Child Criminal Exploitation, County Lines & Victim Identification: An Exploratory Study

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December 2021

This thesis is submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Declaration

This thesis is the result of my own work and includes nothing which is the outcome of work done in collaboration except as declared in the Preface and specified in the text.

I further state that no substantial part of my thesis has already been submitted, or, is being concurrently submitted for any such degree, diploma or other qualification at the University of Cambridge or any other University or similar institution except as declared in the Preface and specified in the text. It does not exceed the prescribed word limit for the relevant Degree Committee.

Abstract

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Hannah Marshall

This thesis explores the processes by which young people involved in county lines drug dealing identify, and are identified, as victims of child criminal exploitation (CCE) in the context of the English youth justice system. Despite calls to recognise experiences of CCE among young people involved in county lines, the label 'victim' is still selectively applied, and many young people affected by CCE are still criminalised and labelled as offenders. This oversight has serious consequences for the lives of those affected. Yet at present we know very little about the processes by which victim status emerges in relation to CCE.

This thesis addresses this oversight, drawing on in-depth interviews with 50 youth justice practitioners and 17 young people affected by CCE, and on over 100 hours of observations of activities relating to CCE victim identification within an English Youth Offending Service, conducted over the course of 18 months. Using a grounded theory approach, this thesis explores three key influences on processes of victim identification. Firstly, it examines the roles of youth justice practitioners, focusing on the impact of their conceptualisations of 'exploitation' and 'victimhood', as shaped by the organisational contexts in which they work. Secondly, it explores victim identification as an interactional process, examining how relationships between practitioners and young people, and between young people and their families and peers, influence processes of victim identification. Finally, it analyses young people's reasons for rejecting, claiming, and accepting, status as CCE victims.

The conclusion draws out the implications of this research for theory, policy, and practice. Through its exploration of the attribution of victim status as an ongoing process of negotiation and renegotiation, this thesis sheds light on new facets of victim identification, excavating its relational nature, developing the concept of the 'scarcity of victimhood', and demonstrating the ongoing challenges associated with victim identification in the context of the youth justice system. This thesis also takes the first step towards establishing a 'critical youth victimology', which engages with young people's experiences of processes of victim identification. With regard to policy and practice, this thesis demonstrates that, because they so often fail, processes of victim identification do not adequately serve the needs of young people affected by CCE. I conclude by advocating for a social harm-focused approach which

looks beyond the assessment of deservingness of support through the allocation of victim status, towards our collective responsibility to respond to the needs of all young people involved in county lines and the harms that they have experienced.

Acknowledgements

I am extremely grateful to my supervisors. Thank you to Caroline Lanskey for being generous and responsive, for challenging me to push my thinking further, and for your reassurance, guidance, and positive outlook throughout the many ups and downs of the PhD. Thank you also to Loraine Gelsthorpe whose recommendations for reading and prompts for further reflection have been invaluable.

I am thankful to the practitioners and young people who took the time to participate in this research, to share insights with me, and from whom I have learnt so much. Without you, this research would not have been possible, and I hope I have done you justice.

I am also grateful to the ESRC and Newnham College, Cambridge for funding this research, and to the Institute of Criminology for covering fieldwork expenses.

In addition, huge thanks to my friends and colleagues at the Centre for Community, Gender and Social Justice: Ali Wigzell, Joana Ferreira, Jane Dominey, Miriam Shovel, and Serena Espeute, for many useful conversations; and to Laura Gutiérrez whose support and advice during the research and writing process I am thankful for. Thank you to Paolo Campana and Ben Crewe for insightful and constructive feedback during the yearly review process. Thanks to CAVER participants for much constructive debate. Thanks to many others at the Institute of Criminology: Matt S, everyone at the library, and to Simon, Matt M, Laura K, Alice, Rebecca, and Charlotte for making the Institute a friendly place to work. Thank you to Ruth, Amy, Izzie, Gareth, and Lisa for many valuable lessons in kindness, vulnerability, and strength. Thanks to Joel Harvey for your encouragement and support from the beginning.

Outside of the world of criminology, my thanks also to Megan, Emma, and Logan for leading by example. To Brenda and Dicky. To Mum, who taught me to tell stories, to Dad, for listening, and to Rachel, for your keen eye and hilariously sharp tongue. To the Petersfield team, especially Ann, Frank, Mary, and Linda for your kind words of advice. To my inspirational sisters and siblings at MAUL. To Sophie. To Kate, for helping me to find direction. Finally, particular thanks to Tony, who deserves several honorary PhDs in kindness, being patient, and for weathering the storm with me during successive lockdowns. Thank you for all the times that you made tea, for your friendship, and for ‘just being’.

The research and writing of this thesis occurred in the aftermath of the tragedy at Fishmongers' Hall, the impact of which is difficult to put into words.

This work is dedicated to Jack and to Saskia.

Contents

1 Introduction 1

1.1 County Lines and Child Criminal Exploitation: An Overview 3

1.1.1 Child Criminal Exploitation (CCE) 3

1.1.2 County Lines 4

1.1.3 Victim Identification or Criminalisation? 6

1.2 The Structure of this Thesis 10

1.3 A Note on Terminology 10

2 Literature Review 12

2.1 Introduction 12

2.2 Access to Victim Status 13

2.2.1 'A Sort of Victim Status': Liminality and the Identification of Victimhood in Early Victimological Research 13

2.2.2 Ideal and Deviant Victims 15

2.2.3 Victim-Offenders and the Victim-Offender Dichotomy 17

2.2.4 Unseen, Unheard: Young People and Victimology. 19

2.3 Access to Victim Status in Relation to Exploitation 21

2.3.1 Exploitation and the Question of Agency 22

2.3.2 Contextualising CCE 25

2.3.3 Overlooking Victim Status 28

2.4 Processes of Victim Identification 30

2.4.1 Micro-level Processes of Victim Identification and CCE 31

2.4.2 Establishing a 'Relational' Approach Within Critical Victimology 34

2.5 Victim Identification in the Context of the Youth Justice System 35

2.5.1 Welfare-orientated Approaches and the 'Troubled' Child 36

2.5.2 Victim Erasure and the Punitive Turn 39

2.5.3 New Prospects for Victim Recognition? 42

2.6 Conclusion and Research Questions 44
3 Methodology 46
3.1 Introduction 46
3.2 Re-framing Vulnerability, Resisting Damage 46
3.3 The Role of Reflexivity 49
3.4 Theoretical Orientations 50
3.4.1 Critical Realism 50
3.4.2 Critical Realist Relational Sociology 51
3.5 Critical Realist Grounded Theory 52
3.6 Measuring Quality 54
3.7 Choosing the YOS and Negotiating Access 54
3.8 Methods: Interviews and Observations 57
3.8.1 Sampling and Recruitment 58
3.8.2 Consent 67
3.8.3 Doing Interviews and Observations 69
3.9 Analysis and Grounded Theory 79
3.10 Evaluating Quality 81
4 Findings: Responding to CCE in the Context of the Youth Justice System 82
4.1 Introduction 82
4.2 The Declining Influence of the National Referral Mechanism (NRM) as a Tool for Determining CCE Victim Status 84
4.2.1 The NRM and the Potential for 'Abuse' of Victim Status 84
4.2.2 The NRM and Expectations of Victim Support 86
4.2.3 Practitioners' Involvement in Decision-making About Victim Status 90
4.3 Approaches to Victimhood 90
4.3.1 CCE-related Victimhood and the YOS: Working with 'Victim-Offenders' 91
4.3.2 CCE-related Victimhood and the Police: The Struggle for Recognition 96

4.3.3 Repressive Welfarism and Criminalisation as a Safeguarding Tool 99

4.3.4 Drawing the Line: The Pressure to Categorise Young People as Victims or Offenders 105

4.4 Conceptualisations of Exploitation 106

4.4.1 The Absence of a Statutory Definition of CCE 106

4.4.2 Exploited Enough? The Spectrum of Exploitation 107

4.4.3 CCE and Existing Narratives of Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE) 110

4.4.4 Exploitation, Young People's Agency and the 'Unknowing Victim' 112

4.5 Chapter Conclusion 115

5 Findings: Relationships and the Emergence of Victim Status 118

5.1 Introduction 118

5.2 Relationships Between Young People and Practitioners 119

5.2.1 Producing Victimhood Through the Acceptance of Care and Support 119

5.2.2 Why Does the Acceptance of Care and Support Influence the Production of Victimhood? 122

5.2.3 The Role of Information Sharing in Producing Victimhood 126

5.2.4 Why Does Information Sharing Influence the Production of Victimhood? 128

5.3 Barriers to Young Person-Practitioner Relationships that Helped to Generate Victim Status…….....131

5.3.1 Young People's Concerns About the Ramifications of Engagement 131

5.3.2 Young People's Concerns About Practitioners' Lack of Shared Experience ..136

5.3.3 Young People's Need For Participation and Sensitivity to Lack of Control ...138

5.4 Re-imagining Relationality: The Work of the YOS CCE Team.....141

5.4.1 "Unconditional" Victimhood 141

5.4.2 Benefits of Minimising the Conditionality of Victimhood on Relationships ..143

5.4.3 Challenges to 'Unconditional Victimhood' 144

5.5 The Scarcity of Victimhood: Peer Relationships, Family Relationships, and the Production of Victim Status 147

5.5.1 Young People's Relationships With Peers Within Drug Distribution Networks…148
5.5.2 Young People's Relationships With Family 149
5.6 Conclusion 152
6 Findings: Young People's Perspectives on Victimhood 154
6.1 Introduction 154
6.2 Claiming, Accepting, and Coming to Terms With Victim Status 156
6.2.1 Vanya: Reaching a Crisis Point, Reaching For a Way Out 156
6.2.2 Alex and James: Posttraumatic Growth 159
6.3 Rejecting Victim Status 166
6.3.1 Connor: Stigma 167
6.3.2 Freddie, Jakub and Mo: Restricted Agency and Constrained Choice 169
6.3.3 Patryk and Phoebe: Perceptions of Positive Aspects of Involvement in Drug Distribution 180
6.4 Conclusion 187
7 Conclusion 189
7.1 Main Findings 189
7.1.1 Victim identification as a process of negotiation 194
7.2 Main Contributions to the Academic Research Literature 196
7.3 Implications for Policy and Practice 198
7.4 Limitations and Future Directions 204
Appendix 1: Information Sheet for Young People 208
Appendix 2: Information Sheet for Practitioners 210
Appendix 3: Consent Form for Young People 212
Appendix 4: Consent Form for Practitioners 214
Appendix 5: Interview Guide for Young People 216
Appendix 6: Interview Guide for Practitioners 219
References 222

Glossary

CAMHS	Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services
CAWN	Child Abduction Warning Notice
CCE	Child Criminal Exploitation
CDA	Crime and Disorder Act (1998)
CFOS	Children First Offenders Second
CJS	Criminal Justice System
CPS	Crown Prosecution Service
CSE	Child Sexual Exploitation
CRGT	Critical Realist Grounded Theory
ECAT	European Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings
ETE	Education Training and Employment
GT	Grounded Theory
ISS	Intensive Supervision and Surveillance
MASH	Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hubs
NCLCC	National County Lines Coordination Centre
NEET	Not in Education, Employment or Training
NRM	National Referral Mechanism
PRU	Pupil Referral Unit
PWITS	Possession With Intent to Supply
SCA	Single Competent Authority
YJS	Youth Justice System
YOS	Youth Offending Service
YOT	Youth Offending Team

1 Introduction

On the 24th October 2018 police received information concerning a property in Bournemouth that was allegedly being used as a cuckoo[1] flat by an organised crime group or groups for the illegal drugs trade…Child C was arrested for being in possession of class A drugs with intent to supply…The Appropriate Adult[2] has told me that his recollection of the time he spent with Child C "was of him appearing as a vulnerable young person frightened by what he was being groomed and coerced into by others. He gave me the impression that he definitely wanted to find a way out of the mess he was getting into…In discussion with [Child C] he came across as polite, intelligent, wanting to continue in full-time education which he enjoyed, and build a career path towards something useful and interesting. He expressed his love for his Mum and was keen to get back home"…At 11:00 p.m. police had completed their interview and Child C was free to be released under investigation…He was driven back to London by two Police Officers, arriving at his grandmother's house at 5:00 a.m.

The youth justice worker's assessment is less convinced by Child C's profession of his determination to change the course of his life. After a first Keyworker session with Child C the worker wrote of gaining the impression that Child C "has no real intention of changing his lifestyle…Throughout it all I gained the impression that [Child C] does not want to embrace responsibility for his decisions or actions". The ultimate assessment reflected this view. What was missing from this assessment was a reasoned analysis of the degree to which Child C was the subject of exploitation in the autumn of 2018. (Extracts from 'Serious Case Review: Child C – a 14-year-old boy', John Drew for Waltham Forest Safeguarding Children Board, May 2020: 24-26 & 39).

The extracts above offer two very different perspectives on the same 14-year-old. In the first, he is a vulnerable victim of exploitation in need of support, in the second he is an offender involved in drug dealing who must be responsibilised. Ultimately, the Serious Case Review into Jaden Moodie's death determined that vital opportunities to engage with him at 'reachable moments' and offer him protection and support as a victim of child criminal

[1] The practice of 'cuckooing' refers to cases in which drug dealers associated with the county lines model of drug distribution take over a property, often of a vulnerable resident, in order to create an outpost to facilitate the supply of drugs in satellite locations (Spicer, Moyle and Coomber, 2019).

[2] An appropriate adult is an independent person whose role is to safeguard the interests, rights, entitlements and welfare of children and vulnerable people who are suspected of a criminal offence (National Appropriate Adult Network, 2021).

exploitation (CCE) were missed (Drew and Waltham Forest Safeguarding Children Board, 2020: 26-27). The aftermath of Jaden Moodie's murder has raised pressing questions about why he was not identified and supported as a victim of CCE and has sparked a much-needed wider public conversation about the identification of, and effective response to, experiences of victimisation among young people in conflict with the law. Despite increasing calls to recognise experiences of CCE among young people involved in county lines drug distribution (Ministry of Justice, 2019; The Children's Society, 2019), the label 'victim' is still selectively applied, and young people are still convicted and labelled solely as offenders (Shaw and Greenhow, 2020). This oversight can have real and tragic consequences for the lives of the young people affected, and of those close to them. Yet at present we know very little about how and why some young people involved in county lines are identified as victims of CCE while others are not.

This lack of understanding persists despite awareness that the reconceptualisation of young people involved in drug dealing as victims of CCE is a complex task for practitioners within the youth justice system (YJS). In its practice guidance on county lines and exploitation for Youth Offending Teams (YOTs) the Ministry of Justice states that children 'can often present as perpetrators when in fact they are victims of exploitation, and identification of victims by police and local authorities can be extremely difficult' (Ministry of Justice, 2019: 5). While current practice guidance recognises the identification of victims of CCE as a challenging task, we know very little about how processes of victim identification actually play out in practice, about what makes them complex and challenging, or about the factors that influence whether the label of 'CCE victim' is either bestowed or withheld by those with the power to do so, and indeed, claimed or rejected by potential victims themselves.

Furthermore, a growing body of research demonstrates that many victims of criminal exploitation risk having their experiences of victimisation overlooked (Hales and Gelsthorpe, 2012; Sullivan and Schulkind, 2018; Shaw and Greenhow, 2020; Papadaki and Marshall, 2020). Yet this research largely consists of studies focusing on the identification of adult victims (Villacampa and Torres, 2017; Papadaki and Marshall, 2020), and/or on the decision-making practices of practitioners alone (Cockbain, 2018; Ramiz *et al*., 2020; Espeute, 2020) as opposed to focusing holistically on the experiences of both practitioners and potential victims. These gaps in the literature stem from a need within the wider field of victimology to do more to centre and explore the perspectives and experiences of young people (Muncie,

2003) and to offer more detailed and multi-faceted accounts of the processes by which victim status emerges, or fails to emerge, at the micro level.

It is these gaps in our existing understanding of victim identification and CCE that this thesis addresses. Drawing on interviews and participant observation with young people involved in county lines drug dealing, and with the youth justice practitioners working to support them, in the context of an English Youth Offending Service (YOS) that I call 'Stonewell YOS', I examine the processes by which young people identify, and are identified, as victims of CCE. In improving our understanding of how and why some young people involved in county lines are identified as CCE victims, while many more others are not, I hope that this study will contribute to improvements in the care and support of young people in conflict with the law.

1.1 County Lines and Child Criminal Exploitation: An Overview

The following section provides an overview of the key concepts relevant to this research: CCE and the county lines model of drug dealing. It also outlines existing practice responses to young people involved in county lines.

1.1.1 Child Criminal Exploitation (CCE)

While there is currently no statutory definition of CCE (The Children's Society, 2019; HMICFRS, 2020), the Home Office (2019: 3) offers the following widely-used definition:

> Child criminal exploitation occurs where an individual or group takes advantage of an imbalance of power to coerce, control, manipulate or deceive a child or young person under the age of 18 into any criminal activity: in exchange for something the victim needs or wants; for the financial or other advantage of the perpetrator or facilitator; through violence or the threat of violence.

An additional definition, provided by a young person affected by CCE, is also in circulation: 'When someone you trusted makes you commit crimes for their benefit' (D, aged 12, Not in Our Community, 2017). Both these definitions capture the essence of CCE: the exploitation of children to commit criminal offences.

The coercion, control, manipulation, or deception of children into the commission of crime is nothing new (The Children's Society, 2019). However, the rise of CCE as a distinct policy issue, which has received significant attention since 2015 (Spicer, 2021a), has been influenced by three main factors. Firstly, the past two decades has seen the rise of 'modern slavery' as a policy concern in the UK (Gadd and Broad, 2018; Broad and Turnbull, 2018).

This has increased awareness of the role that force, pressure or coercion may play in an individual's commission of criminal acts, and of the idea that such individuals might be recognised as victims of exploitation, rather than as offenders (Cooper *et al.*, 2017; Papadaki and Marshall, 2020). In addition, over a similar timescale there has been a growing movement around the issue of child exploitation. This has been led by a shift in perspective regarding a specific group - children previously criminalised as 'child prostitutes' - towards an understanding of these children as the victims of child sexual exploitation (CSE)[3] (Brown, 2019; Melrose and Pearce, 2013). The issue of CSE has led to significant concern over the possibility of overlooking further groups of victimised and exploited children (APPG on Runaway and Missing Children and Adults, 2017; HM Inspectorate of Probation *et al.*; 2018 Children's Commissioner, 2019), which has helped to lay the groundwork for the development of subsequent concerns around CCE as a potential 'new grooming scandal' (Davenport, 2017; Coffey, 2019). These transitions have occurred in the broader context of increased attention to the figure of the victim in British society more generally[4] (Garland, 2001). Finally, the rise of CCE as a policy issue specifically in relation to county lines is consistent with longstanding concerns with the protection of children and 'childhood' within responses to the distribution and sale of illicit drugs (Flacks, 2021).

