based child sexual exploitation. This was demonstrated by the difficulty forces experienced in identifying (for this inspection) which child sexual exploitation cases under investigation were group-based.

Having multiple definitions creates problems for the police service and the Home Office when attempting to understand the true nature and scale of group-based child sexual exploitation. A shared definition would provide forces with greater clarity about their performance in tackling group-based child sexual exploitation. This, in turn, would support better oversight of policing practice and help the service to track progress and show it is making improvements.

Strategic oversight

At the start of our inspection, the [National Police Chiefs' Council](#) had two separate leads in this subject area at deputy chief constable level. One was for child protection and abuse investigation and the other was for group-based child sexual exploitation. We spoke to both leads, who had recognised the need for better national co-ordination across the police service. During our inspection, group-based child sexual exploitation became part of the wider responsibilities of the child protection and abuse investigation portfolio. This avoids duplication, co-ordinates most child protection matters and provides national leadership for the policing response. We regard the change as an important and positive development.

There isn't enough reliable information about group-based child sexual exploitation

We visited six forces and two [regional organised crime units](#) as part of our inspection. We found inconsistencies in how they analysed and developed intelligence on group-based child sexual exploitation. Some forces held intelligence on local rather than central intelligence systems. This meant they didn't have a force-wide understanding of the problem.

The police generally use [problem profiles](#) to provide them with a greater understanding of established or emerging threats. They use data from partner organisations to help senior leaders decide how to prioritise their allocation of resources. Problem profiles also help frontline [police officers](#) and [staff](#) and their supervisors understand local risks and demands.

None of the six forces or two regional organised crime units we inspected had produced a problem profile specifically for group-based child sexual exploitation. Group-based child sexual exploitation is often seen as a subset of wider child sexual abuse and exploitation. This means forces should have a problem profile for child sexual abuse or child sexual exploitation, which should ideally include an assessment of group-based child sexual exploitation. We found two of the six forces had problem profiles for child sexual exploitation, which had been completed in the previous 12 months from the start of our inspection. But only one force had included group-based child sexual exploitation as part of a wider problem profile that related to general child sexual exploitation.

Before our inspection, we asked each of the 43 forces in England and Wales whether they had a problem profile on child sexual exploitation; only 24 said that they did and of those, only half updated it yearly.

After we had finished this inspection, in April 2023, the Government announced that it intended to establish a [new child sexual exploitation task force](#). The task force aims to improve how the police respond to and tackle group-based child sexual exploitation.

The quality of criminal investigations is inconsistent

We found that forces struggled to identify group-based child sexual exploitation investigations among their wider child sexual exploitation investigations when we requested them. However, we were still able to identify 27 investigations into reports of group-based child sexual exploitation from the 6 forces we inspected. We assessed how well forces, regional organised crime units and National Crime Agency officers and staff recognised and identified group-based child sexual exploitation and acted to protect children harmed or at risk.

We found that when specialist officers took charge of investigations, they were of a better quality. Specialist investigators were more likely to identify and pursue lines of enquiry promptly and to address any [safeguarding](#) concerns. This is because they have the right training and skills to investigate group-based child sexual exploitation offences.

In some of the other investigations we reviewed, we found that non-specialist investigating officers lacked the experience and training to progress investigations promptly and effectively. Enquiries were often carried out in isolation with little, if any, consideration that other incidents may be linked to or may involve additional victims, offences and associates. Developments regarding the examination of devices, such as mobile telephones, weren't always recorded, and [warning markers](#) to alert others to the risks posed by individuals were often absent. This meant that opportunities were missed to identify group-based child sexual exploitation and protect other children.

Despite efforts to avoid criminalising children unnecessarily, in some forces we found victim-blaming language being used

We found that most officers understood that children were being sexually exploited and made efforts to avoid criminalising them. In the cases we reviewed, we didn't see any examples of officers making efforts to prosecute children when there was evidence of coercion and exploitation. This is positive.

We didn't find examples of [victim](#)-blaming language in three of the six forces we inspected. One of these forces had challenged another organisation about its use of inappropriate language. We commend the leadership shown by that force.

While we found examples of specialist officers who demonstrated sensitivity and understanding in their references to victims, inappropriate language was used on a few occasions in the other three forces. We saw more than a dozen examples of this in our audits of case file records, in focus groups with frontline officers and in a multi-agency meeting. One example was: "Concerns raised [due] to her general proclivity with older men."

The use of victim-blaming language indicates that some [police personnel](#) didn't understand the vulnerability of children. It meant that responses to protect and

help them were at times inadequate and risk was missed. This lack of understanding was evident from the response of two senior officers in one force when we brought our concerns to their attention. They didn't appreciate that our findings may have demonstrated a cultural issue for the force rather than the shortcomings of individual officers. However, a senior officer in another force immediately recognised the effects this type of language might have on the approach to children and, therefore, the potential outcomes. They made it clear that they intended to address its use across the force.

Forces aren't always doing enough to disrupt the threat of group-based child sexual exploitation

During our inspection, we found that most forces' use of disruption was limited and didn't always involve partner agencies. For example, disruptions predominantly revolved around measures such as arresting suspects and the use of [bail](#) conditions, which might have only a short-term effect. Other options, such as targeting fast food and taxi businesses or other locations where offending is committed, weren't considered by all forces.

The forces we visited made limited use of campaigns to raise awareness of group-based child sexual exploitation. The campaigns we saw were usually limited to one part of the force area and in some cases, were one-off local interventions.

Senior leaders we interviewed recognised the importance of force-wide awareness campaigns and the need to resume them. This is because some officers we spoke to in focus groups and interviews expressed a lack of understanding of the tools to prevent group-based child sexual exploitation. One force commented that it doesn't have any meaningful prevention or disruption capability when it comes to group-based child sexual exploitation or wider exploitation.

Recommendations

We have made nine recommendations and identified one [area for improvement](#). These aim to improve how the police and law enforcement bodies understand the nature and scale of group-based child sexual exploitation and achieve better outcomes for children.

Recommendation 1

By 31 December 2024, the Home Office, the Department for Education, the Welsh Government, the National Crime Agency, the [National Police Chiefs' Council](#) and the [College of Policing](#) should adopt the [Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse](#)'s definition of an 'organised network' as a definition of group-based child sexual exploitation. Or they should devise and implement a suitable alternative.

Recommendation 2

By 31 December 2024, all chief constables should make sure that their forces have [problem profiles](#) for child sexual exploitation, each of which should include an assessment of the nature and extent of group-based child sexual exploitation. This should include relevant data from local partner agencies and should be updated frequently, at least annually.

Recommendation 3

By 30 May 2025, the National Crime Agency should produce an assessment of group-based child sexual exploitation as part of its annual [strategic assessment of serious and organised crime](#). The assessment should use the agreed definition of group-based child sexual exploitation from our recommendation 1.

Recommendation 4

By 31 December 2024, all chief constables and the relevant business user groups for police record management systems should make sure there are sufficient measures in place to identify group-based child sexual exploitation.

Recommendation 5

By 31 March 2025, the Home Office should stop collecting group-based child sexual exploitation data through its [annual data requirement](#) on custody, known as ADR149.

Recommendation 6

By 31 March 2026, the Home Office should introduce a new and specific [annual data requirement](#) on group-based child sexual exploitation. This should be aligned with its existing child [sexual abuse](#) and exploitation crimes annual data requirement. The supporting guidance to forces should use the agreed definition of group-based child sexual exploitation from our recommendation 1.

Recommendation 7

By 31 December 2024, the [College of Policing](#) should update its [authorised professional practice](#) on child sexual exploitation to include group-based child sexual exploitation. It should use the agreed definition from our recommendation 1.

Recommendation 8

By 30 June 2024, all chief constables of forces that are yet to receive the [Hydrant Programme](#)'s [continuing professional development](#) offer should arrange it.

Recommendation 9

With immediate effect, all chief constables should take effective steps to eradicate [victim](#)-blaming language in their forces.

Area for improvement

All chief constables should work with their [statutory safeguarding partners](#) to review, promote and make sure that relevant group-based child sexual exploitation disruption and prevention initiatives are implemented effectively in their forces.

This should include consideration of options such as the advice given in the [Home Office disruption toolkit](#) and an Operation Makesafe (a national police initiative to raise awareness of child sexual exploitation in the business community) type of approach.

Introduction

Background

There is a commonly held belief that public services, in different areas of the country, haven't responded to allegations of child sexual exploitation adequately in the past and haven't protected vulnerable children. The accusations aren't without foundation: several high-profile cases in recent years have provided powerful supporting evidence.

In 2013, a Home Affairs Committee report [*Child sexual exploitation and the response to localised grooming*](#) referred to some of these cases from different areas, including Derbyshire, Oxfordshire and Rochdale in Greater Manchester. The report was clear about who was responsible for these failures:

“Despite recent criminal cases laying bare the appalling cost paid by victims for past catastrophic multi agency failures, we believe that there are still places in the UK where victims of child sexual exploitation are being failed by statutory agencies. The police, social services and the Crown Prosecution Service must all bear responsibility for the way in which vulnerable children have been left unprotected by the system.”

Rotherham

Rotherham in South Yorkshire is worthy of particular consideration. The extent of the failings by public services and the scale of child sexual exploitation and abuse in the town, as well as the cost of failing to tackle the problem, have attracted a great deal of public attention. These issues have also been the subject of significant independent studies and investigations.

There was growing concern that public services in Rotherham were failing to address child sexual exploitation in the town. In October 2013, Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council (RMBC) commissioned Professor Alexis Jay OBE to lead an independent inquiry.