1.1.2 County Lines

While CCE can occur in relation to any form of criminal activity, it is most commonly associated with the county lines model of drug dealing (Home Office, 2019). In essence, the county lines model consists of individuals travelling out from the city, typically across county boundaries, to sell drugs in coastal, rural and market towns (Spicer, 2018; Coomber and Moyle, 2018). The sale of drugs is coordinated using a dedicated mobile phone line or other form of 'deal line' (National Crime Agency, 2018: 2). Heroin and crack cocaine are the two drugs most commonly associated with this model of supply (Coomber and Moyle, 2018; Harding, 2020; NCLCC, 2020). Within the county lines model, children typically work as runners or dealers (Harding, 2020: 46; NCLCC, 2020) involved in 'visible and high risk selling practices' (Windle, Moyle and Coomber, 2020: 5). CCE occurs in the context of

[3] Beginning in the early 2000s with the publication of the government guidelines: 'Safeguarding Children Involved in Prostitution' (Department of Health, 2000), this reframing was catalysed by the emergence of successive CSE scandals in areas including Rotherham, Rochdale and Oxford. These incidents highlighted the ways in which children's involvement in offending often meant that their experiences as victims of sexual exploitation were overlooked by police and social services (Wager and Wager, 2016), and heightened calls to recognise experiences of victimisation among children in conflict with the law.

[4] However, the inclusion of 'victim-offenders' in this trend is not unproblematic, as discussed further in Section 2.2.3.

county lines when children are 'coerced, controlled, manipulated or deceived'[5] into storing, moving or selling drugs that are being distributed via the county lines model, or storing or moving money derived from activities within this model, either within or outside their local area (National Crime Agency, 2018).

Neither the mobility of drug dealers and their migration around the UK (Spicer, 2018), nor the exploitation of children in the context of drug crime (Stone, 2018; The Children's Society, 2019; Windle, Moyle and Coomber, 2020) are novel phenomena. However, what renders the county lines model distinct is the consolidation and routinisation of these two features (Moyle, 2019). The county lines model involves a move towards 'more widespread and systematic exploitation' (Windle, Moyle and Coomber, 2020: 3) of children, which has been described as organised trafficking (Holligan, McLean and McHugh, 2020: 2), in addition to the formulisation and proliferation of a model in which drug markets are controlled from beyond local limits, by highly mobile retail-level sellers (Spicer, 2018; Moyle, 2019). Subsequent processes of naming and labelling these practices as 'child criminal exploitation' in the context of 'county lines' in youth justice policy and practice, from 2015 onwards, have also consolidated the recognition of both phenomena as areas of concern (The Children's Society, 2019).

The emergence of the county lines model has been driven by a convergence of several factors. The saturation of urban drug markets is a major cause, with rural markets offering lower levels of competition and conflict, as well as increased profitability (Hales and Hobbs, 2010; Spicer, 2018; McLean, Robinson and Densley, 2019). Rural markets are also attractive because they offer dealers greater anonymity (National Crime Agency, 2016; Spicer, 2018) and lower levels of police scrutiny (McLean, Robinson and Densley, 2019), and provide a ready market of drug users (National Crime Agency, 2016). This context has coincided with the increased availability of facilitative technology, most importantly mobile phones and social media (Harding, 2020); the role of drug distribution prevention work in pushing dealers towards closed markets[6] using specific phone lines (Windle and Briggs, 2015); and

[5] In practice, this could involve: violence and/or threats towards children and their families, including children being physically held at properties from which drugs are being sold; (National Crime Agency, 2018; Harding, 2020; Chard, 2021); coercion resulting from of debts owed (often spuriously) to exploiters (National Crime Agency, 2016, 2017; McLean, Robinson and Densley, 2019); the use of embarrassing or incriminating images to ensure a child's compliance (Storrod and Densley, 2017); and indirect coercion where the wider pressures of socioeconomic marginalisation may make it difficult for children to transition away from drug dealing (The Children's Society, 2019).

[6] In which buyers and sellers arrange transactions in advance (May *et al.*, 2005: vii).

the emergence of opportunities to expand to new areas facilitated by practices of relocating individuals involved in drug supply outside of urban centres such as London, either post-release from prison (Harding, 2020), or through changes to social housing provision (Windle and Briggs, 2015; Windle, Moyle and Coomber, 2020; Harding, 2020). A convergence of these factors has helped to create the conditions for the emergence of the county lines model.

At present, we lack a clear picture regarding the extent of CCE within contexts of county lines (National Crime Agency, 2017: 3), owing to a lack of systematic and accurate national level data collection (The Child Safeguarding Review Panel, 2020: 41). However, a number of different sources of data provide partial indications of the scale of the issue. Research from the Children's Rights Alliance for England (2018) has estimated that up to 50,000 children may be affected across the UK[7]. Drawing on data from UK police forces, the National Crime Agency (2017: 14) found that 65% of regions reported the exploitation of children within contexts of county lines[8], making children the largest sub-group of individuals reported as exploited for this purpose[9]. While this data gives an initial indication of the prevalence of CCE in the context of county lines, further research is needed in order to establish the full extent of the issue.

1.1.3 Victim Identification or Criminalisation?

As evidenced in the two extracts that introduced this chapter, young people involved in county lines may be criminalised as offenders or identified as victims of CCE. This section provides an overview of what these two pathways may look like in the current youth justice landscape.

If a child involved in county lines is identified as a potential victim of CCE they should, according to statutory guidance (Home Office, 2020a), be referred to the 'National Referral Mechanism' (NRM). The NRM is a framework for identifying potential victims of modern slavery in England and Wales, and connecting them to appropriate support[10] (Home Office,

[7] This estimate is based on the National Crime Agency's estimation of 1000 county lines operating in the UK with between 30-50 children involved in each line.
[8] Preliminary findings from ongoing research by Brewster *et al*. (2021a) and Brewster *et al.* (2021b) suggest that CCE in the context of county lines remained an issue throughout the UK's COVID-19 lockdowns, with increased involvement of local (as opposed to out of area) children. Hesketh and Johnstone (2021: 2) also note a rise in referrals for CCE in the context of county lines since the beginning of the pandemic.
[9] In the National Crime Agency's (2017) report, 61% of regions reported the exploitation of adult drug users, 37% reported the exploitation of adults with mental health problems and 12% reported the exploitation of adults with physical disabilities.
[10] The NRM was established in 2009 in order to fulfil the UK's obligations under the Council Of Europe Convention on Action Against Trafficking in Human Beings (Mantouvalou, 2018).

2020b). While adults must consent to an NRM referral, this is not required for children (Home Office, 2020a), and a referral can be made by practitioners within any of the Home Office's list of designated first responder organisations, which includes the police and the YOS.

NRM referrals require an explanation of the nature of the exploitation that has occurred (Home Office, 2021b). This information will be reviewed by staff within the 'Single Competent Authority' (SCA), a decision-making body based within the Home Office. The SCA will issue a 'reasonable grounds decision' in the first instance, referring to whether the SCA 'suspects but cannot prove that the individual being considered is a victim of modern slavery' (Home Office, 2020a: 11), and, if that decision is positive, will go on to issue a 'conclusive grounds decision' as to whether 'on the balance of probabilities, there are sufficient grounds to decide that the individual being considered is a victim of modern slavery' (Home Office, 2020a: 10). While adults who receive a positive conclusive grounds decision are eligible for a range of support, including financial and housing support, delivered by partner NGOs through the Government's Modern Slavery Victim Care Contract, under 18s are supported within their local authority (Salvation Army, 2020) and the positive decision does not unlock any additional support for the child beyond what is already provided by the local authority itself[11] (Ministry of Justice, 2019: 16).

Local authorities have a responsibility to support potential victims of CCE under existing statutory child protection arrangements (Ministry of Justice, 2019: 15). Preliminary research suggests that children are often identified as victims of CCE once under YOS supervision (The Children's Society, 2019). The YOS may refer a child to social services if this referral has not already been made. In addition, the YOS can work with the police to obtain a variety of victim-focused orders aimed at protecting children from further exploitation. These include Child Abduction Warning Notices (CAWNs), Recovery Orders and Secure Accommodation Orders, as recommended by the Home Office 'Child Exploitation Disruption Toolkit' (Home Office, 2019)[12].

[11] At the time of writing, 'Independent Child Trafficking Guardians', a national-level scheme of independent advocates for children identified as being affected by trafficking (including criminal exploitation), was still in its initial roll-out phrase, and was only available in selected counties (Home Office, 2021a). This service was not available in Stonewell at the time of the research.

[12] At the time of the fieldwork, The Toolkit had only recently been published and the use of interventions covered in the guide to address CCE by Stonewell YOS was limited.

Furthermore, positive NRM decisions have the potential to shift the ways in which children are viewed and treated in the context of the YJS. While there are no specific statutory guidelines for YOS regarding the treatment of children with a positive conclusive grounds NRM decision, in its general guidance for YOTs the Ministry of Justice (2019: 16) advises that a positive decision may 'shift the child further up the priority list for support to be received from their local authority'. Any specific support that the YOS itself can provide will vary from service to service. Within Stonewell YOS, support available included the referral of a child for discussion at its monthly multi-agency CCE review meeting and the offer of a dedicated CCE worker based within the YOS. In Stonewell YOS, this support was available to all potential victims of CCE, as assessed using the YOS's own tool, and not just to those who had received a positive conclusive grounds decision.

Furthermore, the Ministry of Justice (2019) guidance highlights that a positive decision may influence legal proceedings[13]. If children affected by CCE are facing pending criminal charges, provision exists in law[14] for the non-punishment of individuals who commit criminal offences in contexts of trafficking and exploitation. In England and Wales, children may access a defence under Section 45 of the Modern Slavery Act 2015, which states that:

> A person is not guilty of an offence if—
>
> (a) the person is under the age of 18 when the person does the act which constitutes the offence,
>
> (b) the person does that act as a direct consequence of the person being, or having been, a victim of slavery or a victim of relevant exploitation[15], and
>
> (c) a reasonable person in the same situation as the person and having the person's relevant characteristics would do that act. (Modern Slavery Act, 2015).

[13] While the use of NRMs to influence legal proceedings has been challenged by the CPS, the case of DPP v M [2020] EWHC 3422 (Admin) held that conclusive grounds NRM decisions are admissible evidence.
[14] Under Article 6 of the Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings (ECAT) (2005) and Article 8 of the EU Directive on Preventing and Combatting Trafficking in Human Beings and Protecting its Victims (2011).
[15] It is the responsibility of the defence to provide evidence that the child was a victim of trafficking or slavery, for example, through a positive conclusive grounds NRM decision. However, as an NRM decision is not made to the criminal standard of proof, courts are not bound by this decision (Ministry of Justice, 2019: 15), and research from The Child Safeguarding Review Panel (2020) emphasises that positive NRM decisions do not always lead to charges being dropped. If evidence of victimisation is not accepted, it is the responsibility of the Crown to prove beyond reasonable doubt that the child was not a victim (Youth Justice Legal Centre, 2018: 10).

Not all offences are covered by the Section 45 defence[16]. However, in such cases it may still be possible for the defence to rely on the non-punishment provisions of ECAT and the EU Trafficking Directive (Southwell, Brewer and Douglas-Jones, 2018: 37), or on the common law defence of duress (Youth Justice Legal Centre, 2021). Accordingly, through a range of potential approaches, it is possible for the identification of a child as a victim of CCE to prevent the criminalisation of that child.

However, it is also possible that children's experiences as victims of CCE in the context of county lines may be overlooked, and they may receive a criminal conviction for their involvement in drug distribution[17]. While several studies raise this issue as a concern (APPG on Runaway and Missing Children and Adults, 2017; Hunter, Dickson and Allan, 2019; Windle, Moyle and Coomber, 2020), data on the extent to which this is happening in practice is limited. However, it is notable that while children's contact with the YJS has been declining over the last ten years, there is evidence of increased criminalisation of children for drug-related offending. For example, research from The Children's Society (2019: 61) with 18 police forces across England and Wales found 'an increase of 14% (from 673 to 770) between 2015/16 and 2017/18 in the number of 10 to 17 year olds arrested for possession with intent to supply Class A drugs' (rising to a 49% increase, from 338 to 505, when data from the London Metropolitan police was excluded). In addition, while the number of proven offences[18] committed by children was 75% lower in 2020 than in 2010 (falling from approximately 198,400 to just under 49,100) the proportion of these that were drug offences has risen by 2.8% over the same period (Youth Justice Board and Ministry of Justice, 2020: 22-23). While the trends in this data suggest that the potential criminalisation of children affected by CCE merits further exploration, the data itself is not specific to the county lines model nor does it examine whether child criminal exploitation was present in included cases. Additional quantitative data regarding the prevalence of the criminalisation of children affected by CCE would therefore be a useful addition to the field.

[16] 140 offences are exempt from the statutory defence, some of which are common in child trafficking cases (Youth Justice Legal Centre, 2018: 10). The exemptions include a variety of offences against the person, firearms offences, theft offences, sexual offences, and modern slavery offences. See Schedule 4 of the Modern Slavery Act (2015) for a full list.

[17] The Ministry of Justice and the Youth Justice Board for England and Wales do not disaggregate statistics on youth sentences received according to offence type, making it difficult to be definitive about what kinds of sentences the criminalisation of children involved in county lines typically entails. However, sentences that affected the young people involved in this study included Referral Orders, Youth Rehabilitation Orders (including orders with intensive supervision and surveillance) and Detention and Training Orders. See Sentencing Council (2017) for further details of these orders.

[18] That resulted in a caution or sentence in court.

Of course, describing the details of these two possible pathways is not to say that children experience a simple and straightforward process in which they are labelled and treated either solely as victims of exploitation or solely as drug-dealing offenders. As we shall see, children affected by CCE often find themselves in a murky and complex middle ground in which they experience a mixture of both victim and offender-orientated interventions from practitioners. While young people will be labelled and treated primarily as a victim of CCE or as an offender involved in drug dealing, they may experience a variety of overlapping interventions along the way.

1.2 The Structure of this Thesis

The structure of this thesis is as follows: in Chapter Two, I review the existing literature on victim identification as it pertains to CCE and county lines, including the relevant literature on the recognition of children in conflict with the law as victims in the context of the YJS in England and Wales. I identify key gaps in the current literature and then set out the research questions for this study. In Chapter Three, I provide an overview of the methodological dimensions of this research. I outline the methodological approach and theoretical orientation, and present the methods used. Chapters Four, Five and Six provide discussions of the study's substantive findings. Chapter Four focuses on the roles of practitioners working with and within Stonewell YOS in identifying young people involved in county lines as victims of CCE. Chapter Five examines how relationships between practitioners and young people influence processes of victim identification. In Chapter Six, I explore young people's acts of claiming, accepting, and rejecting the CCE victim label. Chapter Seven provides a conclusion to the study, summarising its key findings, including a substantive theory of victim identification, identifying the major contributions of this research to the academic literature and implications for policy and practice, as well as limitations and future directions for research.

1.3 A Note on Terminology

Throughout this thesis, I will use the term 'young people affected by CCE' to refer to the young people who participated in this research. All of the young people who took part had been identified as potentially at risk of harm from CCE by the YOS practitioners who were supporting them. However, many of these young people did not use terms such as 'victim' or 'child criminal exploitation' to talk about themselves or their experiences. The more neutral term 'young people affected by CCE' accounts for the fact that all of the young people who participated in this research were affected by CCE in some way. This was either because they

identified with the term ‘CCE’, or where they did not, because practitioners’ decisions about whether to characterise them as potential or actual CCE victims still affected their lives. I use the terms ‘young person/young people’ to refer to youth participants because they preferred these over ‘child/children’. I do make use of the latter terms where relevant in the discussion of existing literature, acknowledging ‘child’ as an overarching term referring to all under 18s, with ‘young person’ describing a sub-category of older children, usually aged 14-17 (Citizens Advice, 2021).

Additionally, existing policy documents (for example, Ministry of Justice, 2019; National Crime Agency, 2018) and some existing research (for example: Robinson, 2019; Harding, 2020) frames CCE in the context of county lines as an issue of ‘gangs’ and ‘gang culture’. However, this thesis will not use this framing as it risks perpetuating a reductive narrative in which CCE is conceptualised primarily as the result of the actions of ‘predatory gang members’, and in which the more complex and multi-layered sociostructural contexts of CCE are erased (Hallsworth and Young, 2008; Spicer, 2020; Wroe, 2021; Spicer, 2021a). Additionally, I do not wish to exacerbate the problematic role that gang terminology plays in marginalising ethnic minority communities, and in particular young Black men (Hallsworth and Young, 2008; Smithson *et al.*, 2013; Williams, 2015). Finally, none of the young people who participated in this research described themselves as being part of a ‘gang’. Similarly, the term gang was rarely used by participating practitioners, many of whom were highly sceptical of this framing, citing its propensity to unfairly demonise young people’s relationships and activities.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

This literature review weaves together three areas of criminological research: victimology, criminal exploitation, and youth justice. Through a critical examination of these literatures, I identify four gaps in existing research into processes of victim identification as they relate to young people's experiences of CCE, which the findings sections of this thesis then address. Firstly, my discussion of the literature on expectations of victimhood identifies that while research into the characteristics of those who are more, or less, readily afforded victim status is well-established, this literature has paid insufficient attention to the experiences of two key groups: individuals with overlapping experiences of victimisation and offending and young people. In particular, I highlight the failure to develop a critical 'youth victimology' which accounts for young people's experiences of accessing victim status, particularly among those in contact with the YJS. I then examine norms and expectations relating to victimhood in relation to our understanding of CCE, demonstrating that while existing research challenges restrictive norms surrounding criminal exploitation as a form of victimisation, it does not address the extent to which these nuanced understandings permeate processes of victim identification themselves – despite initial indications that they are failing to do so.

To further explore this lack of clarity on processes of victim identification in relation to CCE, I assess the literature within the tradition of critical victimology, as it pertains to CCE and related forms of exploitation. My discussion of this literature demonstrates that existing research into victim identification in this field focuses predominantly on the isolated perspectives and experiences of practitioners as decision-makers. I show that at present, the roles played by potential victims themselves are less frequently addressed, and the influence of the interactions and relationships[19] between practitioners and victims is largely overlooked.

Finally, my analysis of the literature on youth justice demonstrates the importance of examining the wider contexts in which victim identification occurs. Current research offers a rich discussion of the space for the recognition of children in conflict with the law as victims of disadvantage and marginalisation in the YJS in the 20th and early 21st centuries, through its exploration of the welfare-orientated and punitive eras of youth justice provision. I show that despite this, there is a lack of consideration as to whether the rise of CCE as a policy issue

[19] I include both these terms to reflect the fact that both initial or fleeting interactions between individuals, and deeper relationships that develop over time, impact on processes of victim identification.

since 2015 represents a subsequent meaningful shift in the character of the YJS, and the approaches of its constituent organisations, and specifically a greater potential for the recognition of victimhood among children in conflict with the law.

2.2 Access to Victim Status

2.2.1 'A Sort of Victim Status': Liminality and the Identification of Victimhood in Early Victimological Research

> It is legally incorrect to speak of a "victim" when both perpetrator and "victim" are involved in a criminal enterprise, but psychologically in certain forms of crime there is a sort of victim status. This is demonstrated by the much higher risk rate of one of the associates; the hazardous part is mostly played by the younger partner…they are the "exploited" and this is true even in the case of the bully who receives money but in turn has other heavy duties to perform. (von Hentig, 1948: 407).

A concern with the liminal position of individuals who commit crime but are exploited in the process dates back to the earliest work in victimology. During the mid-20th century, the work of von Hentig (1948), Wolfgang (1957), Schafer (1968) and Mendelsohn (1976), largely in the US context, led to the emergence of victimology as criminology's 'wayward sub-discipline' (World Society of Victimology, cited in Rock, 2007: 41). This early work lacks a strong empirical basis[20] (Miers, 1989; Spalek, 2016) and is 'unbalanced' at best in its characterisation of victims (Rock, 2007). However, these flaws often overshadow the foundations that this work helped to lay for future research that would examine and interrogate who was more, or less, likely to be afforded victim status.

While all four authors are known for their work on 'victim precipitation', von Hentig (1948), Schafer (1968) and Mendelsohn (1976) in particular focused on developing victim typologies. Drawing on anecdotal evidence, von Hentig (1948) developed a typology of 'victim-proneness'. Relying largely on his experiences of working as a defence attorney, Mendelsohn (1976) categorised victims according to the extent to which he believed them to be culpable for their own victimisation. Schafer's (1968) more empirical, but nonetheless

[20] Both von Hentig's (1948) study and Mendelsohn's (1976) work have been criticised by Miers (1989) and Spalek (2016) for their use of unstructured anecdotal observation over rigorous empirical analysis. Furthermore, as Rock (2007) recounts, the theoretical underpinnings of this early victimological work were largely derived from the work of Cesare Lombroso, now widely discredited.

flawed[21], work focuses specifically on his assessment of victims' degrees of responsibility for their own victimisation. While these typologies approached the idea of 'culpability' uncritically, and perpetuated harmful 'victim-blaming' perspectives as a result (Mawby and Walklate, 1994; Rock, 2007), they remain important. In developing victim typologies, these authors broke open the previously monolithic concept of 'the victim', originating the possibility of differentiating various categories of victimhood and, as a result, of exploring questions of who should fit where.

Although problematic, these typologies begin to tease apart and expose not only the first ideas of different 'types' of victim, but by extension, through their concern with culpability, they offer unconscious gestures towards the existence of beliefs, prejudices and questions about who should be afforded the victim label and who should not. In the quote from von Hentig that begins this sub-section, the case of the individual exploited to commit crime implies that the attribution of victim status involves a calculation – in this case weighing involvement in crime against the exploitation and exposure to greater risk endured. von Hentig leaves the outcome of such calculations unresolved, with the criminally exploited labelled as having an ambiguous 'sort of victim status' (von Hentig, 1948: 407). Yet examples such as this offer the first indications of an understanding that victim status is not automatic and may involve processes of evaluation, particularly for individuals involved in the commission of crime.

While victimology's early focus on typologies of victimhood and victim precipitation, described by Miers (1989) as 'positivist victimology', might have produced greater gestures towards attribution of victim status than is often acknowledged, the work of the early victimologists has still been roundly, and rightly, criticised for failing to offer any overt critical analysis of 'victim recognition', that is to say: of who is more or less likely to see themselves recognised as a victim in the context of the criminal justice system and why (Walklate, 2007). Positivist victimology never moved far enough beyond the false assumption that individuals who experience harm are objectively victims, and that they will automatically be recognised as such (Holstein and Miller, 1990: 4). As a result, positivist victimology was unable to provide an understanding of the role of the wider factors that

[21] Schafer's work on 'victim precipitation' draws primarily on a survey completed by 721 individuals incarcerated in Florida for homicide, aggravated assault or theft with violence. While Schafer (1968: 58) states that he also obtained information from victims where possible, he does not provide sufficient evidence of the number of victims consulted or the methods used. This raises concerns about the potential bias of the study towards offenders' views of their victims' levels of responsibility.

influence inequalities and imbalances in whose suffering is recognised as victimhood and whose is not (Miers, 1989).

In response to these shortcomings, the 1970s onwards saw a variety of reactions against positivist victimology, including radical, feminist, and critical victimologies (Mawby and Walklate, 1994; Walklate, 2007). While these projects each had distinct concerns and goals, and were often in conflict with one another (Walklate, 2007; Spalek, 2016), a common denominator was the greater explicit focus that they all placed on who is afforded victim status and who is not, and on the role of social norms, values and power relations in influencing these differing levels of recognition (Spalek, 2016). The foundation for this focus was laid by the work of Richard Quinney (Walklate, 2012), who offered one of the first palpable assertions of the socially constructed nature of victimhood, emphasising that 'why we conceive of some persons as victims and others not as victims is a consequence of our common sense assumptions' (Quinney, 1972: 321). In identifying 'victim' as a socially constructed category, this work created the space for victimology to begin to interrogate and understand the normative expectations of the victim label.

2.2.2 Ideal and Deviant Victims

Research that has expanded upon Quinney's work to analyse the characteristics conducive to having one's victimisation recognised as such highlights the connections between access to victim status and perceptions of an individual's social value. This is reflected in Stanko's (1981; 1982) observational work on the felony arrest screening process within the New York County prosecutor's office, which determined that prosecutors were more likely to treat those who conformed to societal stereotypes of credibility - specifically older, white, male and employed individuals with 'good character' - as credible victims. Following this, Christie's (1986) seminal theory of the 'ideal victim', which continues to influence contemporary victimology (Duggan, 2018), provided an outline of the characteristics of individuals who 'most readily are given the complete and legitimate status of being a victim' (Christie, 1986: 12). According to Christie, the ideal victim should be weak and vulnerable, but he also places a strong focus on the 'respectability' of the victim, and in addition emphasises that the ideal victim should be blameless, with no prior connection to the offender (Christie, 1986: 12). Both Christie and Stanko emphasise that individuals perceived as conforming to societal norms of respectability, and thereby already valued as 'worthy' (Long, 2018) and 'deserving', are more readily afforded status as victims and will find it easier to access this label.

In response to Christie's delineation of the 'ideal victim', efforts have emerged to define the 'non-ideal' victim in greater detail. Dunn (2010; 2016) coins the term 'deviant victim' to refer to individuals or groups who 'cannot meet the normative expectations for a victim identity' (Dunn, 2016: 49). Clearly, as the expectations of 'ideal' victimhood are, by their very nature, extremely difficult to attain, it could be argued that almost every victim will be 'deviant' to a degree. Nevertheless, Dunn's concept of the 'deviant victim' remains useful because it introduces the idea of a spectrum of 'victim deviance' reminding us that individuals will experience varying levels of difficulty in accessing victim status. Carrabine *et al.* (2004) also delineate this spectrum of victim deviance as a 'hierarchy of victimisation', highlighting that those within already marginalised groups, for example members of racialised communities (Cossins, 2003; Long, 2018) and LGBTQ+ people (Donovan and Barnes, 2018), as well as those whose activities are criminalised or labelled as 'deviant', for example sex workers, people with drug and alcohol misuse problems, and members of 'deviant' youth subcultures (Carrabine *et al.*, 2004), are more likely to struggle to see their claims to victimhood taken seriously by actors within the criminal justice system, and as a result of this are also less likely to make such claims. As such the literature on 'deviant victims' also highlights a link between perceived social value and access to victim status.

Expectations of the ideal victim as innocent and blameless mean that agency is also a key consideration for access to victim status. Research from Holstein and Miller (1990), Miers (1990), Strobl (2004) and Van Dijk (2009) has emphasised that individuals will be more readily recognised as victims if they display limited levels of agency and autonomy and conversely demonstrate higher degrees of passivity, helplessness and compliance. These low levels of agency are central to the attainment of victim status because to be attributed victim status is to be absolved of responsibility for the harm that one has experienced (Holstein and Miller, 1990: 120; Strobl, 2010: 17). In this context, passivity and lack of agency act as a guarantor of blamelessness and innocence and an assurance that such absolution is appropriate (Meyers, 2011).

In contrast, individuals who are seen as exhibiting greater agency risk being seen as bearing responsibility for the harm that they have experienced (Dunn and Powell-Williams, 2007: 982), and as therefore ineligible for the absolution that victim status is intended to offer. Dunn's (2010; 2016) account of deviant victimhood places a particular focus on the issue of responsibility, emphasising that individuals or groups that deviate from expectations of blamelessness will face the most significant barriers in terms of accessing victim status. This

is notable in the significant literature on jurors' and legal practitioners' assessments of 'victim credibility' in cases of gender-based violence, usefully summarised by Ellison and Munro (2009), which demonstrates an enduring and deeply troubling preoccupation with assessments of women's 'responsibility' for the harm that they have experienced (Finch and Munro, 2005; Randall, 2010). Furthermore, Dunn (2016: 49) centres 'the gambler, the drunk and the drug addict' as key examples of deviant victims. Dunn's examples demonstrate that involvement in criminal activity in particular is often conceptualised as a choice through which the individual bears responsibility for placing themselves at risk of harm, therefore weakening their access to victim status.

2.2.3 Victim-Offenders and the Victim-Offender Dichotomy

Underpinning this connection between victimhood and perceptions of respectability and blamelessness is one key dichotomisation which serves to sharply delineate the characteristics most conducive to the recognition of 'victimhood': the positioning of 'victim' and 'offender' as irreconcilable, impermeable opposites (Long, 2018). As Christie (1986: 18) emphasises, 'victims that merge with offenders make for bad victims'. The 'victim-offender dichotomy' emphasises that 'victim' and 'offender' are conceptualised as diametrically opposed, antithetical identities (Dignan and Maguire, 2005; McEvoy and McConnachie, 2012), with the 'offender' providing the 'other' against which the 'victim' is defined and measured, exemplifying everything a victim must not be (Rock, 1998). In particular, this dichotomisation ties together strong expectations of respectability, innocence and deservingness on the part of the legitimate victim (Fohring, 2018a) and of deviance, guilt and unworthiness on the part of the offender (McAlinden, 2014).

The victim-offender dichotomy positions the law-abiding victim as deserving of protection and support, while simultaneously marking the offender as undeserving (Drake and Henley, 2014), in what Garland (2001) and Canton and Dominey (2020) have described as a zero sum game. This weakens possible claims to victimhood among individuals who are in conflict with the law. In doing so, the victim-offender dichotomy contributes to a criminal justice system that struggles to accommodate those who 'lie in the middle ground between the polarities of accepted victim and offender status' (McAlinden, 2014: 182). While Garland (2001) has described the 'return of the victim' to the foreground of criminal justice policy, the victim-offender is not included in this trend.

This state of affairs persists despite the fact that overlapping experiences of victimisation and offending are extremely common, with overwhelming empirical evidence for the existence of the 'victim-offender overlap': the idea that people who commit crime also experience high rates of criminal victimisation[22] (Jennings, Piquero and Reingle, 2012; Pyrooz, Moule and Decker, 2014; van Gelder *et al.*, 2015; Averdijk *et al.*, 2016; McEvoy and McConnachie, 2016). Individuals are marked either as victims or as offenders and there is little space for hybridity. As Canton and Dominey (2020: 20) emphasise, 'offender' acts as a 'master status' that 'suppresses' the possibility of recognising experiences of victimisation (see also Becker, 1963). As a result of the victim-offender dichotomy, individuals with intertwined or overlapping experiences of victimisation and offending represent the archetypal 'deviant victims' (Dunn, 2016), posing the most significant challenges to normative expectations of victimhood and therefore the most significant barriers to processes of victim recognition. Accordingly, great uncertainty hangs over the potential victim status of an individual who is also involved in offending (Green, 2007; McAlinden, 2014).

Despite their prevalence, individuals with interrelated or overlapping experiences of victimisation and offending are often overlooked within the context of victimological research (Farrall and Maltby, 2003), including regarding processes of victim identification. This is particularly the case for experiences where victimisation and offending are encompassed within the same activity as is the case for CCE. Much of the existing literature that examines the victim-offender overlap, for example, feminist pathways theory (DeHart and Lynch, 2018), general strain theory (Agnew, 2006) and routine activities theory (Clarke and Felson, 1993), looks at victimisation and offending as discrete events, and typically at how experiences of victimisation inform subsequent involvement in offending. In contrast, in the case of CCE, victimisation and offending are intertwined in the same instance, as being exploited to commit a criminal offence constitutes the child's victimisation. Existing research has paid little attention to questions of victimhood and victim identification among those for whom victimisation and offending is simultaneous.

As such, the experiences of individuals with very closely interrelated experiences of victimisation and offending are a topic in need of greater focus within victimology. In general, a victimology that examines the experiences of victim-offenders is important

[22] As Bottoms and Costello (2010: 104) clarify, the term 'victim-offender overlap' typically refers to 'situations in which a person is identified *both* as a victim *and* as an offender within a reasonably short period, such as a year'. The term does not typically refer to the influence of childhood experiences of victimisation on adult involvement in offending (as often studied in relation to child sexual abuse).

because it offers the opportunity to draw attention to the experiences of a group with high rates of victimisation that are too often overlooked, to highlight the artificial reification of the categories of victim and offender (Meyers, 2011; McEvoy and McConnachie, 2012; Drake and Henley, 2014), and to examine potential barriers to victim recognition in greater detail.

2.2.4 Unseen, Unheard: Young People and Victimology

In addition to overlooking the experiences of victim-offenders, victimology is also chronically deficient in offering tailored perspectives on the specific experiences of youth who are victimised, so much so that Muncie (2003:46) has described a 'specific youth victimology' as 'virtually non-existent'. While Finkelhor (2008) has proposed 'developmental victimology' as a sub-field of victimology that applies to children and youth, this approach is limited to the study of trends and risk factors relating to youth victimisation, does not sufficiently address processes of victim identification, and has gained little traction in the research literature. Specific research into criminal exploitation and county lines also tends to overlook the experiences of children and young people, focusing primarily on adults (Hales and Gelsthorpe, 2012; Villacampa and Torres, 2015; Spicer, Moyle and Coomber, 2019; Moyle, 2019; Ramiz, Rock and Strang, 2020). This sub-section demonstrates that the omission of youth from victimology represents a serious oversight if we are to fully understand how processes of victim identification unfold for young people affected by CCE.

The absence of young people within victimology is attributable to several factors. Firstly, there is a significant preoccupation, in both academic criminology, but also in political and media discourse, with young people as the perpetrators of crime (Brown, 2005: 106; Furlong and Cartmel, 2006). This preoccupation is partially explained by societal conceptualisations of the potentiality of youth as a source of fear, and as a potential threat to the current order which must be monitored and controlled (Brown, 2005). In a context in which 'victim' and 'offender' are dichotomised, this hyper-focus on young people as offenders has obscured and

overshadowed the extent to which young people can be recognised as victims of crime[23] (Walklate, 1989; Francis, 2007).

In addition, the absence of young people within victimology is attributable to the ways in which harm to children and young people is recognised and talked about. Brown (2005) and Francis (2007) link the neglect of youth victimhood in victimology to the framing of youth victimisation as the domain of social work and child protection, with young people constructed not as victims of crime but as victims of abuse within the home (Francis, 2007: 205). This 'fencing off' of young people's victimisation as a domestic issue (Brown, 2005) also helps to account for their exclusion from victimology as a sub-discipline of criminology.

Relatedly, as Finkelhor (2008) emphasises, public and policy attention to childhood victimisation has tended to come in transient waves, in the form of moral panics revolving around conceptualisations of childhood innocence and purity, creating patterns of concern that are 'more symbolic than substantive' (2008: 17). The failure of academic attention to specific forms of child victimisation to translate into the more substantive and holistic study of youth victimisation as a coherent subfield, is perhaps explained by a tendency of the research literature to parallel these passing peaks of interest and the funding and publication opportunities that they generate. Furthermore, as Gearon (2014) demonstrates in relation to 'child trafficking', the voices of the subjects of moral panics are often overlooked. This absence of the voices of young people who have experienced victimisation has also likely inhibited the development of youth victimology as a sub-discipline.

Creating a victimology that is specific to young people, and particularly to those in conflict with the law, is important for three reasons. Firstly, a youth-specific victimology creates opportunities for a closer exploration of the crucial role played by the concept of 'agency' in the construction of victim status. As demonstrated above, perceived levels of agency are an important concern in the assignment of victim status. Similar debates play out in youth

[23] This oversight persists despite research that demonstrates that young people are affected by significant rates of victimisation that are worthy of attention. Between 2015 and 2020 the Crime Survey for England and Wales estimates that, on average, 11% of children aged 10-15 were the victim of at least one criminal offence in a given year (Youth Justice Board and Ministry of Justice, 2020). (It is not possible to compare this statistic with the data collected by the Crime Survey for England in Wales for adults due to methodological differences. See Home Office (2011) for further details.) Although smaller in geographical scope, Ramshaw, Charleton and Dawson's (2018) survey of over 7000 London-based 11-16 year olds, draws similar conclusions, finding that 12% of respondents had been the victim of a crime in the last year, comparable with rates observed among London-based adults. While it is true that there is substantial evidence that the average peak offending age falls in one's teenage years (Farrington, 1986), this should not negate young people's experiences as victims. There is no empirical reason to continue to overlook youth victimisation.

studies. Questions regarding whether, and increasingly how, it is appropriate to recognise children's agency have long preoccupied researchers interested in characterising the nature of childhood (Klocker, 2007; Bordonaro and Payne, 2012; Atkinson-Sheppard, 2017; Spyrou, Rosen and Cook, 2018; Abebe, 2019). Accordingly, it is important to examine the possibility that discussions of agency may have particular relevance for young victims.

In particular, existing research that focuses on young people's experiences of victimisation in relation to trafficking and exploitation has not kept pace with changing perspectives on young people's agency[24], in that it does not go far enough in recognising young people's capacity to provide an insight into their own experiences. This is evident in research into rejection of the victim of exploitation label, which exhibits an over-reliance on the assumption that young people are unable to recognise their own victimhood. For example, West and Loeffler (2015) attribute 'victim resistance' to young people's failure to understand that they are victims. More problematically still, this study is based only on the views of service providers working with victims and does not include young people's own reasons for rejecting the victim label. Rigorous accounts of youth victimhood must take young people's perspectives on their own experiences seriously. Research into processes of victim identification with young people themselves offers the opportunity to do just that.