Professor Jay published her findings, the [*Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Exploitation in Rotherham*](#), in August 2014. She concluded that at least 1,400 children had been subjected to serious [*sexual abuse*](#) in Rotherham between 1997 and 2013. The report highlighted collective failures by RMBC and South Yorkshire Police.

In September 2014, the then Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government appointed Louise Casey CB (now Dame Louise Casey DBE CB) to inspect RMBC. The findings of that inspection, the [Report of Inspection of Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council](#), were laid before Parliament on 4 February 2015. The inspection findings were critical of RMBC and wider public services, including South Yorkshire Police.

Following a formal request for assistance from the then Chief Constable of South Yorkshire Police, the National Crime Agency (NCA) agreed to carry out an independent criminal investigation of non-familial child sexual exploitation in Rotherham between 1997 and 2013. The NCA began its investigation in December 2014.

At the time of our inspection, the NCA's investigation was in its ninth year and had cost approximately £70m. This powerfully illustrates the far-reaching consequences and the cost to Government spending when the police and public services fail to tackle these serious crimes. However, as part of our inspection, we found that there was a well-established, multi-agency [safeguarding](#) approach between South Yorkshire Police and its safeguarding partners for responding to child sexual exploitation. We discuss this more in [chapter 4](#).

The Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse

In July 2014, the then Home Secretary, the Rt Hon Theresa May MP, announced the establishment of the [Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse \(IICSA\)](#). Initially, the inquiry was established in non-statutory form but in February 2015, it was reconstituted as a statutory inquiry under the [Inquiries Act 2005](#). This allowed it to compel witnesses and request any material necessary to investigate where institutions had failed to protect children in their care.

The IICSA published 19 reports on 15 investigations (covering a wide range of institutions), an interim report and a final report. The IICSA's February 2022 investigation report, [Child sexual exploitation by organised networks](#), is of particular relevance to our inspection. In echoes of Professor Jay's findings, the IICSA found that children were sexually exploited by networks in all parts of England and Wales in the most degrading and destructive ways. There was evidence of extensive failures by police forces and local authorities.

The IICSA produced its final report, [The Report of the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse](#), in October 2022. It detailed its findings about the extent to which state and non-state institutions failed in their duty of care to protect children from sexual abuse and exploitation and made recommendations for reform.

Lasting effects

The IICSA, via its [Truth Project](#), rightly recognised the long-term damage that offences of this nature cause:

“The devastation and harm caused by sexual abuse cannot be overstated – the impact of child sexual abuse, often lifelong, is such that everyone should do all they can to protect children.”

We have reached the same conclusion during this and our other inspections that relate to child sexual exploitation and abuse. We found that, although many of the offences now under investigation occurred in the past, they have caused continuing and lasting harm to the victims. While some victims have been able to rebuild their lives, others face issues such as drug and alcohol dependency and mental health problems. Some experience self-harm and have suicidal tendencies.

The police have a crucial role in maintaining and improving the confidence of victims so that they can report offences when they occur. Many have had a negative opinion of the police and other organisations because of the way they have been treated in the past. However, in a [news article in October 2022, the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children reported](#) that the police were recording more child sexual exploitation crimes. It also said the number of [Childline](#) counselling sessions on sexual exploitation and abuse increased from 5,962 to 6,230 in the year ending March 2022 (an increase of 4.5 percent). Many offences still go unreported, which is why the society introduced its [Full Story](#) campaign to connect more young people who are at risk of or experiencing sexual exploitation to Childline.

Developments in policing since the IICSA

Following publication of the IICSA report in February 2022 and the recommendation to police forces to collect specific data, the National Police Chiefs' Council lead for child protection set out an action plan to help the police service improve its understanding of the nature and scale of group-based child sexual exploitation. Although we saw the action plan during our inspection, much of the work had only just begun so we weren't able to fully assess its effect.

Child sexual exploitation task force

In April 2023, the Government announced the introduction of a [child sexual exploitation task force](#). The task force takes the [4P-approach](#) of prepare, protect, prevent and pursue to improve the police response to group-based child sexual exploitation. The new task force aims to enhance the policing response to group-based child sexual exploitation, starting with better data collection and analysis.

Complex and organised child abuse database

After our fieldwork had concluded, the child sexual exploitation task force announced the establishment of the [complex and organised child abuse database](#). It is intended to provide an enhanced data picture of group-based child sexual exploitation through the collection and analysis of data from every force. The database is intended to help improve the understanding of group-based child sexual exploitation among the police service, law enforcement bodies and government departments. As the database is in its infancy, we were unable to fully assess its effectiveness, but its development is a positive step.

The Strategic Policing Requirement

The [Strategic Policing Requirement \(SPR\)](#) was first issued in July 2012, in accordance with [section 77 of the Police Reform and Social Responsibility Act 2011](#). It considers major national threats, such as terrorism and [serious and organised crime](#). In 2015, the then Home Secretary, the Rt Hon Theresa May MP, added child sexual abuse to the SPR. In doing so, she recognised the risks and threats it presented:

“In view of the dramatic surge in the number of alleged rapes and sexual assaults against children and the sheer magnitude of reported child sexual abuse (CSA) cases, both recent and historical, I have decided to include CSA as an additional national threat in the SPR.”

In February 2023, the then Home Secretary, the Rt Hon Suella Braverman KC MP, published a revised version of the SPR. It also recognised that child sexual abuse is one of the biggest national threats.

About us

His Majesty’s Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services independently assesses the effectiveness and efficiency of police forces and fire & rescue services, in the public interest. In preparing our reports, we ask the questions that the public would ask and publish the answers in accessible form. We use our expertise to interpret the evidence and make recommendations for improvement.

Our commission

On 21 March 2022, the then Home Secretary, the Rt Hon Priti Patel MP, wrote to us, requesting an inspection under [section 54 \(2B\) of the Police Act 1996](#).

The [terms of reference](#) asked us to inspect the police and other law enforcement bodies in England and Wales and consider how effectively they respond to victims and perpetrators of group-based child sexual exploitation. We were also asked to assess how their responses influence investigations and the ways in which they safeguard children.

During our inspection, we focused on three broad areas:

1. The nature and scale of offending.
2. The police's attitude towards victims.
3. The quality of investigations and wider outcomes.

Methodology

During September and December 2022, our fieldwork took place in six police forces in England and Wales, two [regional organised crime units](#) and the NCA.

As part of this inspection, we interviewed several [officers](#) and [staff](#), carried out a review of a number of documents and examined investigation files. More detail about our methodology can be found in [Annex B](#).

Terminology in this report

Our reports contain references to, among other things, 'national' definitions, priorities, policies, systems, responsibilities and processes. In some instances, 'national' means applying to England and Wales. In others, it means applying to England, Wales and Scotland or the whole of the UK.

We recognise that individuals who have suffered exploitation and abuse are commonly referred to, both by themselves and by different organisations, as either victims or survivors. For consistency and to avoid confusion, we use the term 'victims' in this report.

[Section 9 of the Equality Act 2010](#) states that race includes colour, nationality and ethnic or national origins. In this report, we also use the word 'ethnicity' in a broader sense to cover all aspects of race.

1. The nature and scale of offending

It isn't easy to assess the true scale or nature of child sexual exploitation and [abuse](#). Many offences go unreported. The [Child Exploitation and Online Protection](#) centre (subsequently incorporated into the National Crime Agency (NCA) when it was established in 2013) recognised the difficulty in its 2010 report, [The Way Forward](#):

“Giving an overall estimate of the nature and scale of the problem is difficult, as with any crime. In the case of the sexual abuse of children it is even more difficult because of the complex impact such abuse and exploitation has on its victims; it is a hidden crime. Many never report, others do not report until much later in life.”

Nevertheless, in 2013, the [Home Affairs Committee was able to report](#) that child sexual exploitation was a “large-scale, nationwide problem”, which was increasing.

With such a stark warning, we expected to find, ten years later, that the police and other organisations had a greater understanding of the problem and had developed effective responses to protect children.

In many respects, we were disappointed. We found that an accurate view of group-based child sexual exploitation still wasn't available to the police service, data collection was unreliable and [intelligence](#) gathering wasn't prioritised.

Definition of group-based child sexual exploitation

Child sexual exploitation and abuse, in all its forms, needs a multi-agency response. Different organisations must work together to protect children, bring offenders to justice and dismantle criminal networks. But this is difficult when the organisations concerned, including the police, haven't agreed on what they should consider. As a starting point, we looked for a common understanding of the term 'group-based child sexual exploitation'; we didn't find it.

Child sexual abuse has featured as a national threat in the [Strategic Policing Requirement](#) since 2015, and organised abuse has been a feature of many high-profile investigations. In this context, we were especially concerned that police forces in England and Wales hadn't decided on a common definition. Group-based offending very often transcends geographical boundaries. Therefore, forces can't work in isolation, and an agreed and shared definition that is understood universally is vital.

The lack of a common definition also creates difficulties when trying to assess the nature and scale of offending. We found shortcomings in the way the police identified, measured and analysed data and exchanged information with each other about group-based offending. All six forces and the two [regional organised crime units \(ROCUs\)](#) we inspected used different definitions of group-based child sexual exploitation. And in practice, this could mean that children aren't being [safeguarded](#) promptly because forces define the issue differently.

The Independent Inquiry into Child Sex Abuse's definition of an 'organised network'

For the purposes of our inspection, we adopted the [Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse's](#) definition of an 'organised network', which it introduced in 2019, and set out again in its 2022 [Child sexual exploitation by organised networks investigation report](#).

"An organised network is characterised by two or more individuals (whether identified or not) who are known to (or associated with) one another and are known to be involved in or to facilitate the sexual exploitation of children. Being involved in the sexual exploitation of children includes introducing them to other individuals for the purpose of exploitation, trafficking a child for the purpose of sexual exploitation, taking payment for sexual activities with a child or allowing their property to be used for sexual activities with a child."