Finally, the assignment of victim status is, in part, a process of absolving the victim of responsibility (Holstein and Miller, 1990; Strobl, 2010), yet the policy discourse around young people who offend has, since the late 1990s, seen a heightened focus on the responsibilisation of young people who commit crime (Gray, 2007, 2009; Phoenix and Kelly, 2013; McAra, 2017), as discussed further in Section 2.5.2. Therefore, we must also consider the extent to which this drive towards responsibilisation within youth-specific organisational contexts might impact negatively on claims to victim status among young people in conflict with the law.

2.3 Access to Victim Status in Relation to Exploitation

The previous section outlines the characteristics of those most readily afforded the status of 'victim', as well as drawing attention to children and victim-offenders as two groups for

[24] Calls to recognise such capacity have emerged predominantly from the school of thought known as the 'new sociology of childhood'. Broadly, the so-called 'old' sociology of childhood conceptualised children as 'incomplete' or 'in process', passive and lacking in competence (Matthews, 2007). In contrast, the 'new sociology of childhood' conceptualises children as 'actively involved in the construction of their own social lives, the lives of those around them and of the societies in which they live' (James and Prout, 2015: 4) and, as a result, emphasises children's agency and 'question[s] the practice of privileging adults' views over children's about issues related to children's lives' (Matthews, 2007: 328).

whom experiences of these expectations have not been sufficiently explored. Of course, few individuals will conform perfectly to the normative expectations placed on victims, and those with overlapping experiences of victimisation and offending in contexts of exploitation will certainly struggle to do so. With this in mind, much work has been done within exploitation-related research to stretch and challenge the boundaries of normative assumptions about what makes a recognisable victim of exploitation, and of CCE in particular. These efforts have focused on emphasising the coexistence of victimisation and agency, and on encouraging greater recognition of the broader contextual factors that influence involvement in exploitative work. However, as this section demonstrates, while these nuances are an important part of the academic literature on exploitation, knowledge of the extent to which they have permeated processes of victim identification in practice remains limited.

2.3.1 Exploitation and the Question of Agency

The research literature on exploitation has made a concerted effort to challenge assumptions about the connection between 'ideal victimhood' and limited[25] levels of agency, actively complicating and resisting the confines of the 'ideal victim' stereotype. The image of the stereotypical 'ideal victim' of exploitation (O'Brien, 2019) - passive and powerless (Hoyle *et al.*, 2011; O'Connell Davidson, 2015), helplessly naive and lured, deceived or forced into horrific circumstances (Doezema, 2010) - has become a central motif in contemporary media and policy portrayals of exploitation. This has attracted much criticism from researchers who have emphasised that this framing of victims is 'disempowering' (Lee, 2011: 63), reductive (Vance, 2011; Snajdr, 2013) and exclusionary (Brown, 2019). Yet as Brown (2019: 633) highlights, emphasising victims' agency also carries the risk of responsibilisation or victim-blaming. As a result, a significant amount of research into the experiences of victims of exploitation has focused on carefully navigating the demonstration of the coexistence of agency and victimhood.

Demonstrating this coexistence has involved a shift away from mainstream definitions of exploitation. The emphasis on lack of agency as a core characteristic of the 'ideal' victim of exploitation stems from the interpretation of exploitation that has become dominant in media and policy discourse. At present, conceptualisations of exploitation within national or

[25] The 'ideal victim' must have a limited amount of agency, enough to be able to claim victim status, but not so much as to threaten perceptions of her vulnerability (Christie, 1986).

international law and policy lack clarity[26]. However, current policy and media discourse tends towards the liberal framing of exploitation as 'wrongful use'[27] (O'Connell Davidson, 2015; Fudge, 2021). 'Exploitation as wrongful use' refers to the idea that 'the exploitee is wronged by being used solely as a means, and so is objectified and instrumentalised inappropriately' (Munro, 2008: 84). The moral issue here refers to the fact that the exploitee is treated only as having instrumental value, rather than being valued as a person (Wilkinson, 2003: 171). In this interpretation of exploitation, people are either 'passive objects and slaves' or 'freely contracting subjects', a binary which 'operates to obscure the agency that people exercise in choosing between the narrow range of fates available and working them as best they can to meet their own interests and goals' (O'Connell Davidson, 2015: 77). As a result, the framing of exploitation as wrongful use requires a victim who lacks agency.

However, much of the academic literature on victims of exploitation has shifted towards a different interpretation of exploitation, one which resonates with the 'disparity of value' framing, that allows for a greater recognition of agency. Under the 'exploitation as disparity of value' framing 'the exploited person is wronged more because she is unfairly used, with this unfairness typically consisting of the fact that her position of vulnerability is taken advantage of to under-reward her role within a given transaction' (Munro, 2008: 85). The 'disparity of value' framing conceptualises exploitation as a spectrum of experience (Skrivankova, 2010: 4; Gearon, 2019). By placing the focus on 'unfairness', it allows for the possibility that an individual may gain from their exploitation[28]. In acknowledging that individuals may gain from exploitative situations, the disparity of value framing creates greater space for an understanding of the exploited person as an active agent navigating challenging and restrictive circumstances.

[26] At the international level, the Palermo Protocol 2000 defines exploitation as follows: 'Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs' (Article 3). This definition is somewhat circular and has been criticised for its failure to provide a more detailed and specific explanation of what constitutes exploitation in practice (Howard, 2021). The UK's Modern Slavery Act 2015 bases its definition of exploitation on the Palermo Protocol, although it does make more specific refence to the role of force, threat, and deception (See Modern Slavery Act 2015, Section 3).

[27] For interesting examples of the 'wrongful use' framing of exploitation see: Barnardo's (2011), Home Office (2021c), HM Government *et al.* (2020), and HM Government (2021). Spicer (2020) provides a useful summary of media reports on county lines that align with this framing.

[28] To explain how this is possible, Zwolinski and Wertheimer (2017) use the example of an individual who charges a hiker lost in the desert an exorbitant amount of money for water. This individual may be taking unfair advantage of the lost hiker, but both she and the hiker emerge from the situation better off than they would have otherwise been, with the lost hiker purchasing the water and thereby surviving her ordeal.

There is now a substantial body of research that signals towards the disparity of value framing to demonstrate that individuals can both demonstrate agency and be considered victims of exploitation. This research has largely focused on understanding adults affected by labour exploitation, including in contexts of sex work and of international drug trafficking (for example the literature on 'drug mules'), as entering into exploitative working situations as a survival strategy, and as a way of navigating extremely challenging and restrictive contexts including poverty and violence (Agustín, 2007; Davies, 2009; Kempadoo, 2015; Fleetwood, 2014a; 2017). Yet, while important in disrupting reductive binaries of the passive and powerless victim of exploitation versus the calculating active agent, this literature could go further in theorising the nature of agency in contexts of exploitation in more depth, and in discussing the implications of such agency for victim identification.

2.3.1.1 Agency and child exploitation

Within the existing literature on child labour the theorisation of children's agency in such situations, and the language to describe it, is better developed. Having emphasised the existence of agency in childhood, work in this area has moved on to consider the depth, effect and nature of children's agency (Tisdall and Punch, 2012; Morrison *et al*., 2019: 101). Several similar concepts are in circulation that capture the agency expressed by children engaged in exploitative work in situations where their options are extremely limited. Klocker (2007) uses the terms 'thin' and 'thick' agency to describe the experiences of the child domestic workers with whom she conducted ethnographic research in Tanzania. Here, the term 'thin agency' describes 'decisions and everyday actions that are carried out within highly restrictive contexts, characterised by few viable alternatives' while 'thick agency' describes 'having the latitude to act within a broad range of options' (Klocker, 2007: 85). The concept of 'thin agency' captures children's entry into exploitative domestic work as an active coping strategy and acknowledges their efforts to survive extreme poverty. Similarly, Honwana's (2005) work, based on over four years of ethnographic research with child-soldiers in multiple providences in both Angola and Mozambique, uses the term 'tactical agency' to describe the children as having 'a specific type of agency that is devised to cope with the concrete, immediate conditions of their lives' but which ultimately comes from 'a

position of weakness' (Honwana, 2005: 86)[29]. These terms enable additional characterisation of the ways in which individuals can display agency in contexts that are nonetheless exploitative.

These ideas of restricted agency are already being incorporated into research on issues that overlap with CCE, primarily CSE and the involvement of vulnerable adult drug users in drug supply. As early as 2002, Jo Phoenix recognised the importance of understanding children 'involved in prostitution' as engaged in acts of survivalism, and as making difficult decisions 'not in conditions of their own choosing' (Phoenix, 2002: 362). This point was also taken up by Melrose and Pearce (2013) whose edited volume emphasises the importance of recognising children affected by CSE as 'making constrained but rational choices within the context of highly diminished circumstances and opportunities' (Melrose, 2013: 15). This recognition of constrained agency within the field of CSE is presented by Brown (2019: 622) as a way of moving past a limiting 'discussion of "risk factors" and denial of agency, towards an understanding of intersectional social divisions, social marginality, "critical moments" and how these shape the investments and actions of vulnerable young people'. Similarly, research with vulnerable adults involved in county lines has recognised the 'constrained agency' (Moyle and Coomber, 2017; Moyle, 2019) they exhibited when choosing involvement in dealing from a limited range of options for income generation. Given the applicability of concepts of 'restricted agency' to individuals affected by forms of exploitation that are coterminous with CCE, it is highly likely that these concepts will also be relevant to the experiences of children affected by CCE themselves.

2.3.2 Contextualising CCE

In addition, the academic literature on CCE, and on exploitation more broadly, has also pushed back against the narrow focus on victimisation solely as an event that occurs between victims and offenders, as the result of the immoral actions of the offender. Christie (1986)

[29] Additionally, research in this area has placed significant focus on the idea of these modes of constrained or restricted agency as heavily relational. This is recognised by Klocker (2007: 85) who states that 'it is possible for a person's agency to be 'thickened' or 'thinned' over time and space, and across their various relationships'. This assertion is backed up by Atkinson-Sheppard's (2017) ethnographic research with 'street children' involved in organised crime in Dhaka, Bangladesh, which notes the role of children's relationships in 'thickening' their agency by enabling them to access money and protection. Furthermore, in a theoretical paper that draws on empirical research with children in a range of African contexts, Abebe (2019) describes the 'interdependency' of children's agency, emphasising that children's agency is both 'an integral part of and shaped by the familial notions of care, obligation, and reciprocity' (Abebe, 2019).

demonstrates that conceptualisations of what it means to be an 'ideal victim' tend to revolve around the actions and characteristics of individual victims and offenders. While the reduction of exploitation to the immoral actions of one or more perpetrators may be politically convenient (Spicer, 2020), absolving (on the surface if not in practice) the powerful of certain anxieties and responsibilities around the complex tasks of tackling the wider structural drives of exploitation (O'Connell Davidson, 2015: 206), existing research demonstrates that this occludes the material and structural contexts which are integral to creating the conditions for exploitation (Phoenix, 2002; Brown, 2019).

The wider structural drivers of exploitation are well-established in the literature on the labour exploitation of adults, particularly as it pertains to international trafficking. The broader structural factors that create the conditions for exploitation highlighted by researchers in this area include: increasing criminalisation of certain forms of migration (Bosworth and Guild, 2008; Aas, 2011; Melossi, 2015; Choi-Fitzpatrick, 2016; Gadd and Broad, 2018); global inequalities in access to decent labour opportunities (Jahic and Finckenauer, 2005; Shamir, 2012); and global dynamics of socioeconomic inequality (Hales and Gelsthorpe, 2012; Choi, 2014; Keo *et al.*, 2014; Shen, 2016; Plambech, 2014; 2017; Vanderhurst, 2017). While these structural drivers are also applicable to children, an emerging body of literature is beginning to address specific concerns that children's involvement in exploitative work in the context of county lines drug markets is influenced, not only by the actions of perpetrators of exploitation, but also by factors such as children's own experiences of poverty and austerity (Koch, in press), of a lack of viable alternatives for income generation (Spicer, 2020) and of additional 'structural vulnerabilities' (Moyle, 2019) outlined in the next section, that may place children at risk (The Children's Society, 2019).

2.3.2.1 Existing literature on sociostructural drivers of CCE

However, current research into these factors is still in its infancy. Research in this area is largely London-centric; tends to focus on practitioners' descriptions of the structural vulnerabilities affecting young people, as opposed to centring young people's experiences, views and voices; and does not examine how these dynamics might affect victim identification. Yet, in identifying the wider sociostructural factors that may place children at greater risk of CCE, this research does underscore the importance of recognising CCE as more than an issue of perpetrators choosing to commit harm, and as a result, the importance of situating CCE in its broader social context.

Research describing the structural factors that may place children at risk of CCE focuses on three key areas. Firstly, poverty has been identified as an important risk factor for CCE. Interview-based research from The Children's Society with 22 practitioners working on CCE across six local authorities highlights that while children from more economically privileged backgrounds are affected by CCE, involvement in exploitative drug distribution work can provide a survival strategy for young people to meet their basic needs for food and shelter (The Children's Society, 2019). However, this study only focuses on practitioners' perspectives.

As Spicer (2020) emphasises, there has been a lack of research and policy attention regarding the compounding effect of austerity policies on the relationship between poverty and CCE in the context of county lines, despite significant evidence for the broader relationship between poverty, social exclusion, and involvement in drug-related crime (Seddon, 2006). However, Insa Koch's forthcoming research emphasises the importance of austerity as further context for understanding CCE in two ways. Firstly, the role that austerity's entrenchment of socioeconomic marginalisation and precarity – as a result of: the introduction of the 'Universal Credit' system, with its cuts to levels of support and pernicious inbuilt wait for first payment; the loss of housing benefits for under 21 year olds; and the abolition of the Education Maintenance Allowance (Davies, 2018) – has played in further exacerbating the conditions of poverty that contribute to involvement in exploitative work as a survival strategy (Koch, in press). Secondly, the role of severe cuts to local government funding in positioning the framing of CCE as one of increasingly few levers to access basic support (Koch, in press).

Relatedly, in a study that combined social media analysis with interviews and focus groups with young people involved in illicit drug markets in England, Irwin-Rogers (2019) also identifies 'relative deprivation' (Young, 1999) as an additional risk factor for CCE. In cases where children are immersed in a culture of consumer capitalism that fetishizes the ownership of luxury goods, children may experience pressure to engage in income generation strategies, such as drug distribution, in order to access symbols of power and status that they would not otherwise be able to attain. Therefore, it is likely that economic drivers of CCE operate at two levels: the need to cover essential living expenses, and the need to attain items that feel essential to one's status and self-worth in contexts of consumer capitalism.

Finally, research into the risk factors for CCE victimisation has focused on children's contact, or lack thereof, with various societal institutions. Exclusion from mainstream education is highlighted by multiple sources as a risk factor for CCE, whether this meant that children were being taught at pupil referral units (PRUs) or were not in any form of education (Rescue and Response, 2019; Hudek, 2019). Existing research emphasises that exclusion from mainstream education tends to leave children with significant unsupervised free time[30] (Hudek, 2018; The Children's Society, 2019) thereby increasing their risk of exposure to drug distribution. In addition, a review of the cases of 21 children who died or experienced serious harm through criminal exploitation identified school exclusion as a trigger point for significant escalation of risk (The Child Safeguarding Review Panel, 2020: 8). In addition, research from Hudek (2019) also highlights concerns around high levels of mental health need, disability, and substance use among children affected by CCE coupled with a lack of appropriate support. In terms of institutional contact, there are also significant concerns around the risk posed to children in care, particularly children living in unregulated semi-independent accommodation for over 16s and those placed outside their home areas (Hudek, 2018; Harding, 2020), in addition to risks experienced by children for whom entry into care is being considered (The Children's Society, 2019). Finally, while research from Hudek (2019: 12) identified that 70% of the children supported by St Giles Trust within a CCE pilot programme were also under YOS supervision, there has been little detailed consideration of this correlation within the research literature[31].

2.3.3 Overlooking Victim Status

Existing research into exploitation and CCE provides a depth and nuance that complicates normative expectations of what it means to be a victim, by emphasising the coexistence of agency, albeit restricted, and victimisation; and by demonstrating that exploitation is a spectrum of experience, shaped by the sociostructural contexts in which it unfolds. However, these insights are not yet routinely incorporated into media, policy, and practice discourses. To date, the current policy and media discourse surrounding CCE in the UK has largely offered a reductive narrative of CCE as an issue resulting from the actions of perpetrators of

[30] Attendance requirements in PRUs can be limited to a few hours a week (Hudek, 2018: 3-4).

[31] Relevant to the issue of levels of institutional contact, policy briefings from both the National Crime Agency (2018) and the Ministry of Justice (2019) raise concerns that perpetrators of exploitation are increasingly looking to recruit so-called 'clean skins': conceptualised as children without prior criminal records and/or children not previously known to any division of the local authority, who are therefore more able to participate in drug distribution undetected. However, there is a lack of publicly available empirical research to confirm that such cases form a significant proportion of children affected by CCE in the context of county lines.

exploitation, ignoring structural factors that affect victims. For example, a critical discourse analysis of 127 news articles by Spicer (2020) found that within contemporary media discourse the expansion of CCE in the context of county lines was most frequently explained as ‘a result of ever increasing ruthless and “evil” gang practices’ (Spicer, 2020: 4). Similarly, major policy documents covering CCE, including the Ministry of Justice's (2019) guidance for YOTs, The Home Office's (2019) Child Exploitation Disruption Toolkit, and The Home Office's (2018) Serious Violence Strategy all frame CCE primarily an issue of the behaviour and actions of exploiters, with victims implicitly constructed as passive objects of harm. There is a clear tension between the expectations of what victimisation looks like in contexts of exploitation that are circulating in media and policy, and research that attempts to stretch the parameters of how victims of exploitation are conceptualised and defined.

Early indications suggest that calls to recognise a wider and more complex range of experiences that do not fit neatly within normative expectations of the ‘ideal victim’ have not yet permeated processes of victim identification in relation to exploitation (Lee, 2011). Preliminary studies suggest that those affected by criminal exploitation in particular often see their experiences of victimisation overlooked. Based on a qualitative study involving 36 practitioners working on CCE and CSE with Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub teams, Shaw and Greenhow (2020: 1559) found that when sexually exploited young people are also involved in criminal activity, and/or are victims of CCE, 'they may be seen only as offenders rather than as victims of exploitation'. In addition, research by Papadaki and Marshall (2020: 17) for the charity Hestia found that 52% of adult victims of criminal exploitation supported by Hestia had spent time in prison for crimes committed in relation to their exploitation. The criminalisation of victims of criminal exploitation is a clear concern.

Given the impact of the victim-offender dichotomy, as discussed in Section 2.2, it is unsurprising that individuals whose exploitation directly entails involvement in criminal acts experience particular challenges in relation to victim identification, despite the efforts of recent work to expand conceptualisations of victimhood. Although concerns about these challenges have been raised, current research does not provide an in-depth understanding of how and why the failure to identify victims of criminal exploitation occurs. In order to understand how and why children affected by CCE are overlooked, or indeed recognised, as victims, greater attention is needed to the processes through which the status of victimhood emerges or fails to emerge.

2.4 Processes of Victim Identification

Within the field of victimology, critical victimology provides the most engagement with the need to understand 'the processes associated with acquiring the label victim' (Walklate, 2007: 44). Early iterations of critical victimology, drawing on Quinney (1972) and Ziegenhagen (1977), call for victimologists to study 'the social processes through which person [sic] come to be known and understood as victims' (Holstein and Miller, 1990: 120). This call demonstrates an interest in the process of *becoming* a victim which has emerged as one of critical victimology's central concerns (Miers, 1990). As a result, a growing number of scholars have emphasised the need for greater empirical attention to the processes by which individuals acquire, fail to acquire, maintain and lose[32] victim status (Rock, 2002; Strobl, 2004; Strobl, 2010; Van Dijk, 2009).

This section synthesises the empirical and theoretical work in the sub-discipline of critical victimology and existing research into CCE, in addition to other adjacent issues including trafficking, exploitation and abuse more broadly conceived. In doing so this section assesses existing knowledge of how processes of victim identification unfold or fail to do so. It identifies that, despite the significant energy around the need for a detailed understanding of the processes and mechanisms through which victim status emerges or fails to emerge (Rock, 2002; Strobl, 2004; Strobl, 2010; Van Dijk, 2009), empirical research into processes of victim recognition remains fragmented and limited in scope. In particular, there is a need for a more holistic and relational understanding of micro-level processes of victim identification.

Research into processes by which victimhood is produced tends to focus on the macro-level, reflecting on wider victim movements rather than the micro-level interactional processes through which victim identification occurs. For example, in an astute analysis of British responses to 'modern slavery', Gadd and Broad (2018) emphasise how the image of the pitied innocent victim of racialised foreign slavers, heroically rescued by British authorities, as portrayed in political speeches and NGO publications, is cultivated to obscure histories of British complicity in colonialism and slavery and to justify the present day securitisation and anti-immigration agenda. Similar themes are raised by Koch (2019) in relation to county

[32] Holstein and Miller (1990: 113) describe the assignment of victim status as 'always open ended', emphasising that 'victim status may be assigned and then withdrawn in response to changing circumstances'. In addition, the work of Ronsbo and Jensen (2014) highlights the victim as a figure subject to perpetual scrutiny and suspicion, describing victimhood as an 'ever-negotiated, impermanent and immanent state' (Ronsbo and Jensen, 2014: 6). Therefore in considering the processes by which victimhood emerges or fails to emerge, we must also reflect on the processes by which victim status is maintained or eroded.

lines, specifically regarding the role of modern slavery discourses in obscuring the British state's longstanding complicity in racialised violence and oppression. Relatedly, Yea's (2015, 2019, 2020) substantial body of ethnographic work on migrants' experiences and the anti-trafficking movement in Singapore[33] describes how state practices of bordering, including the invocation of limits to territorial responsibility and the creation of spaces of deportability, create the means to exclude potential victims from official victim status. Similarly, more general research into human trafficking has tended to focus on collective claims made by victims' movements (for example, Bernstein, 2010; 2012; Cojocaru, 2015; O'Connell Davidson, 2015). This literature provides an important insight into the explicit cultivation of the boundaries of victimhood on a national and often international scale. However, we are yet to 'zoom in' and examine the fine detail of the widespread micro-level processes that determine the emergence of individuals as victims in every-day contexts, leaving the details of such processes hazy and ill-defined.

2.4.1 Micro-level Processes of Victim Identification and CCE

Where research has addressed processes of victim identification that relate to exploitation and abuse at the micro-level, it has tended to focus predominantly on specific actors in isolation. In particular, much of this research focuses on the decision-making of practitioners. For example, in an interview-based study with 37 practitioners within criminal justice and victim services in Spain, Villacampa and Torres (2017) found that a lack of practitioner knowledge of exploitation, as well as confusion over which practitioners had the authority to make victim identification decisions, both influenced the failure to identify adult victims of criminal exploitation. Similarly, in an interview-based study with 40 practitioners and 18 adult victims, Papadaki and Marshall (2020) found that a lack of training amongst police and legal practitioners contributed to cases in which victims were overlooked and treated as suspects. This research demonstrates a relationship between a lack of specific practitioner training and the oversight of cases of criminal exploitation.

A second strand of research in this area assesses the impact of practitioners' perceptions of individuals as conforming to expectations around ideal victimhood, focusing on the question of victim agency. As Christie (1986) emphasises, ideal victims' levels of agency are finely balanced. Victims must have a degree of agency in the sense that they must be 'strong enough to be listened to, or dare to talk' (Christie, 1986: 15). However, this should be kept to

[33] Yea's ethnographic work covers multiple sites and sectors. It includes research with migrants working in construction, seafaring, entertainment, and sex work, as well as on the anti-trafficking movement in Singapore.

a minimum and must not threaten perceptions of the ideal victim as weak and vulnerable. Several small-scale studies have touched on the importance of a potential victim's ability to claim victim status, although again only from the perspectives of practitioners. Ramiz, Rock and Strang's (2020) analysis of police actions in three cases of criminal exploitation found that victim disclosure and self-identification was an important influence on victim recognition. In an empirical study that asked eight police officers to make a decision as to whether to refer to the NRM for each of a series of CCE case studies, Espeute (2020) found that victim disclosure was closely associated with the decision to refer. Though small in scope, these studies suggest that a limited amount of victim agency is important to the recognition of victim status in relation to criminal exploitation.

In addition, other studies in this area have explored practitioners' perceptions of potential victims as being too agentic or volitional as barriers to victim identification. In a study that is somewhat limited in that it looked at CCE only as part of the wider issue of serious youth violence, Lumley (2020) analysed risk reports provided by the charity 'Redthread' on 57 young people seen across five London trauma centres, finding that perceptions of children as 'freely making choices' to become involved in drug dealing remained a barrier to victim recognition. Research from Sturrock and Holmes (2015), based on interviews with 17 youth services practitioners and three young people, found that children at risk of exploitation were being criminalised rather than safeguarded, because they were regarded as 'streetwise' or as 'making a lifestyle choice' (Sturrock and Holmes, 2015: 38). Similarly, in a particularly sensitive and detailed qualitative study[34] with 20 migrant children affected by exploitation, exploring their experiences of front-line services in England, Gearon (2019: 490) found that 'young people experienced an approach in frontline practice that overwhelmingly treated them as culpable and volitional, and not as victims of trafficking'. The children attributed this to perceptions among practitioners that positioned them as 'immigration offenders', linked to beliefs 'that immigrants are to be distrusted, they lie, and come to the UK to abuse the system' (Gearon, 2019: 493). In these examples, children affected by exploitation were denied victim status as practitioners perceived their actions to be too agentic.

Research into victim identification relating to criminal exploitation also tends to neglect the organisational and systemic contexts that influence and shape their decision-making.

[34] Gearon's research pays particular attention to the importance of building trust with research participants affected by exploitation. Gearon invested significant time within the research process in building relationships with participants, joining participants' existing activities as well as running participatory and creative group work sessions to introduce potential participants to the research.

Research that touches upon this focuses on more practical organisational issues, such as whether the CPS is likely to prosecute in the case of a victim-offender (Cockbain, 2018), and less on the role of organisational values and philosophies. Notable exceptions to this include Jarman and Lanskey's (2019) documentary research examining the capacity of state agencies to overlook victims of sexual exploitation in youth custody in England and Wales, which emphasises the influence of organisational culture of 'entitlement' within the youth secure estate; and the US-focused work of Farrell and Pfeffer (2014) and Farrell, Pfeffer and Bright (2015), which demonstrates that a culture of resistance to change and reliance on existing crime schemas[35] within the police creates barriers to identifying human trafficking offences. However, additional attention is needed to the ways in which CCE victim identification is multi-layered: influenced by both the practicalities and the cultures of the organisational contexts in which it occurs.

Similarly, the smaller body of literature concerned with responses to victim status among potential victims has also tended to focus on these processes in isolation. Building on the work of Taylor, Wood and Lichtman (1983), Fohring explores crime victims' processes of neutralisation and denial of victimisation, demonstrating that victim status sometimes fails to emerge because individuals reject the victim label as an act of psychological self-preservation (Fohring, 2018b; 204). Other research into rejection has focused on children who avoid claiming victimhood due to fear of violent ramifications (The Children's Society, 2019). While these approaches provide a useful insight into one reason why individuals might reject victim status, this is only one part of the overall process of victim recognition. We know little about how and why the victim label was initially offered, or how this rejection was received. Relatedly, current research does not consider young people's processes of claiming or accepting status as CCE victims in any detail. Evidently, existing research into the processes through which victimhood emerges or fails to emerge is somewhat disjointed. What is missing is a joined-up approach offering detailed analyses of the ways in which both potential victims and criminal justice practitioners, and the interactions between them, shape the emergence of victim status.

[35] Farrell, Pfeffer and Bright (2015: 318) define these schemas as 'tools for organising knowledge gained from prior experience'. Drawing on 166 in-depth interviews with law enforcement practitioners, Farrell and Pfeffer (2014) focus specifically on the example of pre-existing vice units taking responsibility for anti-trafficking work and simply replicating vice investigation strategies. This finding is further supported by Spicer's (2021a) ethnographic research on police responses to county lines, which finds that officers favoured the use of familiar anti-drug strategies such as 'crack downs' over the use of new county lines or modern slavery tactics.

2.4.2 Establishing a 'Relational' Approach Within Critical Victimology

Holstein and Miller (1990: 120) first highlighted that victimology has 'generally overlooked the *interactional* and descriptive practices through which persons come to be known and understood as victims', and this lacuna is still pervasive over thirty years later. As discussed above, research with criminal justice practitioners with the power to bestow or withhold victim status has tended to focus solely on the perceptions and actions of these individuals. As a result, practitioners' interactions and relationships with potential victims and how these shape the emergence of victim status, are neglected.

In describing the process of attaining victim status as a 'communication process between the victim and representatives of society', Strobl (2004: 304; 2010) goes further than any previous researcher in outlining the emergence of victimhood as an interactional process. Drawing on interview-based research with Turkish migrant victims living in Germany[36], Strobl defines four key factors that determine the success or failure of the communication of victimhood: the impression that the victim's appearance and behaviour makes on the receiver[37], the social group to which the victim belongs, the clarity and distinctiveness of the victim's call for help, and the extent to which the receiver concludes that victimisation has occurred (Strobl, 2004). However, perhaps owing to the fact that this research did not include an observational component, Strobl's outline of the communication process remains somewhat static, focusing on the separate actions of the victim and the receiver rather than analysing the interactions between them. As a result, the nature and substance of the communication itself is largely overlooked. Victimology continues to suffer from a 'conceptual void that has yet to be filled by an adequate description of the victim as a situated, reflective self in interaction with others' (Rock 2002: 13), leaving critical victimology's existing analysis of processes of victim recognition insufficient.

It is clear that critical victimology has not yet fully embraced Rock's (2002) call for a genuinely dialectical approach to the emergence of victim status. This is a concern because it represents a theoretical limitation of current research within critical victimology as a whole, but also because it hinders our understanding of exploitation as a specific form of victimisation. A relational approach is necessary to our understanding of CCE because

[36] While they are interesting and theoretically novel, we must treat Strobl's findings with caution, given the striking absence of an adequate discussion of methods, including sampling and interview protocol, in either the 2004 and 2010 articles or elsewhere.

[37] Here Strobl is referring to the 'receiver' of the attempt to communicate victim status – typically a criminal justice practitioner.

exploitation is an intrinsically relational crime. Here, it is not only the relationship and interactions between the potential victim and the criminal justice practitioners with the power to attribute victim status that matters for the emergence of victimhood. In addition, the recognition of this form of victimisation is inextricably connected to the way in which different parties, including young people and the practitioners working to support them, view the nature of the relationship between the young person as a potential victim and the potential exploiter. Accordingly, a relational approach to victimology, and in particular an understanding of the potential victim's interaction with others, is important to the study of CCE.

Furthermore, a relational understanding of processes of victim identification is of particular interest for the development of a victimology relevant and applicable to children (discussed in Section 2.2.4), whose social status means that they live uniquely interconnected lives, marked by a particular degree of dependence on the actions of parents, practitioners, and peers (Brown, 2005). In England and Wales, expectations that adults will assume responsibility for dependent children, and therefore have the power to make decisions for a child, are written into policy and law (Children Act, 1989). We must acknowledge that in British society adults hold power over children in a unique way (Walklate, 1989). As a result, expanding our knowledge of processes of victim identification along relational lines is likely to be particularly important for our understanding of how and why children emerge, or fail to emerge, as victims of CCE.

2.5 Victim Identification in the Context of the Youth Justice System

In pursuing an enhanced understanding of processes of CCE victim identification, it is also important to remain conscious that the 'victim' label is not produced in a vacuum (Walklate, 2007: 45). This approach is supported by proponents of critical victimology who emphasise the importance of engaging with individuals' interactions with the 'social, political and legal conditions' (Spencer and Walklate, 2016: xi) within and through which victim status emerges (Mawby and Walklate, 1994; Walklate, 2007; Walklate and Spencer, 2016). Such engagement enables a more nuanced understanding and critique of 'the affixing of the label [victim] to some traumatised bodies and not others' (Spencer and Walklate, 2016: xiv), and of how structures of power shape these processes, which 'go on behind our backs' [and] contribute to the victims (and the crimes) we 'see' as opposed to those we do not 'see'' (Walklate, 2007: 48). Critical victimology's attentiveness to both structure and agency (Spalek, 2016: 68) creates space for an understanding of the generative mechanisms of victim

identification that incorprorates the circumstances, and individuals' interactions with these circumstances, that shape the emergence of victim status (Walklate, 2007: 50).

As the identification of children as victims of CCE often occurs after they have been convicted of offences (The Children's Society, 2019), and because children affected by CCE are in conflict with the law, the YJS is the key context for processes of CCE victim identification. The YJS in England is a complex bricolage of welfare-orientated and punitive approaches[38]. While these are not the only paradigms that characterise the YJS in England (McAra, 2017; Gelsthorpe and Lanskey, 2016) they are the most salient for our discussion of the recognition of experiences of victimisation among children in conflict with the law. Welfare-orientated approaches within youth justice seek to address children's needs (Smith, 2009). In doing so, they afford more space for an understanding of children in conflict with the law as the victims of multiple and complex social disadvantages[39] (Goldson and Muncie, 2006; Smith, 2005; 2009). Conversely, punitive approaches position children in conflict with law solely as offenders (Smith, 2009). The 'awkward compromise' (Gelsthorpe and Lanskey, 2016: 16) between welfare and punitive interests that characterises the English YJS has led researchers to describe it as 'a meeting place of two otherwise separate worlds' (Harris and Webb, 1987: 79), within which an amalgam of competing rationales has created conflict, contradiction and ambiguity (Muncie and Hughes, 2002: 1). As such, the space within which to conceptualise children as victims within the YJS is, like the system itself (Goldson and Muncie, 2006: 204; Goldson, 2020), dynamic, ever-changing and elastic. Such spaces expand and recede depending on whether welfare-orientated approaches are more or less ascendant in the system as a whole (Goldson and Muncie, 2006: 204) and, as this section will demonstrate, their potential is ultimately restricted by societal conceptualisations of childhood and victimhood.

2.5.1 Welfare-orientated Approaches and the 'Troubled' Child

Although there have been various points in the history of the English YJS in which welfare-orientated approaches have become more prevalent, they have never dominated the youth

[38] It is important to acknowledge the complexities of offering a characterisation of the YJS in England. The existence of a conflicting and incongruous ethos that includes both welfare and punitive approaches is one factor that renders this kind of analysis particularly challenging (Briggs, 2013: 19). The YJS in England 'does not lend itself to easy classification' (Gelsthorpe and Lanskey, 2016: 1) and the following section offers a rigorous but preliminary summary of the YJS approach to children as victims. The findings sections of this thesis offer additional elaboration on the local context of Stonewell YOS.

[39] Specific examples of such disadvantages frequently cited in the research literature include: poverty, poor parenting and inadequate neighbourhood resources (Smith, 2009: 256), social marginalisation and exclusion (Smith, 2005), behavioural and mental health problems and substance abuse problems (Smith, 2005).

justice landscape. The early development of a YJS that was distinct from the adult system, during the mid-nineteenth century, was grounded in a need to improve the welfare of children in conflict with the law (Gelsthorpe and Lanskey, 2016). Subsequently, the Children Act 1908, and the Children and Young Persons Acts of 1933 and 1969 all sought to embed a particular concern for welfare into the response to children who offend. Notably, the Children and Young Persons Act 1969 emphasised decriminalisation and sought to divert all children under 14[40], and the majority of 14-17 year-olds, away from criminal prosecution into consideration for care and protection proceedings (Bottoms and Kemp, 2007). However, the 1969 Act was only ever partially implemented (Bottoms and Kemp, 2007) and has come to represent a 'high water mark of welfarism' (Gelsthorpe and Morris, 1994; Case and Bateman, 2020), which was neither fully realised nor matched by subsequent attempts at youth justice reform. While the 1980s were characterised by apparently progressive 'intersecting principles of "diversion", "decriminalisation" and "decarceration"' (Goldson, 2020: 322), these were rooted in Thatcherite conservatism's proclivities for 'rolling back the frontiers of the state' (Goldson, 2020: 323; Case *et al.*, 2020) rather than in any genuine commitment to recognising children in conflict with the law as children in need. Furthermore, Case (2022) notes the division between 'child' and 'adolescent' that was further strengthened between 1950 and 1990, with more punitive elements increasingly directed towards those nearing adulthood[41]. Accordingly, the welfare-orientated character of the YJS during this period was only ever partial both in terms of the policies that were enacted and the proportion of under 18s to whom they were applied.

In order to understand why welfare-orientated approaches have struggled to fully permeate the response to children in conflict with the law in England, it is useful to look towards prevailing societal conceptualisations of childhood[42]. Responses to children who offend are informed and shaped by contemporary conceptualisations of what it means to be a child (Fionda, 2005; Staines, 2015). The social construction of childhood (James and Prout, 1997) in the English (and Western) context is characterised by a persistent ambiguity in which

[40] With regards to children under 14 an exception was made for cases of homicide (Bottoms and Kemp, 2007: 140).