This definition is also used by the [Hydrant Programme](#), which is part of the [National Police Chiefs' Council's](#) child protection and abuse investigation portfolio.

Other potential definitions

We looked elsewhere for alternative definitions, with little success. For example, we considered the following potential sources:

- The Department for Education doesn't have a definition of group-based child sexual exploitation in England but defines child sexual exploitation in its guidance [Child sexual exploitation: definition and guide for practitioners](#).
- There isn't a common definition of group-based child sexual exploitation in Wales, although child sexual exploitation is defined in the [All Wales Practice Guide – Safeguarding children from child sexual exploitation](#).
- The Home Office doesn't have a definition of group-based child sexual exploitation. It uses the Department for Education's definition of child sexual exploitation and has inserted the words "two or more people" to describe group-based child sexual exploitation in its guidance to police forces on data collection (not publicly available). There isn't a definition in its paper [Group-based Child Sexual Exploitation: Characteristics of Offending](#).
- The [College of Policing](#) doesn't have a definition of group-based child sexual exploitation.

Recommendation 1

By 31 December 2024, the Home Office, the Department for Education, the Welsh Government, the National Crime Agency, the [National Police Chiefs' Council](#) and the [College of Policing](#) should adopt the [Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse](#)'s definition of an 'organised network' as a definition of group-based child sexual exploitation. Or they should devise and implement a suitable alternative.

Intelligence and analysis

To properly understand the nature and extent of group-based child sexual exploitation, police forces need to have effective systems, processes and resources to gather and analyse intelligence. We circulated a survey to the 43 forces in England and Wales. Only nine reported that they collected data specifically related to group-based child sexual exploitation. Those nine forces told us that they collected data on matters such as perpetrators and child [victims](#) who were at risk. They also gathered relevant intelligence they received or generated and recorded any links to [organised crime groups \(OCGs\)](#).

We visited six forces and two ROCUs during our fieldwork. We found inconsistency in how they analysed and developed intelligence on group-based child sexual exploitation. Some forces held intelligence on local rather than central systems. And although there were child sexual abuse and exploitation analysts established in the ROCUs we visited, neither unit had produced any analysis on group-based child sexual exploitation. This meant there wasn't a force or regional understanding of the problem, and they couldn't identify group-based child sexual exploitation cases as distinct from wider child sexual exploitation. Nor were they making full use of the [Police National Database](#)'s capabilities.

We were encouraged to find that in five of the six forces we visited, intelligence analysts were dedicated to work on child exploitation (criminal or sexual). But the analysts told us that senior leaders didn't routinely ask them to consider group-based child sexual exploitation.

Complex and organised child abuse database

After our fieldwork had concluded, the [child sexual exploitation task force](#) announced the establishment of the [complex and organised child abuse database](#). It is intended to provide an enhanced data picture of group-based child sexual exploitation through the collection and analysis of the data from every force. The database is intended to help improve understanding of group-based child sexual exploitation among the police service, law enforcement bodies and government departments. As it is in its infancy, we were unable to fully assess its effectiveness.

Problem profiles

The police generally use [problem profiles](#) to provide a greater understanding of established or emerging threats. They include data from partner organisations and help senior leaders to prioritise their allocation of resources. They also help frontline [police personnel](#) and their supervisors to understand local risks and demands.

None of the six forces or the two ROCUs we inspected had produced a problem profile specifically for group-based child sexual exploitation. Group-based child sexual exploitation is often seen as a subset of wider child sexual abuse and exploitation. This means forces should have a problem profile on child sexual abuse or child sexual exploitation, which ideally includes an assessment of group-based child sexual exploitation. We found two of the six forces had problem profiles for child sexual exploitation, which had been completed in the previous 12 months from the start of our inspection. But only one force included group-based child sexual exploitation as part of a wider problem profile that related to general child sexual exploitation.

A senior [officer](#) in one force told us that they didn't look for group-based sexual exploitation because they had other priorities to deal with. This is extremely disappointing. Those responsible for offences of this nature target some of the most [vulnerable](#) members of society and commit some of the most serious offences that have a profound and lasting effect on victims.

Recommendation 2

By 31 December 2024, all chief constables should make sure that their forces have [problem profiles](#) for child sexual exploitation, each of which should include an assessment of the nature and extent of group-based child sexual exploitation. This should include relevant data from local partner agencies and should be updated frequently, at least annually.

Intelligence collection plans

The College of Policing describes [intelligence collection plans](#) as plans that help to “close gaps in knowledge”. They are intended to inform forces' [strategic assessments](#) (sometimes also referred to as strategic intelligence assessments or strategic threat assessments).

Three of the six forces we visited had produced intelligence collection plans that included group-based child sexual exploitation. Another force was in the process of producing a plan specifically related to group-based child sexual exploitation. We saw a draft of the plan, which set out what type of intelligence it intended to gather and how. Creating a plan such as this is a step in the right direction, but it was too soon for us to fully assess its effectiveness. However, a preliminary assessment of the

intelligence that the force had already collected revealed locations ('hot spots') of potential group-based offending.

From our survey of all 43 forces in England and Wales, it was encouraging that nine told us they were gathering data, including intelligence on group-based child sexual exploitation. However, far too few were doing this, and we were disappointed to find that most forces weren't gathering data and intelligence on these crimes. Several frontline personnel in the forces we inspected told us that their forces considered the collection of intelligence on other forms of criminal exploitation, such as that inherent in [county lines](#) drug trafficking, to be a greater priority than the collection of intelligence on sexual exploitation of children. While it is good to see forces tackling criminal exploitation, this shouldn't be at the expense of tackling the sexual exploitation of children. Since those children who are vulnerable to sexual exploitation may also be the victims of other forms of criminal exploitation, a combined approach is likely to be complementary.

Some senior leaders told us that it is harder to recognise group-based child sexual exploitation than other types of exploitation. This may be a factor in the way they prioritise intelligence collection. But forces shouldn't prioritise based on ease of access.

Victims and perpetrator research

The full scale of child sexual abuse and exploitation in general – let alone group-based child sexual exploitation – is difficult to measure because of the complexity and often hidden nature of the crime.

Research, [such as that published by Barnardo's in 2014](#) and the Home Office paper on characteristics of offending, has shown that victims, particularly boys, those with disabilities and those from ethnic minority communities are reluctant to talk about what has happened or is happening to them. These crimes are therefore likely to be under-represented in the available data. As a result, crimes go unreported, and intelligence isn't gathered. The Home Office paper goes on to say that:

“Nonetheless, the evidence suggests that victims are predominantly female, teenage and come from a range of ethnic backgrounds.”

The [Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse commissioned perpetrators research](#) into those convicted of child sexual exploitation and found a wide range of behaviours. Some of the variation depended on whether groups or networks were involved, since they may also be involved in other types of organised crime, such as drug offences or human trafficking. On occasions, members of the groups and networks may have been only loosely interconnected rather than formally organised. Adult criminals may also use older children or teenagers to exploit child victims.

Intelligence models to assist in tackling group-based child sexual exploitation

The [MoRILE](#) (management of risk in law enforcement) model is a recognised process for assessing [serious and organised crime \(SOC\)](#) threats in England and Wales. This includes mapping OCGs, [priority individuals](#) and tactical vulnerabilities.

The NCA's [National Strategic Assessment of Serious and Organised Crime 2020](#) defines [OCG mapping](#) as “a law enforcement tool which maps characteristics of OCGs and individuals involved in SOC [serious and organised crime]”. During our inspection, we were encouraged to find that one force had mapped an OCG that was linked to group-based child sexual exploitation using the MoRILE model. Mapping helps law enforcement bodies assess the level of threat and prioritise activity against the highest harm.

OCG mapping depends on the timeliness and quality of the intelligence that underpins it. To provide a consistent approach in forces, the 2023 *Strategic Policing Requirement* sets out that all chief constables should make sure that “all officers and staff involved in the response to SOC within their force work closely with their neighbourhood policing teams”. This, in turn, will make sure that “community intelligence supports the development of the SOC threat picture” and the police response to it.

Tackling organised exploitation programme

The [Tackling Organised Exploitation \(TOEX\) Programme](#) is an “intelligence capability that provides dedicated intelligence and analytical expertise in support of forces undertaking complex organised exploitation investigations”. These investigations may involve matters such as adult and child sexual exploitation and abuse, [modern slavery and human trafficking](#), organised immigration crime and county lines activities.

TOEX teams, based in ROCUs, aim to make sure that victims are safeguarded and offenders are disrupted and brought to justice. At the time of our inspection, the programme was operating in three ROCUs: East Midlands, West Midlands and the Eastern Region (the latter being one of the two ROCUs we inspected).

Police personnel we met during our inspection spoke positively about the TOEX Programme. However, TOEX was still in development at the time of our inspection and wasn't actively supporting any group-based child sexual exploitation investigations. The programme commissioned an [independent evaluation](#) to assess its effectiveness. It concluded that the programme is “improving the UK's understanding of the threat from organised exploitation as well as making significant savings to both law enforcement and wider society”.

The role of the NCA

The [National Strategic Assessment 2023 for Serious and Organised Crime](#) produced by the NCA estimates that there are between 680,000 and 830,000 UK-based adults who pose varying degrees of sexual risk to children.

The estimate didn't include an assessment of how many of them were involved in group-based child sexual exploitation. Therefore, it should be treated with caution. But it illustrates the possible threat level. However, when we spoke to some NCA senior managers and other NCA staff, they made it clear that they considered their role to be confronting the threat posed by those who target children online, both in the UK and internationally. They considered tackling group-based child sexual exploitation predominantly to be a role for police forces, although with NCA support if necessary.