[41] Case (2022) notes that the 'welfare-orientated' period of youth justice from 1950-1990 was also a period of successive moral panics over 'delinquent youth subcultures' (for example mods, rockers, punks and skinheads), in which adolescence was increasingly contrasted with the innocence and vulnerability of childhood and constructed as threatening and dangerous. In discussing the YJS during this period, it is important to remain conscious of the distinctions that existed between children and adolescents.

[42] While young people occupy a distinct position in society relative to that of younger children (Heath *et al.*, 2009), they remain affected by constructions of childhood.

adults position children as both, on the one hand, vulnerable, innocent and in need of protection, and on the other, as threatening, savage and in need of control[43] (Goldson, 2007; Hendrick, 2002; Hendrick, 2015). As a result, the YJS is shaped by a 'victim-threat dualism' in which children are either perceived as 'troubled and in need of protection (the child as victim), or as troublesome and in need of control, correction and punishment (the child as threat)' (Goldson, 2007: 105). This victim-threat dualism is then also frequently 'articulated as a "deserving-undeserving schism"' (Goldson, 2013: 112)[44]. In a clear parallel of the way in which the victim-offender dichotomy shapes the criminal justice system as a whole, binary conceptualisations of the child as in need of protection, and the child as a threat, also permeate approaches to youth justice.

In light of this binary, welfare-orientated approaches to children in conflict with the law are subject to an inherent tension that restricts their prevalence, one which remains understudied. While research in the field of youth justice has drawn attention to a dichotomised view of the child that can only conceptualise of *either* the child as a victim in need of welfare support *or* as an offender who must be punished, the literature has rarely remarked upon the fact that children receiving supervision within the YJS have already been marked as offenders, or as at significant risk of offending in the case of those on Prevention Orders, through their entry into the system itself (Case and Haines, 2020). This presents a clear challenge for the recognition of the child as a victim in need of support, as the victim-offender dichotomy means that any contact with the 'offender' label contaminates and restricts the potential for victim recognition. Furthermore, while the label 'victim' is precarious, fragile, and easily displaced (Ronsbo and Jensen, 2014), the label 'offender' represents a stain on one's identity that is much harder to remove (Garland, 2002; Petersilia, 2003; LeBel and Maruna, 2012). Accordingly, the 'offender' label exerts a comparatively greater force which pulls children in conflict with the law away from the victim side of the 'victim-threat dualism' (Goldson, 2007: 105) and its associated welfare-orientated interventions. As a result, the proliferation of welfare-orientated approaches within the context of a YJS will always be an uphill battle. As

[43] Here it is important to acknowledge that different groups of children will experience the weight of these categorisations differently. For example, Valentine (1996: 587) emphasises that older children may be subject to the constructions of adulthood as well as childhood. Furthermore, Flacks (2021) emphasises that working class and ethnic minority children are more likely to be subject to framings that conceptualise children as threatening and in need of control.

[44] Despite widespread acknowledgement of both the prevalence of overlapping experiences of victimisation and offending for children (McGhee and Waterhouse, 2007; Roe and Ashe, 2008) and the need to recognise the complexities of children as both 'risky' and 'at risk' (Goldson, 2007; Smith, 2009), this binary remains pervasive.

long as dichotomised conceptualisations of both 'childhood' and of 'victims' and 'offenders' remain prevalent, the space within the YJS to conceptualise children as victims will remain restricted.

2.5.2 Victim Erasure and the Punitive Turn

Given these constraints, it is perhaps not surprising, then, that a 'punitive turn' (Muncie, 2008; Bateman, 2011b) was able to take root in the YJS from the late 1980s onwards, reflecting a broader punitive turn in the criminal justice system as a whole (Garland, 2001). Fuelled by a rising moral panic around youth crime (Goldson, 2000; 2011; 2018), which Carlen (1996: 48) describes as the 'folk devilling of children', and catalysed by the murder of James Bulger in 1993 (Valentine, 1996; Haydon and Scraton, 2000; Case, 2022), this 'authoritarian shift' (Scraton, 2005) in youth justice throughout the 1990s and 2000s privileged conceptualisations of children in conflict with the law as offenders[45] in need of punishment and control.

The initial stages of this punitive turn focused on heightening the separation of the "deserving" troubled child, and the '"undeserving" troublesome one' (Goldson, 2002: 685, see also Staines, 2015), and was characterised by two key interventions. Firstly, the Children Act 1989 separated the previous dual jurisdictions of the juvenile court, creating the 'youth court', now exclusively a criminal court, and a separate 'family proceedings court' (Bottoms and Kemp, 2007). In creating separate spaces to address children's welfare and children's offending, the act reduced the possibility of conceptualising children in conflict with the law as the victims of social disadvantage. Following the 1989 Act, the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 replaced 'juvenile justice teams', comprised mainly of specialist social workers (Bottoms and Kemp, 2007: 149) with YOTs. This change had both symbolic and practical significance. Goldson (2008: 28) emphasises that 'the substitution of the term justice by offending is symbolically vital' as this shift institutionalises a process whereby 'the child as "threat" conceptualisation has become more prevalent, whilst the child as "victim" identity has receded further to the margins'. In addition, while the constituent membership of YOTs is broad, including health, education and other specialist welfare-orientated workers (Fox and Arnull, 2013), the creation of YOTs served to distance interventions with children in conflict

[45] Case (2022: 72) emphasises that the moral panic that followed the Bulger murder 'significantly influenced the way in which child "offenders" were socially constructed from that point'.

with the law from mainstream social care and child welfare services[46] (Goldson, 2000; 2008; Goldson and Muncie, 2006).

A second facet of the marginalisation of the young person as a victim within contemporary youth justice is the rise of what Phoenix (2009) has called a return to 'repressive welfarism' (Hudson, 1987), in which coercive interventions are deployed 'in the name of protection' (Phoenix, 2002). While the Acts described above sought to separate 'troublesome' from 'troubled' children, repressive welfarism curtailed residual welfare-orientated approaches to children in conflict with the law by reimagining and repackaging criminalisation and offender-focused interventions as a way of promoting child welfare (Hudson, 1987; Smith, 2005). This approach was set out within the 1998 Crime and Disorder Act which stated that 'the government does not accept that there is any conflict between protecting the welfare of a young offender and preventing that individual from offending again' (CDA, 1998 in Muncie, 2011: 44). It has proliferated through other interventions, including 'the scaled approach' to risk assessment in youth justice, in which children with greater welfare need are assessed as at greater risk of re-offending, and therefore targeted for more intensive YOS intervention on the basis of this need (Bateman, 2011a). Repressive welfarism creates a situation in which the purported recognition of children in conflict with the law as victims of social disadvantage makes less of a difference in terms of the kinds of interventions they receive, as offender-orientated interventions are always deemed appropriate (Phoenix, 2009).

Youth justice reforms first implemented under New Labour further limited the possibility of recognising children as victims through their focus on the responsibilisation of children for their offending behaviour. This focus manifested itself at the level of government rhetoric around youth crime (Smith, 2009), exemplified by the tone of the 1997 White Paper 'No More Excuses', which called for the YJS to help 'young offenders to tackle problems associated with their offending and to develop a sense of personal responsibility' (Home Office, 1997). This discourse around responsibilisation translated into practice, exemplified by changes including a greater focus within offending behaviour programmes on children's own management of their individual risk factors for offending (Gray, 2009), and by the abolition of the presumption of doli incapax for 10-13 year olds through the introduction of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998[47]. New Labour's emphasis on responsibilisation revolved

[46] Although, as noted by Taylor (2016: 12) some local authorities are now moving to re-integrate youth offending services with wider children's services, including education and health provision.
[47] In a context in which the minimum age of criminal responsibility of ten years was, and continues to be, already low in comparison with other jurisdictions (Goldson, 2013).

around a conceptualisation of children as ‘dangerous, wilful and agentive’ (Such and Walker, 2005: 43) and in need of control (Smith, 2009). Previous studies have not fully acknowledged the implications of these responsibilising discourses for victim identification among children in conflict with the law. This picture of the responsibilised and agentic ‘young offender’ clearly clashes with norms and expectations that require victims to be passive and blameless. As a result, we must be mindful of the possibility that the focus on responsibilising children in conflict with the law restricts opportunities to recognise them as victims.

In addition, processes of responsibilisation also fed into the further ‘decontextualisation’ (Goldson, 2000; Phoenix and Kelly, 2013) of youth crime from the sociostructural harms that, where recognised, might have previously facilitated greater recognition of children in conflict with the law as victims of disadvantage. Responsibilising narratives reconceptualise sociostructural risk factors for offending into individual ones (Kemshall, 2008). This approach locates the causes of crime within the individual child, and in doing so fails, perhaps purposefully (Phoenix and Kelly, 2013), to adequately acknowledge the social, political and economic drivers of youth crime (Gray, 2007). We see this both in YOS provision during this period, for example offending behaviour programmes that focused on deficits in cognitive skills over engaging with the wider structural constraints on young people (Gray, 2007), as well as in practitioner decision-making. For example, drawing on analysis of Asset data from 2000-2002, Gray (2007) emphasises that YOT workers prioritised individual risk factors for re-offending, such as ‘cognitive deficits’, over social risks such as school exclusion or unemployment. Garland (1997) and Gray (2009) have located this decontextualisation of youth crime as stemming from a fundamental misunderstanding of difference between ‘agency’ and ‘freedom’, one which assumes that children’s capacity to make choices means that ‘they have the freedom do so uninhibited by external structural constraints’ (Gray, 2009: 451). By erasing broader contexts of offending, responsibilising narratives restrict the scope for narratives of children’s participation in crime as a constrained choice, which position them as victims of wider socioeconomic inequality and marginalisation.

A final component of these changes is the ‘vulnerability zeitgeist’ (Brown, 2014b) that has developed in UK policy and practice from the New Labour era onwards (Brown, 2012; 2014). Vulnerability is typically, in the Western tradition of understanding, a key component of victimhood, conventionally seen as increasing both one’s risk of being victimised, and one’s likelihood of subsequently being recognised as a victim (Green, 2007; Walklate, 2011).

However, the framing of vulnerability that has become prevalent through the 'vulnerability zeitgeist' has served to further restrict the meaningful recognition of victimisation among children who offend. In particular, this framing of vulnerability elides vulnerability and need with dangerousness and risk (Kemshall, 2008: 29), contributing to a climate of 'repressive welfarism' by further blurring the lines between care and control (Brown, 2014b). For example, in the scaled approach described above, it is the characterisation of children as 'vulnerable' that provides justification for heightened intervention and control (Brown, 2014a; Brown, 2017), further entrenching young people in the YJS. In addition, contemporary framings of vulnerability tend to reinforce the processes of responsibilisation and decontextualisation described above (Brown, 2014a; Brown *et al*., 2017). As a result, the link between vulnerability and victimhood is weakened and the space for the identification of children who offend as victims thereby restricted.

Furthermore, in the context of austerity Britain, discourses around vulnerability have further entrenched narratives of deservingness and of the conditionality of welfare-orientated support within the YJS (Brown, 2012; 2017). Within the language of the 'vulnerability zeitgeist', welfare-orientated support is repositioned as a privilege (Brown, 2014a) to be extended only to a ring-fenced category of the most vulnerable[48] (see also Menichelli, 2021), characterised as those devoid of any agency to control their life circumstances (Brown, 2017). Paralleling the unattainability of the characteristics of 'ideal victimhood', children will rarely match up to expectations of passivity and compliance that have come to be associated with vulnerability (Brown, 2017), and as a result the language of 'vulnerability' can operate as further exclusionary tool when it comes to welfare-orientated support for young people in conflict with the law (Brown, 2011).

2.5.3 New Prospects for Victim Recognition?

The literature on youth justice has yet to examine whether the contemporary youth justice landscape offers new possibilities for the recognition of victimhood among children who offend. The election of the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition Government in 2010 signalled a departure from New Labour's 'prescriptive' approach to youth justice (Briggs,

[48] For example, the 1997 White Paper 'No More Excuses' (Home Office, 1997) suggests diversion from prison (to local authority secure accommodation) for the 'most vulnerable' 15–16-year-old boys. Given that the incarceration of children in prison settings has been identified as criminogenic (Bateman, 2016), it is clear that such diversion could benefit all children in conflict with the law.

2013: 27) towards a more diffuse, localised and flexible YJS[49] (Briggs, 2013; Drake, Fergusson and Briggs, 2014; Phoenix, 2016; Case *et al.*, 2020). While preserving much of New Labour's focus on risk and responsibility[50] (Case, 2022), the YJS under the Coalition and the subsequent Conservative government from 2015 to the time of writing has been defined by 'downscaling' informed by austerity-led cuts (Smith and Gray, 2019; Goldson, 2020), and the de-prioritisation of youth justice as other political issues, such as Brexit, took centre stage (Case *et al.*, 2020). The freedom afforded by heightened localism, specifically the devolution of responsibility for 'setting practice goals and operational priorities' (Smith and Gray, 2019: 567) from 'centralised state direction' (Smith and Gray, 2019: 556) to local agencies, and the lack of a central vision that unifies youth justice policy and practice across England (Haines and Case, 2018), does mean that space exists for new trajectories and outlooks within the system. Despite this, the YJS post-New Labour has received less research attention than previous eras, including in relation to questions of victimhood.

While the 'children first offenders second' (CFOS) philosophy[51] has been identified as a potential future organising principle for the YJS (Haines and Case, 2018), one which does clearly deprioritise the conceptualisation of the child as an offender, its impact on practice to date has been somewhat limited[52] (Ministry of Justice, 2016; Case and Haines, 2020). In addition, the CCE framing, while more limited in scope, goes further than CFOS in terms of

[49] Specifically demonstrated by the approaches set out in 'Breaking the Cycle' (Ministry of Justice, 2010), the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012, and the revisions to Asset in the form of AssetPlus (Case, 2022).

[50] For example, through the focus on responsibilisation and communitarianism in the Conservative Party's ideology of 'The Big Society' that was prevalent during this period.

[51] CFOS places an emphasis on creating a 'child-friendly' and 'child-appropriate' model of youth justice (Case and Haines, 2015) by explicitly reversing the 'adultification' of the punitive turn described in Section 2.5.2, which they describe as viewing children as 'fully independent, capable, mature and responsible "mini adults" who are thus deserving of punitive and responsibilising responses in accordance with this status' (Case and Haines, 2015: 163). Although CFOS's exact conceptualisation of the 'child' remains under-theorised, the philosophy does call for the re-responsibilisation of the adults who hold power in children's lives, and for an understanding of children's offending as a response to unmet need (Case and Haines, 2015), ultimately taking an abolitionist approach to the criminalisation of children (Case and Haines, 2020). CFOS is particularly interesting because in centring the child in need, it also seeks to acknowledge children's agency, emphasising children as 'capable of experiencing, interpreting, negotiating, resisting and constructing forces and influences in their social and personal worlds' (Case and Haines, 2015: 164). In doing so, CFOS offers the prospect of resisting the connotations of passivity that often accompany stereotypes of victimhood, including renderings of the child in conflict with the law as a victim of social disadvantage.

[52] While Taylor's (2016) review of the YJS in England and Wales advocates for a 'new system in which children are treated as children first and offenders second' (Taylor, 2016: 48), these recommendations were largely ignored in the government response to the report (Ministry of Justice, 2016; Case and Haines, 2020). While Taylor was subsequently appointed chair of the YJB (from 2017-2020), and while the YJB's current strategic plan describes CFOS as a guiding principle (Youth Justice Board for England and Wales, 2019: 3) the extent to which CFOS will change practice still remains to be seen. CFOS has found readier acceptance in the Welsh context (Drakeford, 2010).

imagining new responses to children in conflict with the law, calling for the YJS to reconceptualise county lines-involved children as victims rather than as criminals (The Children's Society, Victim Support and National Police Chiefs' Council, 2018; Youth Justice Legal Centre, 2018; HM Government, 2018; The Children's Society, 2019; Coffey, 2019; Ministry of Justice, 2019). On the surface at least, CCE discourse is not just about recognising victimisation as a cause of offending, rather it is about seeing exploited victims where we once saw offenders. This is potentially a significant break with the punitive turn that has dominated the English youth justice landscape since New Labour. Accordingly, it is important to examine whether the rise of CCE as a policy issue is expanding the space for the recognition of victimhood within YJS.

As emphasised in the introduction to this section, while the prevailing ethos of the YJS provides important context for prospects of victim identification among children affected by CCE, it is also important to consider the ways in which practitioners, and children themselves, interact with these overarching climates. This is particularly important because, at present, the YJS is characterised by high levels of localism (Phoenix, 2016; Case *et al.*, 2020; Marshall, Harvey and Lanskey, 2020), and national-level policies are subject to a variety of local interpretations (Goldson and Muncie, 2006), with practitioners able to 'resist, subvert, challenge or accommodate' (Phoenix, 2009: 86) guidance for practice. Furthermore, children themselves are not the passive recipients of YOS work, but can resist, comply with, or embrace interventions, and bring their own perspectives on their needs and actions to the table (Kemshall, 2008). As Phoenix (2016) points out, at present there is a lack of empirical research into youth justice practice itself[53], meaning that the actions and experiences of children and practitioners often elude description and definition. Accordingly, in examining processes of victim identification, this thesis will engage with the ways in which practitioners and children interact with the organisational contexts of Stonewell YOS and the wider YJS, and broader sociostructural contexts within which they exist.

2.6 Conclusion and Research Questions

To summarise, while it is clear that as 'deviant victims', potential victims of CCE face an uncertain path towards victim identification, there is a significant gap in the research literature regarding the processes by which young people identify, and are identified, as CCE victims. This oversight is the result of a gap in the wider field of victimology, which has not

[53] For useful exceptions see: Wigzell (2020) and Marshall, Harvey and Lanskey (2020).

yet headed calls for an understanding of the micro-level processes through which victimhood is produced, one which offers a holistic and joined-up assessment of the roles played by both potential victims and those with the power to attribute or withhold victim status – as well as, crucially, the interactions and relationships between these two groups. Another key oversight in this area is the development of an understanding of processes of victim identification in relation to young people. As this review has demonstrated, a tailored approach that accounts for the experiences and perspectives of young people, and the influence of the wider context of the YJS in which processes of CCE victim identification unfold, is required.

This thesis addresses these gaps in the literature through research with young people affected by CCE and the youth justice practitioners working to support them. Accordingly, it is guided by the following overarching research question:

> *How and why do young people involved in county lines drug distribution attain, or fail to attain, the status of CCE victims in the context of the youth justice system?*

In addition, I pursue the following supplementary research questions:

> *What influences youth justice practitioners' processes of identifying young people involved in county lines as victims of CCE?*
>
> *How do the relationships between young people and youth justice practitioners influence whether young people attain the status of CCE victims?*
>
> *Why do young people involved in county lines claim or reject the CCE victim label?*

In the findings sections of this thesis, I offer a detailed examination of three key influences on processes of victim identification in relation to CCE: YOS practitioners' responses to CCE in the context of the YJS, the relationships and interactions between YOS practitioners and potential victims of CCE, and the experiences and perspectives of young people affected by CCE themselves. Before proceeding with these findings, I will first provide details of the methodological approach of this research.

3 Methodology

3.1 Introduction

> Dear Mr or Ms Grad Student, I am sorry to report that I will not participate in your study as a data point. I don't understand what you're trying to accomplish. I don't trust you. I don't like you. I don't care if you succeed. In fact, I kind of think you suck. (Anne Tagonist, 'Fuck You and Fuck Your Fucking Thesis', 2009).

> No need to hear your voice when I can talk about you better than you can speak about yourself. No need to hear your voice. Only tell me about your pain. I want to know your story. And then I will tell it back to you in a new way. Tell it back to you in such a way that it has become mine, my own. Re-writing you I write myself anew. I am still author, authority. (hooks, 1990: 343).

Before I began this PhD, uncomfortable encounters with the two texts quoted above, the first in a graduate seminar, the second in a meeting of a feminist campaigning group, provided powerful reminders that, unless approached collaboratively, responsively, and sensitively, involvement in research can become a stifling, frustrating and harmful experience for participants, particularly for those who already experience marginalisation. These two texts sparked a commitment to a deeper interrogation of both my own power and positionalities as a researcher, and of what it means to do meaningfully ethical research, particularly with young people affected by CCE who are often described as 'vulnerable' and 'marginalised'. This is not a linear narrative of ethical awakening with me as the protagonist. Rather, the development of a methodology for this thesis has been a disquieting, spiky, ongoing, and collaborative process.

In the first section of this chapter, I argue for the rejection of the attribution of the 'vulnerable' label, and its paternalistic overtones, to specific groups of research participants, in favour of cultivating a caring and collaborative response to vulnerability as a universal, dynamic, and valuable quality. I also reflect on the need to examine positionalities and dynamics of power within the research context, and to engage in practices of reflexivity. These initial reflections on vulnerability and reflexivity are then woven into my discussion of the substantive methods of this study.

3.2 Re-framing Vulnerability, Resisting Damage

In working with young people affected by CCE, this research involved participants classified as 'particularly vulnerable' by both the university and local authority council ethics bodies

that granted approval for the project. This existence of such a classification indicates a need for a substantive engagement with how to best support such participants. The primary focus of my exploration of 'vulnerability' during this research has been the extent to which the term 'vulnerable' meaningfully serves the people it is used to describe in research contexts. The term can connote 'fragility, defencelessness and deficiency, framing those who are defined as vulnerable as being different or "other"' (Brown, 2017: 3). As a result of its potential to mark certain individuals with connotations of weakness and passivity, in ways that are paternalistic at best and oppressive at worst (Brown 2011; 2012; 2019; Booth and Harriott, 2021), the labelling of research participants as 'vulnerable' can perpetuate 'othering'. Othering refers to processes of 'attaching moral codes of inferiority to difference' (Krumer-Nevo and Sidi, 2012: 300) and in doing so, depriving the person considered 'other' of 'visibility, uniqueness, subjectivity, voice and knowledge' (Krumer-Nevo, 2016: 186).

Yet, while the deficit-orientated nature of the label 'vulnerable' risks othering research participants, this does not negate the researcher's responsibility to be attentive to the needs that informed the use of this label in the first place. For example, the discussion of exploitation in a research context carries a risk of re-traumatisation for those affected (Witkin and Robjant, 2018). I wanted to minimise this risk and to ensure that participants were properly supported throughout the research. Accordingly, my question became: how can researchers respond to participants' needs, and practice care for participants, without perpetuating the paternalism and othering that often stems from the label 'vulnerable'?

To address this question, I first looked towards the concept of 'universal vulnerability' which, rather than labelling specific groups as 'vulnerable', re-frames vulnerability as 'a fundamental feature of the human condition, biologically imperative and permanent' yet also shifting and changing in relation to 'the personal, economic, social and cultural circumstances within which individuals find themselves at different points in their lives' (Brown, Ecclestone and Emmel, 2017: 498). Theorists who espouse the universal model of vulnerability (Fineman, 2008; Fineman and Grear, 2013; Mackenzie, 2013) emphasise that vulnerability is an essential characteristic of all human beings, but, as Cole (2016) helpfully clarifies, we each exist in different positions along a spectrum of vulnerability, and these positions may shift and change over time, according to our circumstances and the wider social contexts in which we exist.

An understanding of vulnerability as a universal and dynamic quality invites an approach that asks what individual participants *need* in any given context rather than making reductive, and often stigmatising, assumptions about what they *are* or *are not.* This research conceptualised vulnerability in these terms and took steps to identify and respond to the needs of each participant as they unfolded within the context of the research. This required an approach that was iterative, responsive, and flexible. Accordingly, I took inspiration from the 'living ethical protocol' developed by Hynes *et al.* (2018), reflecting on and discussing participants' needs with them throughout the life of the project. This re-framing of vulnerability also enabled me to take a more holistically ethical approach, encouraging a focus on, and responses to, not just the needs of the youth participants, but also those of the youth justice practitioners, and my own needs and vulnerabilities as a researcher. I explore what this approach looked like in practice in more detail in Section 3.8.3 of this chapter.

An additional component of this re-framing of vulnerability is a move away from exclusively negative conceptualisations of the concept. This move forms part of a wider resistance to what Tuck (2009) describes as 'damage-centred' research. Research that is 'damage-centred' equates particular individuals or communities solely to their experiences of pain, deprivation, and oppression, in ways which are both reductive and harmful. This approach is captured by the critique from hooks at the beginning of this chapter: 'No need to hear your voice. Only tell me about your pain' (hooks, 1990: 343). Deficit-orientated interpretations that equate vulnerability with weakness play into such portrayals, bringing perceptions of the group labelled 'vulnerable' as damaged and lacking to the centre. Re-framings of the term 'vulnerability' offer a challenge to this. Cunniff Gilson's (2016) work dismantles the coupling of 'vulnerability' with passivity and dependence and of 'invulnerability' with agency and self-sufficiency. Cunniff Gilson recognises, and indeed celebrates, vulnerability and the capacity to affect and be affected by others as key components of agency. This approach provides a new lens through which to consider aspects of participants' lives and experiences that might otherwise be viewed only in terms of deficit or weakness.

In addition to this re-framing, I also wanted to follow Tuck (2009) and Tuck and Yang (2010) in resisting research that focuses exclusively on participants' pain. While this research is about processes of rejecting, accepting, bestowing, withholding, and negotiating victimhood, it is not a study of the pain of victimisation – but rather of participants' active engagement with the concept of victimhood, as situated within their broader narratives and contexts. This is demonstrated by the approach of the three findings chapters, particularly the third which

focuses on young people's experiences and views. In this chapter, where space allows, I have provided introductions to each of the young people which I hope provide the reader with a sense of their lives and personalities outside their experiences of CCE.

Finally, research that looks only at participants' vulnerabilities, or which conceptualises vulnerability as exclusively negative, risks reducing participants to passive objects in need of protection rather than respecting their agency, voices, and views. As part of my research approach, one which values the strengths and capacity to contribute of all research participants, including those who might be considered vulnerable, I also worked to create opportunities for participants to act as collaborative partners in the research wherever possible. The challenges and benefits of this in practice, in the context of this research, are discussed in detail in Section 3.8.3.1.

3.3 The Role of Reflexivity

The two quotes that begin this chapter demonstrate the authors' clear frustrations with research in which the researcher positions herself as an objective, neutral authority with unquestioned power to collect and disseminate participants' experiences as she wishes. Examining and challenging such a dynamic, or 'power gradient', are matters of methodological rigour and meaningful ethical practice.

With regards to methodological rigour, as Holstein and Gubrium (2011: 150) remind us, interviews and observations are 'interactional accomplishments rather than neutral communicative grounds'. Research is a 'process not just a product' (England, 1994: 82) and the researcher herself inescapably shapes this process. Accordingly, it is critical to challenge the fallacy of the neutral and objective researcher, and to examine the impact of the positionalities of participants and researchers, and the interactions between them, on findings that are produced through qualitative research.

With regards to meaningful ethical practice, there is now a substantial body of literature that makes very well-founded ethical objections to extractive research that hierarchises researchers above participants, as opposed to acknowledging and embracing the co-creation of knowledge between them (Hesse-Biber and Piatelli, 2012; Lumsden and Winter, 2014; Booth and Harriott, 2021). As this literature demonstrates, challenging the power gradient between researcher and participant where possible should form part of the ethical responsibilities that all researchers commit to.

Reflexivity is a practice that goes some way towards addressing these concerns by providing the opportunity for 'the self-conscious analytical scrutiny of the self as researcher' (England, 1994: 82). Fine (1994) characterises this process as 'working the hyphen' between the self and other: referring to practices in which 'researchers probe how we are in relation with the contexts we study and with our informants' (Fine, 1994: 72). Reflexive approaches create space to examine how the production of knowledge is 'affected by the social conditions under which it is produced and [how] it is grounded in both the social location and the social biography' (Mann and Kelley, 1997: 392) of the researcher and the research participant. In the case of this research, as discussed in further detail in Section 3.8.3, this involved examining my positionalities as a young, white, middle-class British woman, in relation to the positionalities of participants, our interactions during the research, and my potential impact as a researcher through the use of fieldnotes and analytical memos (discussed in more detail in Section 3.9).

When considering how reflexivity operates throughout the research process it is important not to treat 'reflexivity' as a panacea for the complexity, discomfort and challenge that is created by our awareness of researcher and participant positionalities and dynamics of power. Writing on white researchers' use of 'declarations' and reflections on their whiteness, Ahmed (2004) critiques the 'fantasy of transcendence': the tendency to work as though simply stating our positionalities absolves us of the need to fully engage with their impact on our research. Ahmed's critique applies to all aspects of the researcher's positionalities, not just race, and reminds us of the importance of 'staying implicated' in the dynamics of power and privilege that we critique (Ahmed, 2004: 59). Accordingly, my aim in this research is to examine the ways in which positionalities and power have shaped this research, acknowledging that these influences are impossible to erase.

3.4 Theoretical Orientations

3.4.1 Critical Realism

In terms of its theoretical orientation, this piece of research will follow a critical realist approach. Originating from the work of Roy Bhaskar (1978; 1998), critical realist approaches sit in-between positivist and constructivist approaches, simultaneously recognising both the existence of a reality independent of human knowledge, and the socially-embedded and influenced nature of human knowledge about this reality (Cruickshank, 2003; Clark, 2012). Furthermore, critical realism recognises and emphasises the potential for research to affect positive social change (Clark, 2012: 4). In relation to this research, a critical realist theoretical

orientation recognises both that young people experience exploitation in the context of county lines drug networks, in ways that we can understand and address, and that the ways in which this exploitation is defined, recognised, responded to, and talked about are influenced by the social world.

3.4.2 Critical Realist Relational Sociology

As demonstrated in the literature review, current research in victimology is limited by its failure to embrace a relational approach to processes of victim identification, and relational approaches have particular relevance to the identification of young people as victims of CCE. Relational sociology is an emerging theoretical framing that can support the development of relational approaches to understanding processes of victim identification. The aim of relational sociology is to 'depict social reality instead in dynamic, continuous, and processual terms' (Emirbayer, 1997: 281), and the framework explicitly centres relations as its main object of interest (Dépelteau, 2018). This kind of conceptual lens is well-suited for excavating the ways in which processes of victim identification are inherently relational – influenced by the interactions between the potential victim and those with the power to assign victim status. By inviting us to look at any social object, and therefore at victimhood, in relational terms (Donati, 2010), relational sociology opens up the possibility of exploring these dynamics further.

The 'critical realist relational sociology' developed by Donati (2010; 2015) provides a particularly useful conceptual lens for the study of the emergence of victimhood for two reasons. Firstly, Donati's work offers a flexible approach that is applicable to a broad range of social processes, emphasising that any sociological object can, and indeed should, be explored in terms of relations (Donati, 2010: 12). In essence, Donati's framework of relational sociology simply asks us to take relations as a central focus of sociological analysis and reflection (Donati, 2010: 3), and to explore the ways in which relations have their own 'solidity' and 'concrete reality' (Donati, 2010: 6, 19) meaning that they can have a significant impact (Weaver, 2015), for example on processes of victim identification.

In addition, Donati's critical realist relational sociology offers a holistic approach, engaging with both structure and agency. Donati (2010) emphasises the dialectical relationships between personal and social identity and the relationships between entities at multiple levels stating that 'relations…reflect the performance of an emergent reality between two or more people, groups, and even institutions' (Donati, 2010: 17). Donati (2010: 43) is clear that 'the

relation does not eliminate the terms which it connects; instead it reclaims, explores and expresses them', providing the researcher with licence to consider the role of individuals, relations, and structures in the emergence of victimhood. This is important because it creates space for a relational approach to the emergence of victimhood that is cognisant of both the micro-level interactions and relationships between individuals, and the ways in which the social contexts and individuals themselves inform and infuse these[54].

To examine relationships empirically, I draw inspiration from existing applications of Donati's approach to topics of criminological interest. Weaver's (2015) and Weaver and Fraser's (2021) work makes use of Donati's relational sociology to examine the relational dynamics of group offending and desistance. Drawing on Weaver's (2015) study, which used in-depth interviews, and Weaver and Fraser's (2021) study, which used ethnographic observations, I use a combination of interviews to explore relationships from the perspectives of all those involved, and observations in order to observe these relationships playing out in practice. The application of Donati's approach to relational sociology enables Weaver and Fraser to consider the individuals participating in the research as 'individuals-in-relation' and to consider the impact of their experiences in 'relationally and emotionally textured worlds' (Weaver, 2015: 47), thereby shedding light on previously under-explored facets of offending and desistance. Donati's framing offers the same prospects for the study of the emergence of victimhood, one which resonates strongly with critical victimologists' calls for a greater understanding of the interactional processes through which individuals emerge, or fail to emerge as victims (Holstein and Miller, 1990; Rock, 2002).

3.5 Critical Realist Grounded Theory

This research also draws on critical realist grounded theory (CRGT). Grounded theory (GT) is a research method that offers flexible guidelines (Charmaz, 2014: 16) that allow the researcher to explore the ideas, concepts and patterns that emerge from the data – as opposed to using a pre-determined hypothesis to guide analysis (Birks and Mills, 2011; Charmaz,

[54] Another plausible approach for this research would have been the use of 'symbolic interactionism' (SI) as a theoretical orientation, particularly as this lens is popular with both proponents of grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014) and researchers within critical victimology (For example, Rock, 1979; Holstein and Miller, 1990 and Dunn, 2001). While SI's focus on the social construction of the self is insightful and informative, I have chosen not to use SI as a framing for this study for two reasons. Firstly, SI's 'belief that there is no single objective reality' (Polk, 2018: 1742) means that it lacks the same capacity for grounding research findings in implications for policy and practice, as is offered by critical realism. Secondly, SI has been criticised for being insufficiently attentive to influences that are important in understanding victim identification within this research, including socioeconomic structures, organisational and institutional contexts (Ritzer, 1992), and our emotional lives (Polk, 2018). In contrast, critical realist relational sociology foregrounds the synthesis of the macro and the micro level.

2014). GT was a valid approach for this study due to the lack of existing research on CCE and county lines, particularly as it relates to questions around victimhood. The lack of existing literature means that this research is exploratory in nature, and GT enables the researcher to follow an exploratory process, one which is open to a range of possible insights (Hussein *et al.*, 2014), and which follows leads as they emerge (Charmaz, 2014: 25).

Critical realist grounded theory is a specific interpretation of GT which navigates a midway path between objectivist GT's belief in the possibility of an 'objective' and 'neutral' research process and constructivist GT's commitment to relativism (Charmaz, 2014: 236). CRGT is committed to the idea that:

> We [researchers] construct research processes and products, but these constructions occur under pre-existing structural conditions, arise in emergent situations and are influenced by the researcher's perspectives, privileges, positions, interactions and geographical locations. (Charmaz, 2009: 130 quoted in Oliver, 2012: 337).

CRGT is consistent with the broader critical realist theoretical orientation of this research, and with its methodological approach. In providing 'contextualised explanations' (Oliver, 2012: 383), CRGT reaches towards analyses that enable us to 'see the world from a different vantage point and create new meanings of it' (Charmaz, 2014: 233), and in doing so, create opportunities for transformation and change (Oliver, 2012), while remaining conscious of our own positionalities.

In line with CRGT, I also depart from the assertion in classic grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) that engagement with the literature should be delayed until after the analysis is complete in order to prevent previous research from unduly influencing the researcher's analytical process (Charmaz, 2014: 306). This shift is the result of the recognition that researchers inescapably arrive at the analysis with a degree of familiarity with the relevant literature (Thornberg, 2012; Charmaz, 2014). As an approach, CRGT aligns with this recognition advocating for researchers' acknowledgement of their theoretical points of departure (Oliver, 2012: 380). Accordingly, I read and reflected on relevant literatures, including CCE, county lines, victimology, and youth justice, throughout the research design, data collection, analysis and write-up. I have outlined the additional ways in which I have implemented CRGT in the study in detail the sections on sampling (Section 3.8.1.1) and analysis (Section 3.9) below.

3.6 Measuring Quality

Researchers have an ethical responsibility to produce high quality research (Mason, 2018: 114). As such, it is important to be clear about what we mean by 'quality'. There is a general consensus that measures of quality established in the tradition of quantitative research, namely - reliability, validity and generalisability - do not always translate well to qualitative research, and that while the broad principles that they convey are valuable, the use of criteria tailored to the qualitative method employed is more meaningful and appropriate (Flick, 2012; Mason, 2018). Notwithstanding this call for specificity, there is also a consensus that transparency and reflexivity are a key cornerstone of quality across qualitative research (Seale, 1999; Flick, 2012; Mason, 2018).

I will draw on measures of quality developed for the grounded theory approach used in this study. While little guidance on quality criteria has been written specifically for CRGT, Birks and Mills (2011) provide a useful synthesis of the work of key thinkers on quality across a variety of interpretations of grounded theory, identifying three comprehensive criteria: researcher expertise, methodological congruence, and procedural precision (Birks and Mills, 2011: 34). These factors are clearly attentive to issues of reliability, validity, and reflexivity. Methodological congruence focuses on the fit between chosen methodology, methods, and research aims. Procedural precision emphasises evidencing and reflexively examining the research process, including the demonstration of researcher expertise through one's rigorous application of grounded theory as a method and its key features. These features include theoretical sampling and saturation, the production of rich data, a detailed and multi-stage coding process, the use of analytical memos[55], and the development of a more general theory grounded in empirical data[56] (Birks and Mills, 2011; Charmaz, 2014). Throughout the following sections, I demonstrate my adherence to these principles of quality, and provide a summary at the end of the chapter.