Group-based and other organised forms of abuse and exploitation can transcend both international and UK police force boundaries. In the vast majority of cases, local police forces investigate the types of offences that meet the definition from the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse of an organised network. This is because a local police presence is required to provide timely local safeguarding. But the NCA can and should play a more proactive role in developing a more comprehensive intelligence picture of group-based child sexual exploitation, which can support timely safeguarding of children.

Furthermore, since 2014, the NCA has been carrying out a large-scale and long-term investigation of non-recent child sexual abuse and exploitation on behalf of South Yorkshire Police ([Operation Stovewood](#)). During the operation, the NCA has learned a great deal about group-based child sexual exploitation. It is, therefore, ideally placed to support local forces with an assessment of the nature and scale of the problem. It also puts them in a good position to assess potential good practice of local forces as well on a regional and national basis.

Recommendation 3

By 30 May 2025, the National Crime Agency should produce an assessment of group-based child sexual exploitation as part of its annual [strategic assessment of serious and organised crime](#). The assessment should use the agreed definition of group-based child sexual exploitation from our recommendation 1.

Flags and warning markers

[Flags](#) and [warning markers](#) are used on police systems – such as [Athena](#) or [Niche](#) – to identify, for instance, where an individual may:

- pose a risk to themselves;
- pose a risk to others;
- be vulnerable; or
- be wanted for an offence.

They alert police officers, who may be carrying out research or responding to an incident, about risk and vulnerability. Forces apply flags and warning markers to a range of crimes that constitute child sexual exploitation.

However, during our inspection, none of the six forces or two ROCUs we inspected had current flags or warning markers in place for group-based child sexual exploitation. This reduced their chances of identifying links between individuals, whether victims or offenders, and between different offences. Perhaps more importantly, it meant that opportunities to protect the vulnerable might have been missed and offenders may have escaped justice.

However, we did find that all six forces and the two ROCUs we inspected had flags and warning makers for child sexual exploitation. In one force's child sexual exploitation problem profile, its analysis of group-based offending in its area was informed by the child sexual exploitation offences flags on its systems. This has helped the force to begin to understand the profile of offenders and target resources appropriately. This demonstrates the benefits of using flags to identify child sexual exploitation offences, which can help forces better understand links between them even if they haven't been identified as group-based offences.

Recommendation 4

By 31 December 2024, all chief constables and the relevant business user groups for police record management systems should make sure there are sufficient measures in place to identify group-based child sexual exploitation.

Ethnicity of offenders

Police forces and the Government have a legal duty to have due regard to how different people are affected by their activities. This is set out in the [Equality Act 2010](#) and is called the [public sector equality duty](#). The duty applies equally to [protected characteristics](#), of which race is one.

One of the issues we looked at during our inspection was the recording of ethnicity data for those under investigation for group-based child sexual exploitation. The ethnicity of offenders involved in group-based child sexual exploitation has received much media attention.

The inclusion of demographic data, such as ethnicity, gender or sex in problem profiles, is important as it helps forces understand their communities better. Unless problem profiles and strategic assessments include demographic data, reliable conclusions about the characteristics of offenders can't be made.

In towns such as Rotherham in South Yorkshire and Rochdale in Greater Manchester, the known offenders were predominantly of South Asian or Pakistani descent. But in

April 2023, in Walsall, [Operation Satchel](#) saw 21 people convicted of a range of child sex abuse offences. All those convicted were White.

In December 2020, the Home Office published a paper that considered the characteristics of group-based child sexual exploitation. An [accompanying literature review](#) (produced in October 2020) noted that “the media has given much attention to the model of offending involving an Asian perpetrator and white victim”. Both papers reached the conclusion that it isn’t possible to state whether offenders can be linked to group-based child sexual exploitation based on their ethnicity. It also stated that it is “likely that no one community or culture is uniquely predisposed to offending”.

We agree with this assertion from the Home Office’s paper. Any public perception that those responsible are predominantly from the Pakistani or South Asian community may be influenced by national media coverage of some of the cases referred to above. Furthermore, we didn’t find that this public perception was supported by the 27 group-based child sexual exploitation investigations we examined during the inspection.

In July 2022, Tom Crowther KC, the chair of an [independent inquiry into child sexual exploitation in Telford](#), Shropshire, published the inquiry’s final report.

Mr Crowther recognised that the extent to which race had or hadn’t played a role in child sexual exploitation in Telford was a “particularly sensitive issue”. In addressing this matter, he stated:

“It would in my judgment be wholly wrong, and undoubtedly racist, to equate membership of a particular racial group with propensity to commit CSE [child sexual exploitation].”

That said, he concluded that it was an “undeniable fact” that men of South Asian heritage had been responsible for a high proportion of the child sexual offences he had considered.

Professor Jay’s report the [Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Exploitation in Rotherham](#) similarly found that a high proportion of known offenders in Rotherham were of Pakistani heritage. Professor Jay noted that her findings in Rotherham weren’t necessarily the case elsewhere:

“... there is no simple link between race and child sexual exploitation, and across the UK the greatest numbers of perpetrators of CSE [child sexual exploitation] are white men.”

Both Mr Crowther’s and Professor Jay’s reports included commentary that suggested, on the part of the police, a concerning reluctance to act for fear of being labelled racist. It should go without saying that the police must act without fear or favour and be actively anti-racist: investigators should follow the evidence, carry out their duties impartially and support all victims sensitively to maintain public confidence.

Reassuringly, we didn't find evidence of any reluctance to be thorough when carrying out investigations into group-based child sexual exploitation in our interviews with [staff](#) and officers of various ranks or in the cases we examined. We welcome this level of progress. Force leaders must make sure this is consistently maintained.

The inclusion of demographic data, such as ethnicity, gender or sex, in problem profiles is important as it helps forces understand their communities better. Unless problem profiles and/or strategic assessments include demographic data, reliable conclusions on where offenders are from or any other characteristics can't be made.

Night-time economy

A study commissioned by the Centre of Expertise on Child Sexual Abuse and carried out by NatCen Social Research, [Responding to child sexual abuse and exploitation in the night-time economy](#), was published in December 2017. It defined the night-time economy as "businesses and services that have direct contact with the public after 6pm". The study noted that "the night-time economy is known to have been instrumental in some activities associated specifically with CSE [child sexual exploitation]" and that "perpetrators are known to use fast-food outlets, taxi firms and hotel rooms to facilitate and conduct abuse".

Mr Crowther's report similarly examined any connection between the night-time economy (including the taxi industry) and child sexual exploitation. The inquiry "heard numerous accounts of children being subjected to unwanted sexual attention in taxis" and "a significant number of accounts of exploitation taking place in restaurants and particularly takeaways". Some victims told the inquiry that they were "subjected to CSE [child sexual exploitation] after gaining weekend employment in fast food establishments locally, where they met the perpetrators of their eventual abuse, even being employed by them in some cases".

A poor understanding and unreliable statistics

We know that child sexual exploitation, group-based or otherwise, extends far beyond the confines of towns and cities with a high concentration of residents of South Asian heritage. But developing an accurate view of who the offenders are is hampered because some forces aren't developing intelligence, producing problem profiles or prioritising markers or flags. And the little data that is available is unreliable. Indeed, the Home Office's 2020 paper on the characteristics of offenders of group-based child sexual exploitation reported that data from police forces in July 2020 suggested that:

"... the nationalities and ethnicities of offenders and suspects in group-based child sexual exploitation investigations varied considerably, including American, Angolan, Bangladeshi, Bengali, British, Bulgarian, Congolese, Dutch, Eritrean, Indian, Iranian, Jamaican, Lithuanian, Pakistani, Portuguese, Somali, Syrian,

and Zimbabwean. Unfortunately, the data was not sufficiently robust to allow for comparisons to be made in terms of proportions across these groups.”

During our inspection, we reviewed 52 investigations that involved the sexual exploitation of children. Of those, 27 were group-based offending, and 50 of the 53 offenders in those investigations had their ethnicity recorded. The records suggested that the most common ethnic group of offenders was White; the next most common ethnic group was Asian or Asian British. Other ethnic groups were also represented in the sample.

We recognise that our sample size isn't fully representative. And, as the Home Office reported, the available data is unreliable. However, our findings are consistent with [Professor Jay's statement](#) that the greatest number of perpetrators of child sexual abuse are White men. We found in our inspection, in a small number of cases, that ethnicity data wasn't always accurate. For example, some offenders who were initially classed as Asian were subsequently found to be from other backgrounds. The Home Office characteristics of offending paper recognised this same issue, stating:

“Police-collected data on ethnicity uses broad categories and requires the police to assign an ethnicity rather than it being self-reported by offenders. Data is therefore not always accurate; Berelowitz *et al.* (2012) observed cases of offenders being initially classed as ‘Asian’ but actually coming from other backgrounds, such as White British or Afghan.”

Incomplete recording practices adversely affect the ability to reach evidence-based conclusions and to provide an adequate response to the threat posed by group-based child sexual exploitation. As forces begin to share their data on group-based child sexual exploitation with the task force, the analysis of the data picture – which includes the ethnicity of victims and offenders – will help improve the understanding of group-based child sexual exploitation and better inform approaches to tackle it.

Concerns over inadequate record-keeping of ethnicity have featured repeatedly in our inspection reports over many years.

The Home Office annual data requirement

The Home Office collects crime data from police forces in England and Wales through its [annual data requirement \(ADR\)](#). ADR guidance on child sexual abuse and exploitation offences sets out that forces must highlight (flag) crime records that relate to these specific crimes. Until recently, this didn't include group-based child sexual exploitation.

Ethnicity data

In early 2022, the Home Office asked police forces, on a voluntary basis, to begin collecting ethnicity data for every individual taken into custody on suspicion of group-based child sexual exploitation. This request was part of what is referred to as ADR149. One force (out of 43) complied with the request in 2021/22.

In April 2022, the Home Office made this data collection mandatory, but none of the police personnel we spoke to during the latter half of 2022 knew of the requirement.

Problems with ADR149

We recognise and support the Home Office's intentions to build a better understanding of the nature and scale of group-based child sexual exploitation and to understand the profile of those who commit this type of offending. However, attempting to collect the data in this way is counter-productive because it can't accurately provide the data it is intended to collect. We explain this below.

The Home Office's guidance on ADR149 doesn't make clear whether the requirement to collect data relates to the first time an individual comes into police custody or at a later date if relevant offences materialise. Custody personnel we spoke to in police forces pointed out that when a suspect is first arrested, it is often during the early stages of an investigation. At that point, it might not be possible to determine the exact nature of the offending or whether a suspect acted alone or as part of a group. Therefore, data collected at that time might be inaccurate and of little value.

Depending on the interpretation of the Home Office's guidance, a false impression could be created that group-based child sexual exploitation doesn't exist in some communities. Conversely, it could inaccurately suggest that such exploitation is prevalent among certain minority groups.

We suggest that a more effective way to collect this data would be to record the ethnicity of the suspect as part of the routine crime-recording process. Officers should proactively seek this information.

We are aware that the Home Office introduced a separate data requirement after we completed our fieldwork for this inspection. In April 2023, the Home Office mandated that forces should record information about [protected characteristics](#) in a consistent way and in accordance with categories used by the [Office for National Statistics](#) for its Census 2021.

Recommendation 5

By 31 March 2025, the Home Office should stop collecting group-based child sexual exploitation data through its [annual data requirement](#) on custody, known as ADR149.

Recommendation 6

By 31 March 2026, the Home Office should introduce a new and specific [annual data requirement](#) on group-based child sexual exploitation. This should be aligned with its existing child [sexual abuse](#) and exploitation crimes annual data requirement. The supporting guidance to forces should use the agreed definition of group-based child sexual exploitation from our recommendation 1.

2. Quality of investigations and wider outcomes

The police response to group-based child sexual exploitation

The number of high-profile investigations into non-recent cases, at a cost of many millions of pounds, demonstrates the consequences of failing to respond effectively to the first indications of exploitation and abuse. It leads to generations of children being unprotected and the guilty being free to carry on offending. It also means that, eventually, the police may need to carry out complex and highly expensive inquiries when some evidence (especially forensic evidence) has been lost forever. This happens when the police response is inadequate and forces fail to record crimes and start investigations, which can lead to missed opportunities.

In chapter 1, we say that many forces don't proactively gather [intelligence](#) about group-based child sexual exploitation. Therefore, it naturally follows that the police response to the problem is reactive. This conclusion was set out in our [National Child Protection Inspections: 2019 thematic report](#):

“Our inspections continue to find many of the same problems challenging forces and their partners again and again. This is in large part because the approaches of the police and their partners continue to be reactive with decisions based on the most recent incident.”

This is despite the fact that successive [Strategic Policing Requirements](#) have identified child [sexual abuse](#) as a national threat.

The views of parents and carers

We sought the views of [victims'](#) parents and carers about the police response to group-based child sexual exploitation. In recognition of the difficulty of identifying families who might be willing to take part in the review, we devised a survey in conjunction with [Parents Against Child Exploitation](#). The survey was distributed to parents throughout England and Wales who were being supported by Parents Against Child Exploitation. It was intended to gather information about their experiences of interaction with the police following group-based child sexual exploitation.

The parents of six families responded to the survey. Five said that, while the police recognised that exploitation was a crime, investigations were persistently delayed, and mistakes were made when gathering evidence. Four of the six were also dissatisfied with the way the police had treated their children.

One parent shared that although investigating officers were supportive and compassionate, the force made a mistake in recording their daughters' evidence. This meant a second [achieving best evidence](#) interview was required 18 months after the initial interview. Delays such as these can adversely affect criminal justice outcomes and lead to distrust in the police. For the victims, the cost is likely to be far-reaching and lead to long-term difficulties.

The quality of investigations

We found that forces struggled to distinguish group-based child sexual exploitation investigations from wider child sexual exploitation investigations. However, during our fieldwork, we were still able to identify 27 investigations into reports of group-based child sexual exploitation. We assessed 9 of those cases as good, 14 as requiring improvement and 4 as inadequate. We were especially looking for how well forces, [regional organised crime units](#) and National Crime Agency officers and staff:

- recognised and identified group-based child sexual exploitation and acted to protect children harmed or at risk;
- made effective use of investigative tools to identify children at risk, victims and suspects;
- made effective use of [risk assessment](#) tools and actively mitigated risks;
- considered and effectively used their powers to [safeguard](#) children at risk of group-based child sexual exploitation; and
- considered the risk to suspects during the investigation of group-based child sexual exploitation.

Reports from members of the public

Members of the public contact the police in various ways. They may, for instance, visit a police station, speak to a patrolling [officer](#) or member of [police staff](#), make contact by email or through social media or write a letter to the force concerned. But most contact is made by telephone using either the emergency (999) or non-emergency ([101](#)) numbers.

In the records we examined, we were pleased to see that in some forces, control room staff tried to identify whether any children were vulnerable when answering calls from the public and whether any individuals posed a risk to them. They also understood that, in cases of suspected child sexual exploitation, several perpetrators could be involved. We commend this approach.

Investigation

However, we were disappointed to find that the subsequent response didn't always correspond with the known risk and the child's vulnerability.

Even when forces already held information that a child was at risk, it wasn't always used to help shape the response. In some cases, we found that due to a lack of professional curiosity, connections between offenders, children and different incidents were missed. This was especially evident when individual incidents involving the same people were investigated by different teams. We rarely saw much consideration as to whether offending was group-based.

Specialist officers

We found that when specialist officers took charge of investigations, they were of a better quality. Specialist investigators were more likely to identify and pursue lines of enquiry promptly and to address any safeguarding concerns. This is because they have the right training and skills to investigate group-based child sexual exploitation offences.

Case study: a force quickly recognises and investigates group-based child sexual exploitation

A member of the public reported to the police that two teenage girls were being forced to carry out sexual acts in exchange for money at a local address.

Specialist investigators actually identified 4 [victims](#), aged between 16 and 17 years, and responded quickly to [safeguard](#) them. They also established that the exploitation was group-based in nature.

A prompt and effective investigation followed, using a [Home Office large major enquiry system](#) database, which helped to manage the complexity of the investigation. This led to the identification of several suspects, who were all arrested and charged.

Non-specialist officers

In six of the investigations we reviewed, we found that non-specialist investigating officers lacked the experience and training to progress investigations effectively and without delay. Enquiries were often carried out in isolation with little, if any, consideration that other incidents may be linked. Developments regarding the examination of devices such as mobile telephones weren't always recorded, and there were often no [warning markers](#) to alert others to the risks posed by individuals.

Case study: delays with the initial investigation led to several missed opportunities

The police received a report that 2 groups, with several suspects, had raped a 17-year-old girl at a hotel. The [victim](#) was already known to be at risk of child sexual exploitation but any action taken to [safeguard](#) her hadn't been recorded by the force.

There was a delay in the initial investigation, and opportunities were missed over several weeks to speak with the victim about her welfare. Enquiries weren't completed at the hotel, and none of the identified suspects were promptly interviewed, even though one of the suspects was also being investigated for a similar offence by the same investigation team. Investigators didn't recognise the connection between the two incidents.

[Officers](#) downloaded the content of the victim's mobile telephone but didn't examine it. As a result, [intelligence](#) was missed and investigative opportunities were lost.

The force didn't recognise that this was a case of group-based exploitation until we told them during our inspection.

Effect of delays

During our inspection, we found that 17 of the 27 group-based child sexual exploitation investigations were carried out promptly. At the time of our inspection, 20 of the 27 investigations were ongoing, some of which had been in progress for 12 months or longer. Although 17 started well, many of these ongoing investigations were allowed to continue for extended periods and had limited activity and direction. This, in turn, delayed the progress of these investigations.

When investigations are delayed, especially those without good supervision, it can mean that some children are left at risk and some suspects aren't investigated properly or at all. Cumulative and escalating risk isn't spotted at the earliest opportunity. This delays the development of appropriate protective plans to safeguard children.

Supervision and review

Regular and timely supervision of group-based child sexual exploitation investigations was evident in most cases we reviewed. We also found that some supervisors set bespoke investigation plans. However, other supervisors didn't do so and failed to provide clear direction. Although they subsequently reviewed the progress of cases, enquiries weren't effectively progressed and were allowed to continue for extended periods.

A lack of effective oversight meant that linked investigations weren't always identified. We commonly found that additional victims, offences or a suspect's associates were overlooked. As a result, the group-based nature of offending was missed, as were opportunities to provide other children with the protection of early safeguarding measures.

Case study: a poor risk assessment contributes to an inadequate initial response

A mother reported her 15-year-old daughter missing. She had last seen her daughter the previous day. Although the force recognised child sexual exploitation concerns, the [risk assessment](#) was graded as medium. The police received information from a social media source suggesting that she had been taken to another town to meet men for sex. Despite this, the risk assessment remained as medium.

Two days later, a detective inspector reviewed the case. The [officer](#) recognised the level of threat and increased the risk assessment to high. The investigation then gathered pace and two suspects were identified, though not traced immediately.

The following day, the mother contacted the police to say that her daughter had returned home but she wouldn't assist the police investigation.

Following further investigation, both suspects were arrested for child abduction.

Despite the outcome, we consider the initial response inadequate. The police incorrectly treated the risk level as medium until a detective inspector increased it to high. Grading it as high in the first place could have prevented the risk to the child from escalating.

Case study: a poor investigation, despite a good initial response

A 14-year-old girl with learning difficulties, who was known to be at risk of child sexual exploitation, was reported missing by her father. The initial response from control room staff and response [officers](#) who attended was good. Officers soon located the girl at a property and took her home. Several men inside the property were arrested for sexual [grooming](#) offences. The girl also disclosed that she had been raped, and one of the men was further arrested.

The investigating officers and their supervisors produced detailed plans to cover all aspects of the investigation and appropriate [safeguarding](#) measures. Officers arranged a [strategy meeting](#) with children's social care services and support for the [victim](#).

The victim later decided that she didn't wish to support a prosecution. Nonetheless, the police recorded that they still intended to proceed, based on available and further potential evidence.

However, there were then significant delays in progressing the investigation. Mobile telephones that had been seized still hadn't been examined a year later. The force didn't take action to disrupt and prevent further offending, and it didn't use [flags](#) or [warning markers](#) on force systems for the victim or the perpetrators. This meant other [officers](#) or teams may not have been fully aware of the risks the perpetrator posed to the victim.

Despite the good initial police response, we consider the investigation inadequate.

The [Hydrant Programme](#) offers reviews of cases at no cost to forces. On request, it provides a comprehensive review of complex child sexual abuse and exploitation investigations (including those involving group-based offending) and makes recommendations. Since 2019, three of the six forces we visited during our inspection have called on Hydrant for help to review cases. We would encourage all forces to use the services offered by the Hydrant Programme so that good practice can be shared across policing.

Case study: the benefits of a Hydrant-led peer review

During a two-year investigation into allegations of group-based child sexual exploitation in one force, the police arrested more than 30 suspects. However, the investigation didn't lead to any charges, and the force closed the investigation.

The force invited the [Hydrant Programme](#) to review the investigation. Based on the findings, the force re-opened the investigation. It was ongoing at the time of our inspection, but we found a structured approach with the use of a [Home Office large major enquiry system](#) database, which Hydrant had recommended. A senior investigating [officer](#) had been appointed to lead the investigation, supported by a blend of [personnel](#) from different departments in the force. There was good supervisory oversight and new lines of enquiry were being explored.

We also found evidence of enhanced [safeguarding](#) measures because of the review.

Resources

As we report in [chapter 1](#), before carrying out fieldwork, we circulated a survey to all forces in England and Wales that asked about their response to group-based child sexual exploitation. Of the 43 forces, 17 said that they had a team dedicated to investigating child exploitation offences.

The [College of Policing](#) sets out the level of training that is required to investigate child abuse cases. It includes [professionalising investigations programme](#) level 2 accreditation and/or completion of the [specialist child abuse investigation development programme](#).

Given their complexity, we would expect officers carrying out group-based child sexual exploitation investigations to be suitably trained. But in three of the six forces we inspected, we found officers without professionalising investigations programme and/or specialist child abuse investigation development programme accreditation who were investigating group-based child sexual exploitation.

Guidance and training

Available guidance

The College of Policing's [authorised professional practice](#) for [major investigation and public protection](#) considers child sexual exploitation, but it doesn't refer to group-based child sexual exploitation. However, the College of Policing provides access to the [Knowledge Hub](#). This has been created to help UK policing and select private and public sector partners to share information, discuss ideas and opportunities and encourage greater collaboration.

The Knowledge Hub includes a [National Police Chiefs' Council](#) user group on group-based child sexual exploitation, but it contains no documents or information. At the time of our inspection, it wasn't actively in use. The Knowledge Hub also includes a Hydrant Programme user group, which contains a range of relevant information.

Information hubs are useful portals for accessing advice and guidance. Indeed, [police personnel](#) told us that they used other hubs, such as the [National Policing Vulnerability Knowledge and Practice Programme](#). But during our inspection, we heard mixed views about the general use and benefit of using other information hubs. Senior leaders told us that, at times, they found the range of different hubs available on organisations' websites confusing. However, the Knowledge Hub includes a Vulnerability Knowledge and Practice Programme user group, which has an active membership of 134 officers and staff. As the Knowledge Hub is a national resource for all police forces, we believe that the police would benefit from using this facility more often.

The Hydrant Programme has produced detailed and comprehensive guidance relating to the investigation of group-based child sexual exploitation. This is aimed at senior investigating officers who are responsible for leading the most complex investigations. But there isn't guidance for frontline personnel to recognise and appropriately respond to initial signs of group-based child sexual exploitation. Signs may include finding children in hotels with drugs or alcohol in the presence of adults.

We understand that developing and maintaining knowledge will be one of the aims of the Government's [child sexual exploitation task force](#), which the Prime Minister announced in April 2023. However, we don't consider that this relieves the College of Policing of its responsibilities; appropriate guidance on dealing with group-based child sexual exploitation should still be available through authorised professional practice.

Recommendation 7

By 31 December 2024, the [College of Policing](#) should update its [authorised professional practice](#) on child sexual exploitation to include group-based child sexual exploitation. It should use the agreed definition from our recommendation 1.

Training

Through our survey, we asked the six forces and two regional organised crime units we inspected about the learning and development they had provided about group-based child sexual exploitation. Forces responded and said that they didn't provide training on this specific topic, although one force had plans to do so. We were also told that some had accepted an offer of [continuing professional development](#) from the Hydrant Programme, which it offers to all forces, free of charge. It includes training for specialist investigators involved in identifying and investigating complex sexual offences against children, including group-based child sexual exploitation.

We found that between May 2021 and December 2022, the Hydrant Programme had provided such training to 16 forces. At the time of our inspection, three further forces were due to receive training. This meant that 24 forces had yet to take up Hydrant's offer. As well as training specialist investigators, it is equally important to train all police personnel so that they have an awareness of the signs and indicators of group-based child exploitation and know how to support those who need it.

Recommendation 8

By 30 June 2024, all chief constables of forces that are yet to receive the [Hydrant Programme's continuing professional development](#) offer should arrange it.

3. Attitudes to victims

Responding to victims

Before our inspection, our literature review identified three recurring themes:

1. Police in the past have often failed to recognise abuse.
2. Police don't ask questions about suspected abuse.
3. [Victims](#) don't feel encouraged to report to the police.

The [Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse](#) concluded in its final report that there are “significant barriers to effective reporting of [child sexual abuse](#), including victim-blaming and notions of shame and honour”. It found that ‘victim-blaming’ affected the way the police and others approached child sexual abuse:

“Victims of child sexual exploitation were frequently seen by police and other professionals as making a choice – such as to be ‘child prostitutes’ who ‘consented’ to their own abuse – and so their needs were not prioritised, and the criminality was not addressed.”

The inquiry also published findings from its [Truth Project](#) in its report [I will be heard](#). This was a core part of the inquiry and was “set up to hear and learn from the experiences of victims and survivors of child sexual abuse in England and Wales”. From a sample of victims who assisted the project, many felt that they were “blamed by the police” and that this resulted in them “not being believed, or the case not (being) taken seriously or progressed further”.

The inquiry's report [Child sexual exploitation by organised networks](#) cited several examples of victim-blaming language used by police forces and local authorities in case files. The use of the language was challenged in only a handful of cases. Similarly, in November 2021, the [Independent Office for Police Conduct](#) published its report [Operation Linden – Learning and Recommendations](#), which found that:

“While the issues we examined happened between 1992 and 2013, and there has been a great deal of work in this area by the police service since, we are concerned that some issues still exist today, and there are still lessons to be learnt from this across policing.”

In July 2022, an [independent inquiry into child sexual exploitation in Telford](#) commented on the use of language in a police force when dealing with child sexual exploitation:

“The Inquiry has seen evidence which suggests that public-facing [officers](#) and [staff](#) have, on occasion, used insensitive and inappropriate language in dealing with CSE [child sexual exploitation] cases and with victim/survivors and their families. This has the potential – particularly where there is a sense of victim-blaming – to discourage the complaint.”

Victim-blaming language

The [College of Policing](#) in its [guidance on child sexual exploitation](#) explains that forces should consider the fear of victims of “not being believed”, particularly when supporting victims of child sexual exploitation. This is crucial, as forces must guard against a perception that children are troublesome, which, in turn, can negatively influence the overall response.

A victim-blaming approach can result in inadequate police investigations and important lines of enquiry being overlooked or dismissed. It can also lead to a lack of [safeguarding](#), with victims left unprotected.

We didn’t find examples of victim-blaming language in three of the six forces we inspected. One of these forces had challenged another organisation about its use of inappropriate language. We commend the leadership shown by that force.

While we found examples of specialist officers who demonstrated sensitivity and understanding in their references to victims, inappropriate language was used on a few occasions in the other three forces. We saw over a dozen examples in our audits of case file records, in focus groups with frontline officers and a multi-agency meeting. Examples included:

- “Concerns raised [due] to her general proclivity with older men.”
- “Medium-risk due to age – streetwise and tends to return the next day.”
- “Putting herself in precarious situations.”
- “High risk child sexual exploitation but this not out of character.”
- “She is a difficult victim to engage with.”

Victim-blaming language indicates that some [police personnel](#) don’t understand the vulnerability of children. It means that responses to protect and help them are at times inadequate and risk is missed. This lack of understanding was also evident from the response of two senior officers in one force when we brought it to their attention. They didn’t appreciate that our findings may have demonstrated a cultural issue for the force rather than the shortcomings of individual officers. However, a senior officer in another force immediately recognised the effects this type of language might have

on the approach to children and, therefore, potential outcomes. They made it clear that they intended to address its use across the force.

Recommendation 9

With immediate effect, all chief constables should take effective steps to eradicate [victim](#)-blaming language in their forces.

Attitude training and guidance

We were encouraged to find that police officers and staff more often than not understood the need for a victim-centred approach. They understood that it is often more appropriate to treat children who are exploited as victims rather than perpetrators. It is also encouraging that, for example, South Wales Police had considered its own response to group-based child sexual exploitation in the light of the Operation Linden report; the chief constable commissioned an internal review, which identified [areas for improvement](#).

Nevertheless, despite these signs of changes in approach and evidence of a willingness on the part of some forces to learn from past experiences, there is still some way to go, as our findings about the use of inappropriate language have shown. Useful advice and guidance is readily available. For example, in January 2022, the [Children's Society](#) published [Appropriate Language in Relation to Child Exploitation](#), which gives guidance for professionals.

Unconscious bias

We considered the concept of [unconscious bias](#), which can influence approaches and actions. In cases of child sexual exploitation, police personnel may unconsciously believe that a victim is responsible for the abuse they have suffered. While unintentional, this may lead to unfounded assumptions and stereotyping and can become normalised if not addressed.

We also considered the availability of unconscious bias training. However, in 2021, a [report by the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities](#) recommended that it no longer be used. The Government has phased out such training in the Civil Service and has encouraged other public sector employers to do the same.

The College of Policing provides some guidance in its [authorised professional practice](#). For example, the [guidance on stop and search](#) advises that officers should “be mindful of the potential influence of unconscious (implicit) bias on their decision making”.

Safeguarding

The victims of child abuse are among the most vulnerable members of society. Many need the police and other public services to care for them and protect them from harm. Too many high-profile cases demonstrate what happens when their needs aren't met and organisations fail to discharge their responsibilities. Group-based child sexual exploitation continues to pose a risk to children today.

Against that backdrop, we were pleased to note that during this and other inspections, we have found good examples of safeguarding. We published our [National Child Protection Inspections: 2019 thematic report](#) in February 2020 as part of an ongoing programme of child protection inspections that began in 2014. In the report, we commented on innovative work in police forces and “an unambiguous commitment from police leaders, officers and staff to the protection of children”.

Unfortunately, that commitment isn't always translated into action. For example, [regional organised crime unit](#) officers told us that they didn't consider safeguarding to be part of their role.

Safeguarding featured prominently in the National Crime Agency (NCA) [Annual Plan 2021–22](#), which stated:

“In the course of its investigations, the NCA must safeguard vulnerable individuals and victims, working with partners to ensure they receive the most appropriate care and support.”

Safeguarding statistics for that year were included in the NCA's [Annual Plan 2022–23](#), which showed that 1,159 children were safeguarded as a result of NCA activity in 2021/22. This level of activity has continued, with 1,076 children being safeguarded by the NCA in 2022/23.

In June 2022, we published our report [Safeguarding: How effective is the National Crime Agency at protecting vulnerable people?](#) on our inspection into how the NCA safeguards children and [vulnerable people](#). We found that, during investigations, “the agency has effective processes for assessing the risks related to children” and that “senior leaders consistently emphasise the importance of safeguarding”. However, we also found that “safeguarding isn't seen as part of their primary function” by many in the NCA.

That said, the NCA's [Operation Stovewood](#), which we refer to in [chapter 1](#), has a well-established and highly regarded safeguarding regime. In our 2022 NCA safeguarding report, we suggested that the NCA should learn from some of Operation Stovewood's good ways of working.

The criminal justice process

Victim criminalisation

The [United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child](#) is an international human rights treaty that details the specific rights of children. It sets out the human rights of every person under the age of 18 and is the most comprehensive statement on children's rights in history. It was adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1989 and is also the most widely adopted international human rights treaty in history. In 1991, the UK ratified it.

In England and Wales, a child is defined as anyone who hasn't yet reached their 18th birthday. [Guidance from the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children](#) points out that even if a child has reached 16 years of age and is living independently, in further education or in custody, they are still legally children and should be given the same protection and entitlements as any other child.

Recognising every child's vulnerability at the outset provides an opportunity to consider appropriate safeguarding measures and to take steps to divert children from a potential life of crime. During our inspection, we were encouraged that we didn't find examples where officers had tried to prosecute children unnecessarily. However, we were concerned that some officers didn't automatically consider alternatives to arrest when dealing with children.

Case study: officers quickly shift from criminalising children to safeguarding them

A 14-year-old girl who had been missing from home told her parents she and her friend had been in sexual contact with a 30-year-old man in exchange for money. Her mobile telephone contained indecent images of her friend. [Police officers](#) initially arrested the two [victims](#) for facilitating abuse but, after making further enquiries, realised their action wasn't appropriate. They then adopted a more [child](#)-focused response, involved partner agencies and took appropriate [safeguarding](#) measures.

Their initial action could have led to the two children being criminalised and opportunities for safeguarding them and other potential child victims being overlooked. It could also have deterred the children, their parents and others they may have told about their ordeal (including other victims) from involving the police.

Self-generated imagery of children

In 2021, the [Internet Watch Foundation](#) reported it had investigated more cases of child sexual exploitation that year alone than in the first 15 years of its existence. It found that self-generated imagery was the fastest-growing type of child sexual abuse material.

In April 2023, we published our report [An inspection of how well the police and National Crime Agency tackle the online sexual abuse and exploitation of children](#) on the inspection of how well the police and NCA tackle the online sexual abuse and exploitation of children. One of our key findings was that there is limited guidance for officers and staff about online child sexual abuse and exploitation. We made recommendations to the police, law enforcement bodies and government departments to help improve the policing response.

Adultification

When dealing with children, it is important to remember that no matter how mature they may appear, they aren't adults. Failing to recognise their vulnerability by treating them as adults ('adultification') can have a profound and lasting effect on the rest of their lives. The [Cambridge Dictionary](#) provides a simple definition of adultification:

"The process or fact of treating or considering a child as if they are an adult, usually in a way that is wrong or harmful."

Research has shown that certain groups of children are more likely to be treated as adults than others. The *Cambridge Dictionary* gives this definition of adultification bias:

"A form of racial prejudice where children in some groups are treated as being older than they actually are."

In June 2022, His Majesty's Inspectorate of Probation published its report [Adultification bias within child protection and safeguarding](#). It was intended to "increase awareness of adultification bias and to improve child protection and safeguarding practice". The report recognised the effect that such bias could have on the lives of Black children but also saw that it could occur in other circumstances:

"... this form of adultification bias is not a new phenomenon; over the past decade literature and research in North America and the United Kingdom (UK) has highlighted that for many Black children, this type of racialised discrimination continues to impact their daily lives across welfare services, education, health, and criminal justice. Literature also suggests that adultification bias can feature in other contexts, which leaves all children at risk of this form of discrimination."

Adultification increases the risk of unnecessarily drawing a child into the criminal justice system as a potential offender, meaning that they become criminalised. Black children and children who are looked after by the state are particularly

susceptible to unnecessary criminalisation. In November 2018, the Department for Education, the Home Office and the Ministry of Justice produced a [national protocol](#), which highlighted the danger of unnecessarily criminalising children and the increased risk of re-offending thereafter:

“Coming into contact with the criminal justice system tends to increase the likelihood of offending, and children and young people, especially the most vulnerable, such as looked after children, should be diverted from it wherever possible.”

Evidence of adultification is an issue that we look for in our inspections. Similar to our finding on victim criminalisation, we didn't see any evidence of officers treating children as adults during this inspection.

Special measures

The [Youth Justice and Criminal Evidence Act 1999](#) introduced special measures to assist those who are considered vulnerable or intimidated. Vulnerable witnesses include all children (persons under 18 years of age). Many witnesses suffer from stress and anxiety during a criminal investigation and when called on to provide evidence at a trial. Children can give evidence to a court either through a pre-recorded interview or by live video link.

The Crown Prosecution Service has produced [legal guidance](#) on the use of special measures.

During our inspection, we found good examples of forces using special measures to safeguard victims. Officers demonstrated their understanding of the processes involved by explaining how they worked and how they used them to support investigations involving child victims of sexual exploitation. Their approach helped to make sure that vulnerable child victims and witnesses received support throughout their journey through the criminal justice system.

4. Partnership working

Working together to safeguard children

In March 2015, the Government published statutory guidance on [working together to safeguard children](#). It was last updated in July 2022. It made clear that “everyone who works with children has a responsibility for keeping them safe”. It also sets out the police’s responsibility to investigate offences and work and share information with relevant organisations:

“The police will hold important information about children who may be suffering, or likely to suffer, significant harm, as well as those who cause such harm. They should always share this information with other organisations and agencies where this is necessary to protect children. Similarly, they can expect other organisations and agencies to share information to enable the police to carry out their duties. All police forces should have officers trained in child abuse investigation.”

Different models will work in different locations, so outcomes should be reviewed to make sure the partnership working is effective.

In our [National Child Protection Inspections: 2019 thematic report](#), we concluded that:

“... broadly speaking, partnership working has matured and the quality of multi-agency planning and decision making has improved. This has resulted in improvements in the outcomes for some, though not all, of the most vulnerable children.”

We found a similarly mixed picture during this inspection, with pockets of good practice and integrated working in every force we inspected. For example, a member of a [safeguarding children partnership](#) in South Yorkshire told us, “You have to dig to find child sexual exploitation and group-based child sexual exploitation. In Rotherham, we work with the police and when we dig, we dig together.” It appeared to us that the difficult lessons of the Rotherham experience were being learned by forces but not fully.

In at least three forces, we found an inconsistent approach. In one town, we found dedicated child exploitation teams, with proactive investigations and a high level of interaction with other services and local children. But in other towns in the same force's area, there were no such teams. This not only created challenges in identifying, investigating and preventing exploitation but also meant that children could receive a different service depending on where they lived. The service that victims of child sexual exploitation receive shouldn't depend on a postcode lottery.

Prevention and disruption

Child sexual exploitation, including group-based offending, can be prevented and disrupted through a range of options. Many involve the police working not only with partner organisations but also with local businesses, such as those operating in the hospitality sector. However, in four of the six forces we inspected, we found that disruption activity was limited and didn't involve partner organisations. In those forces, prevention and disruption predominantly relied on measures such as the arrest of suspects and the use of [bail](#) conditions, some of which offered only short-term solutions. This isn't good enough.

Some straightforward practices should be considered by all forces. A simple first step is to interview children who are frequently missing from where they live or who are looked after by the state. The police and their [safeguarding](#) partners should try to determine why they went missing, where they were and who they were with.

The police may also share information with other organisations through the [Government Agency Intelligence Network](#) and may work closely with the [Disclosure and Barring Service](#). Further safeguarding measures are provided by the [Child Sex Offender Disclosure Scheme](#) (often referred to as Sarah's Law). This allows parents, carers or guardians to ask the police for information about a person who has contact with their child, or a child close to them, if they are concerned the person may pose a risk.

The police may also raise the possibility of risks posed by any individuals who are, or are connected to, suspects and have a professional relationship with children. In such cases, they should liaise with a [local authority designated officer](#) who is involved in the management and oversight of cases that involve allegations of abuse made against those who work with children.

The police can use several tactics to disrupt child sexual exploitation. For example, they may apply to local authorities for the revocation of suspects' taxi licences (based on evidence that offenders are frequently involved in the taxi hire business). Licensing authorities also have a responsibility to share safeguarding and road safety concerns about taxi and private hire vehicle drivers with each other under the [Taxis and Private Hire Vehicles \(Safeguarding and Road Safety\) Act 2022](#). The police may also target business premises, including takeaway food outlets, where suspects may be involved in other criminal activity or are otherwise contravening regulations.

[Sexual risk orders](#) can be considered for restrictive conditions or positive obligations to prevent the harmful behaviour of any individual who hasn't been [cautioned](#) for or convicted of a relevant offence. The police can also consider [child abduction warning notices](#). We found varying use of these notices by forces; they were considered sporadically and often not implemented when they could have been.

Child exploitation disruption toolkit

In April 2019, the Home Office published its [Child exploitation disruption toolkit](#); it was last updated in July 2022. The toolkit was developed to “support frontline practitioners”, including the police, in safeguarding children and young people under the age of 18 from sexual and criminal exploitation.

Although the toolkit doesn't refer explicitly to group-based child sexual exploitation, it offers forces and partner organisations a suite of options to consider when attempting to disrupt offenders and safeguard children.

The toolkit is divided into two sections. The first includes advice on how to develop an accurate picture of the extent and nature of child exploitation in both a local area and across different locations. The second section provides the options available for the police, social care professionals, statutory agencies and other frontline professionals to:

“... disrupt the exploitation of children and young people, safeguard current and potential future victims, and send a signal to perpetrators about the consequences of their actions.”

It considers different aspects of the problem under the headings ‘suspects and offenders’, ‘victims’ and ‘location’.

Most of those we spoke to from police forces and partner organisations weren't aware of the toolkit's existence.

‘Front door’ arrangements

[Front door](#) is an arrangement that local authorities make to receive and respond to an initial contact from a professional or member of the public who is concerned about a child. Local authorities provide advice and make decisions about how they will act on information about the health, well-being and safety of children.

We found particularly good front door arrangements in one force area, which had a process for identifying children at risk of exploitation. An officer from the force's specialist child exploitation team worked closely with a social care professional to determine the best course of action and intervention needed to safeguard children. However, there seemed to be little consideration of potential group-based child sexual exploitation and, again, the process was reactive rather than proactive.

Operation Makesafe

In 2015, the [police and crime commissioner](#) for South Yorkshire commissioned Professor John Drew CBE to carry out a review of the force's handling of child sexual exploitation. Professor Drew's report [An independent review of South Yorkshire Police's handling of child sexual exploitation 1997–2016](#) referred to an initiative called Operation Makesafe:

“Operation Makesafe began in Sheffield in 2013 as an initiative to raise awareness of child sexual exploitation amongst businesses. The Operation gathers intelligence about child sexual exploitation and works with taxi drivers, bed and breakfast staff, fast food outlets, door staff and concierges to train and raise awareness of the issues, including explaining to staff how to respond to these. It was first aimed at hotels and taxi drivers. The training has grown steadily since that time to include fast food outlets and other businesses.”

We also referred to Operation Makesafe in our 2015 report [PEEL: Police effectiveness](#):

“South Yorkshire Police has developed an in-depth training and awareness programme known as Operation Makesafe for staff and targeted sectors of society. Over a two-year period, training is being provided to hotel staff, shop workers and taxi drivers on how to spot the signs of child sexual exploitation.”

At the time our fieldwork ended, a review of Operation Makesafe, commissioned by the National Police Chiefs' Council, was underway.

None of the forces we visited had used this type of approach consistently, even though senior [officers](#) recognised the importance and relative ease of implementing force-wide awareness campaigns. While we found evidence of some awareness campaigns, they were usually restricted to one part of a force area and in some cases, to one-off local events.

Implementing prevention and disruption tactics

Some [police personnel](#) we spoke to expressed a lack of understanding of the options to prevent group-based child sexual exploitation. Those in one force told us that their force didn't have any meaningful prevention or disruption capability for group-based or general child sexual exploitation. In many cases, forces need to adopt more preventative and disruptive tactics.

Area for improvement

All chief constables should work with their [statutory safeguarding partners](#) to review, promote and make sure relevant group-based child sexual exploitation disruption and prevention initiatives are implemented effectively in their forces.

This should include consideration of options such as the advice given in the [Home Office disruption toolkit](#) and an Operation Makesafe (a national police initiative to raise awareness of child sexual exploitation in the business community) type of approach.

Annex A – External reference group

- Association of Police and Crime Commissioners
- Barnardo's
- Care Inspectorate Wales
- Care Quality Commission
- Centre for Child Sexual Abuse
- College of Policing
- Home Office
- National Crime Agency
- National Police Chiefs' Council lead for child protection and abuse
- Office of the Children's Commissioner for Wales
- Ofsted
- Safer Young Lives Research Centre, University of Bedfordshire
- University College, London
- University of Salford
- Vulnerability Knowledge and Practice Programme

Annex B – About the data

Data in this report is from a range of sources, including:

- the Home Office;
- a survey on lived experiences;
- a survey on the response from police forces to group-based child sexual exploitation;
- expert presentations;
- rapid evidence assessment on [victims'](#) voices; and
- our inspection fieldwork.

When we collected data directly from police forces, we took reasonable steps to agree the design of the data collection with forces and other interested parties such as the Home Office.

We set out the source of this report's data below.

Methodology

Force selection

The selection of the six forces and two [regional organised crime units](#) was based on several criteria, which helped identify the forces deemed suitable for this inspection. We made sure there was a mix of force types by considering factors such as size and geography. We also sought to avoid visiting forces or regions that had been inspected in the last 18 months.

Case file review

We carried out a case file review in six police forces in England and Wales where we examined 52 investigations that involved the sexual exploitation of children. The case file review was based on a non-statistical sample, so the results aren't representative of all forces in England and Wales.

As part of the inspection, we carried out:

- a document review, in which we examined 286 documents, including policies, procedures and other material;
- an examination of 52 investigation case files from police forces, covering a total of 61 offences reported between December 2019 and October 2022;
- a total of 94 interviews, which included representatives of the [National Police Chiefs' Council](#), the Home Office, local authorities and victims' services;
- 55 focus groups with [police officers](#) and [staff](#); and
- [reality testing](#) across the National Crime Agency, regional organised crime units and police forces that we visited.

We also carried out our own research and reviewed relevant literature.

Survey on lived experiences

We designed a survey on police attitudes towards victims of group-based child sexual exploitation, which was distributed by [Parents Against Child Exploitation](#) to the parents/carers of children who had been victims of group-based child sexual exploitation. The survey was open from 1 December 2022 until 8 February 2023.

Parents Against Child Exploitation promoted our survey via their support staff who regularly offer support to the parents/carers of victims. They used multiple methods to encourage parents/carers to participate in our research, including via email, in-person communication and over the telephone. Posters were also put up in their offices.

This survey was a non-statistical, voluntary sample, so the results may not be representative of the parent/carer population.

Survey of all 43 forces

Before we started our fieldwork in forces, we distributed a survey to all forces with the aim of understanding more about their response to group-based child sexual exploitation.

In the survey we asked forces:

- whether they had a [problem profile](#);
- how child sexual exploitation was prioritised within the force;
- whether they collected data on group-based child sexual exploitation; and
- what their resource allocations and multi-agency arrangements were.

All 43 forces responded. This data was analysed and some of the analysis has been included in this report.

Other lived experience

Due to the absence of primary lived experience research for this inspection, we instead gathered voices of victims of group-based child sexual exploitation that already exist in the literature. To collate this, we commissioned two experts in the field to present their research findings to our inspection team. They also carried out a rapid literature review that specifically searched for voices of victims. The aim of these methods was to gather victims' voices that related to:

- the effectiveness of police assessments of the nature and scale of offending in their area, with particular attention paid to information sharing, problem profiling, and the collection of data, including on the characteristics of child sexual exploitation offenders;
- police attitudes towards victims of child sexual exploitation; and
- the nature, adequacy and timeliness of responses, including the use of proactive prevention and disruption tools and the quality of criminal investigations.

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