3.7 Choosing the YOS and Negotiating Access

I chose to work with a YOS to explore the central questions of this thesis because the YOS plays a key role in responding to young people affected by CCE. This is the case for several

[55] Analytical memos are short pieces of writing used in GT to help researchers to reflect on their processes of analysis (Charmaz, 2014: 343)

[56] Research within contemporary grounded theory prioritises 'transferability' - the extent to which findings could be applied to other contexts, demonstrated through the production of theory - and the assessment of theoretical saturation, over assessing external and internal generalisability in numeric, quantifiable terms (Charmaz and Thornberg, 2021).

reasons. Firstly, because young people are often identified as being affected by CCE only when they come into conflict with the law. Based on interviews with 22 local authority practitioners, The Children's Society (2019: 6) found that young people affected by CCE often 'come to attention of statutory agencies when exploitation is already present in their lives…typically, in these instances practitioners report that law enforcement takes precedence over safeguarding responses', meaning that young people end up under YOS supervision. Accordingly, the YJS represents a key organisational context in which processes of victim identification are likely to arise and then subsequently succeed or fail. Furthermore, while multiple actors within the YJS, including police, court practitioners, lawyers, and YOS practitioners, may be involved in processes of CCE victim identification, only YOS practitioners carry out work with young people over an extended period of time as a result of their role in supervising young people on a range of youth orders[57]. Due to the greater level of contact that they have with young people, it is important to explore the influence that YOS practitioners have over young people's trajectories in relation to CCE.

I worked in partnership with Stonewell[58] YOS, which covers a relatively large[59] English county containing both urban and rural areas, as well as areas of affluence and deprivation – with high levels of inequality in the county as a whole. In the south of the county, rates of poverty were similar to the UK average of 22%. However, rates in the north of the county were significantly higher (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2022). From the early 2010s onwards, inequality and deprivation for young people in Stonewell had been further exacerbated by the austerity policies of the Coalition and subsequent Conservative governments, which had seen cuts to youth services, including youth centres and youth workers, of more than 80% across the county. In addition, the wider region of which Stonewell is a part had seen cuts of roughly 20% to children's and young people's services as a whole, between 2010/11 and 2018/19, with a particularly negative impact on early intervention services (Action for Children *et al.*, 2020).

Stonewell YOS was divided into four Youth Offending Teams (YOTs) each covering a different geographic area of the county. In its last inspection the YOS had been assessed as

[57] Referral Orders for young people will involve a supervision period of between three months and one year, while supervision under a Youth Rehabilitation Order can last for up to three years. In some cases, for example for young people subject to intensive supervision and surveillance, supervisory contact will be daily. See Sentencing Council (2017) for more details.
[58] To ensure participant confidentiality, all names, including place names, team names, and names of individuals used within this thesis are pseudonyms. All participants were invited to choose their own pseudonyms.
[59] Both in terms of population and geographic area.

performing well across all national indictors and had received a mixture of 'good' and 'satisfactory' ratings. I selected Stonewell YOS for several reasons. Firstly, as the majority of existing research into CCE in the context of county lines has focused on a few specific urban areas[60], predominantly London (Windle and Briggs, 2015; Hudek, 2019; Harding, 2020) and Glasgow (McLean, Robinson and Densley, 2019), I felt that it was important to examine the issue in the context of a county that had not yet received any research attention relating to CCE or county lines. Secondly, Stonewell YOS already placed a strong emphasis on CCE as an issue, in that it had recently set up a dedicated eight person YOS 'CCE team' within the YOS[61], in addition to working closely with a dedicated 'CCE police team'[62] within Stonewell's police force. Accordingly, it was likely that I would be able to involve practitioners and young people with experience relating to CCE and county lines. In addition, my PhD supervisor had an existing contact within Stonewell YOS and was able to facilitate an introductory meeting with the head of service, which assisted with securing research access.

After an initial meeting with the head of service, I applied to Stonewell County Council for research ethics approval and applied for an enhanced DBS check as required by the Council for work involving children. After several months, both of these approvals were granted and in September 2019 I was able to attend a Stonewell YOS 'away day' to present my research proposal to YOS practitioners. I followed up these initial introductions with a visit to the team meetings of each of the four local area teams and the YOS CCE team[63]. These meetings were also invaluable in getting to know practitioners, establishing rapport, and ensuring that practitioners were comfortable with the nature of the research. This was particularly

[60] Research on adult experiences of criminal exploitation in contexts of drug distribution has covered a wider geographical area, for example: Moyle (2019).

[61] The YOS CCE team was a voluntary support service available to young people at significant or moderate risk of CCE. Young people were allocated a support worker who could deliver a variety of interventions depending on the young person's needs and interests. Intervention work could include safety planning, supporting young people to access resources such as education and employment, raising young people's awareness of exploitation, and general mentorship and emotional support. CCE team practitioners worked alongside a young person's existing YOS officer.

[62] The CCE police team had a number of functions. In relation to individual children, officers conducted 'Police Prevention Interviews' with children affected by CCE who had been missing, in order to gather information and to provide opportunities for young people to disclose offending by or against them. Officers also attended YOS risk meetings for relevant young people, as well as referral meetings for the YOS CCE team, in which they would contribute any relevant information from police databases. At a local authority level, the team was responsible for analysing data on CCE in order to detect patterns that indicated particular concerns and risks, and would share this with the YOS (Stonewell Local Authority Safeguarding Partnership, 2020).

[63] In these meetings, we were able to discuss the research, talk through any questions or concerns in a more relaxed small group setting, and agree a plan for the data collection. Most of the questions that arose in these settings related to the logistics of the research, as well as further clarification of the focus and aims of the project.

important as YOS practitioners were the gatekeepers through whom I recruited young people. Research from Powell *et al*. (2019) that surveyed stakeholder groups involved in making decisions about access to young people as research participants found that sound, trusting relationships between researchers and gatekeepers were a key component of achieving access. Accordingly, it was important to develop relationships in which practitioners trusted me to work with the young people in their care.

3.8 Methods: Interviews and Observations

This research used a combination of semi-structured interviews with youth justice practitioners and with young people affected by CCE and observations of YOS activities relating to CCE. Semi-structured interviews allowed for a detailed discussion and dialogue on issues relating to CCE, county lines and victimhood. Yeo *et al*. (2014: 183-4) emphasise that the value of in-depth interviewing lies in its capacity to offer flexibility, interactivity, depth, and opportunities for detailed analysis. Particularly as this was an exploratory study, semi-structured interviews enabled me to follow lines of enquiry that emerged through discussions and that were not previously apparent, and to probe and clarify participants' comments. Furthermore, the interactive nature of the interview resonated with the collaborative ethos of this research, enabling me to be led by participants' insights. Finally, the audio-recording and detailed notetaking of interviews enabled me to conduct close analysis of the language used by participants to express their thoughts on CCE and victimhood (Yeo *et al*., 2014: 184), which assisted in grounding the analysis in the empirical data.

I supplemented the interviews with observations of YOS activities relating to CCE. McNaughton Nicholls *et al*. (2014: 245) state that observations allow the researcher to 'observe systematically and record…interactions, processes and behaviours' and are particularly useful in studying complex processes, such as victim identification, which it may be difficult for participants to describe fully in interviews. Observations of a variety of YOS activities (discussed in more detail below) enabled me to observe how processes of victim identification played out in practice. The observations also served as a useful method of triangulation, enabling me to test out comments made in interviews (McNaughton Nicholls *et al*., 2014: 250) and thereby improve the clarity and validity of the data (Lewis *et al.*, 2014).

3.8.1 Sampling and Recruitment

3.8.1.1 Grounded theory and sampling

The following sections outline the sampling criteria and recruitment process for this research. Following a grounded theory approach, the sampling proceeded in two phases: initial purposive sampling, which involves the recruitment of participants interested in the study who meet the sampling criteria (Morse, 2012), followed by theoretical sampling, which involves 'seeking and collecting pertinent data to elaborate and refine categories' that are emerging from the data (Charmaz, 2014: 192). Following the initial purposive sampling phase, I transcribed and coded the data, producing analytical memos to keep track of emerging theoretical ideas. I then sought to further examine the ideas that emerged from my initial analyses through further empirical enquiry in the form of the second phase of theoretical sampling. In this phase, I conducted follow-up interviews and interviews with additional participants to further elaborate the study's emerging themes regarding victim identification.

This research avoided the use of probability sampling for two reasons. Firstly, non-probability sampling, particularly in the form of theoretical sampling, is a key component of grounded theory, enabling the researcher to saturate and verify emerging categories within the data (Morse, 2012: 237). Secondly, with regards to the young people, the challenges associated with recruitment, discussed in more detail in Section 3.8.1.4, meant that it was unlikely that probability sampling would generate sufficient participants in the time available. Accordingly, despite the limits to empirical generalisability associated with non-probability sampling, this approach was the most suitable for this project both in terms of feasibility and in terms of facilitating a rich and in-depth understanding of participants' experiences in the context of a grounded theory-based explorative study.

A grounded theory approach involves continuing data collection until one reaches 'theoretical saturation' (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). Following Charmaz (2008: 167), I define theoretical saturation as follows: 'when gathering more data sheds no further light on the properties of [theoretical categories]'. Saturation is tied to the richness of the data rather than to its quantity (Morse, 1995). Throughout the data collection, the transcribing, coding, and theoretical sampling processes, as well as the use of analytical memos, enabled me to explore a wide range of variations in the data and to fully explore the emerging categories.

Reaching theoretical saturation is not a mechanical process or an exact science. As a result, it is more useful to think of saturation as 'a matter of degree, rather than something either attained or unattained' (Saunders *et al*., 2018: 1904). There is no formula for making assessments regarding degrees of saturation. Morse (2015: 588) places the emphasis on the researcher's sense of 'knowing' or 'getting inside their data'. Charmaz (2014: 214) offers a little more specificity, recommending that the researcher reflects on a variety of questions including what comparisons they might make within and between categories, and where these lead them in terms of illuminating the theoretical categories and their conceptual relationships. Following this guidance, and in discussion with my supervisors, I was able to judge that I had reached an adequate degree (Saunders *et al.*, 2018) of theoretical saturation in the context of this research.

Here it is useful to provide a concrete example of how this process worked in practice. One of the categories that I will discuss in the third findings chapter is 'claiming victim status' among young people. Through the initial process of sampling, coding and memoing, I identified two primary variations in this category: claiming in a crisis and claiming in retrospect. I explored these variations in detail through an iterative process of further examining the data, conducting additional interviews and observations in the theoretical sampling phase, and conducting additional coding and memoing. Through these processes, I reflected on the different meanings of 'crisis' for children, considering other possible variations within the claiming category, for example cases in which children claimed victim status immediately rather than retrospectively, but not in the context of a crisis, and reflecting on the relationships between these different types of claiming as well as between claiming and rejecting victim status. I concluded that I had reached an adequate degree of theoretical saturation as I felt the continuation of the data collection process was not providing any meaningful further illumination of variations in the 'claiming victimhood' category.

3.8.1.2 Youth justice practitioners

The sampling criteria for practitioners required that they had experience of working directly on, or managing, cases at Stonewell YOS in which a young person was affected by CCE. In order to recruit practitioners, I took a sign-up sheet to the introductory meetings that I attended with each of the four area teams, and the YOS CCE team, and asked practitioners to pass on their name and email address if they were interested in taking part in a research interview. I then followed up with each practitioner by email in order to arrange a time to

meet. This approach resulted a near total sample of YOS officers, managers and CCE team practitioners at Stonewell YOS[64].

For the theoretical sample, I conducted interviews with additional practitioners with whom it was clear, through the first round of interviewing, coding, and memoing, it would be useful for me to speak. I also completed follow-up interviews with four practitioners from the initial sample[65], whose comments had been particularly insightful and from whom I wanted to seek further clarification. This resulted in the following final sample:

[64] Two YOS managers declined to participate on the basis of lack of time and availability. Three YOS officers declined, one who was about to go on maternity leave and two who felt they had not had enough experience to feel confident in discussing CCE-related issues. All members of the YOS CCE team participated.
[65] One YOS manager, one YOS officer and two practitioners from the YOS CCE team.

Final sample of youth justice practitioners

Practitioner Category	**Number of participants**
Initial Sample	
YOS managers	5
YOS officers	19
YOS CCE team[66] [67]	8
YOS-seconded police officers	3
YOS Intensive Supervision and Surveillance (ISS) officers	2
YOS accommodation officers	1
YOS Education Training and Employment (ETE) officers	2
Initial sample total	*40*
Theoretical sample	
CCE police team[68]	6
Local area police officers[69]	3
County Council safeguarding lead	1
Theoretical sample total	*10*
Total practitioner sample	**50**

3.8.1.3 Observations

Through the practitioner interviews I also sought access to activities that I could observe. I asked practitioners if I could accompany them to any activities that might be relevant to my understanding of CCE. Through this approach I was able to complete just over 100 hours of participant observation over 43 days[70]. These activities included: CCE team meetings (one),

[66] Members of the YOS CCE team had a range of practitioner backgrounds prior to joining. Alana, Aaron and Maddison had held roles in the YOS; Karo, Laura and Chantel had worked in non-statutory youth support roles; Kerri had been a children's practitioner; and Cassie had been a teacher working with children excluded from mainstream school.

[67] The YOS CCE team was established in October 2019, coinciding with the beginning of my fieldwork. Accordingly, I prioritised other interviews first to give the team time to gain experience in their roles.

[68] Officers working in the CCE police team had completed a variety of other roles in the police before joining. The majority had experience working in other specialist police teams primarily for rape or child sexual abuse.

[69] These three officers were recommended by YOS practitioners as they had worked closely with the YOS on CCE cases.

[70] These 43 days were spaced out over the course of 18 months, in part due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, which is discussed in more detail in Section 3.8.3.2.

referral meetings for the CCE team (12), CCE team-led workshops[71] (four), YOS-led risk meetings for young people affected by CCE (seven), YOS team meetings (eight) and away days (two) where CCE and county lines were discussed, and YOS supervision sessions for young people who participated in the interviews (two), as well as informal time spent discussing CCE with YOS practitioners in the office, on lunch breaks and while travelling to/from meetings[72].

3.8.1.4 Young people

For the young people, the sampling criteria was as follows:

- Under 18[73] at the time of the research,
- Living in Stonewell[74],
- Under the supervision of Stonewell YOS,
- YOS or police intelligence to suggest young people's involvement in county lines drug distribution
  and/or
- assessed as being at emerging, moderate, or significant risk of harm from CCE relating to county lines drug distribution, as determined using the YOS's CCE risk assessment tool[75].

The challenges of recruiting research participants who are involved in drug dealing, or who have experienced exploitation (let alone a combination of the two), are well-documented

[71] CCE team-led workshops were run by the YOS CCE team or a trained affiliate. They were attended by young people affected by CCE, who had been referred by their school, their social worker, or their local youth group. The workshops explored the issue of CCE and encouraged young people to share their views on the topic.
[72] As much of the YOS's work does not relate to CCE, I found it more fruitful to attend specific relevant meetings, trainings, and other activities than to embed myself in the YOS full-time. This approach also meant that I could devote more time to other labour-intensive components of the fieldwork such as the recruitment of young people.
[73] One participant turned 18 during the course of the research but was included as he remained under the supervision of the YOS.
[74] Early in the research process I did explore the possibility of including children who travelled into Stonewell from other local authority areas as part of their involvement in county lines. However, because 'out of area' children came into Stonewell from such a large number of different local authority areas it was not logistically feasible to gain the relevant ethical approvals from each of these areas in order to facilitate this approach within the scope of this PhD.
[75] In practice, the YOS made little distinction between these two categories, and in general perceived all children involved in county lines drug dealing as being potentially at risk of harm from CCE. The YOS's CCE risk assessment tool covered the typical predictors of CCE risk documented in the research literature: education status, accommodation status and substance use, as well as recording information about missing episodes, contact with locations or persons of concern, and the nature of the offences committed by the young person. During the fieldwork, I did not encounter practitioners using the CCE risk assessment tool to make determinations about whether or not young people were CCE victims. Rather it provided an initial assessment used to help practitioners to think about whether a young person might be a potential target for exploitation.

(Bosworth *et al*., 2011; Windle and Briggs, 2015; Moyle, 2019), and the recruitment of young people to this study was a lengthy process. I implemented a number of steps to facilitate young people's engagement with the research.

Firstly, it was important to think carefully about how to present research into questions around 'victimhood' and 'CCE' to young people who might not describe themselves in those terms. I opted to frame the study more neutrally as research into young people's experiences of involvement in selling drugs. This ensured that I did not exclude young people who did not see themselves as victims of CCE.

I took a gradual approach to engaging young people in the research, focusing on building familiarity and trust. In his research with young people affected by exploitation and abuse, Hackett (2016) finds that during the recruitment and consent seeking process it is important to be mindful of the potential impact of exploitation on young people including: a lack of trust of adults; feeling that saying 'no' is not meaningful; experiences of pressure to meet others' needs even when they are contrary to their own; and feeling that they lack control over what happens to them (Hackett, 2016: 139). In order to be sensitive to these experiences, I took a gentle and gradual approach to the recruitment process (as well as to the consent seeking process - discussed further in Section 3.8.2), to create space for young people to ask questions, reflect on their participation, and opt out at any time.

To begin with, I asked practitioners who participated in the study if they had young people on their caseload who fit the sampling criteria[76]. Once these young people were identified I asked practitioners to introduce the research to the young people without me there, to ensure that my presence did not create any pressure for the young people to participate. I provided an information sheet introducing the research (see appendix) both to guide practitioners during the discussion, and to provide a resource that young people could take away and reflect on. Through practitioners, and through the information sheet, I encouraged young people to think about taking part and to come back to me or to their YOS workers with any

[76] One limitation of this approach was the possibility that practitioners would 'filter' participants, and only suggest young people whom they felt would be suitable – usually those described as 'chatty' or 'open'. As someone who presents as relatively quiet there was also the potential that practitioners would avoid putting me in contact with young people who they thought would be challenging or abrasive. During the process of arranging the interviews, one practitioner commented of two young people: 'if they're not happy they will be very straightforward about that and possibly very rude. How thick is your skin?' (Cassie, YOS CCE team, email communication). I tried to counter this as best as possible by emphasising to practitioners that I wanted to work with young people with a range of outlooks and experiences. I cited my experience working as a volunteer with a local youth outreach charity, and my previous research experience with young people leaving prison, as evidence that I would not be too fazed by any difficult encounters.

questions or to talk further. The process of introducing myself to young people and discussing the possibility of research often lasted several months, allowing plenty of time for questions and for young people to reflect on whether they wanted to take part.

Overall, 34 young people were invited to participate in interviews and 17 declined, giving a final sample of 17 young people[77]. Thirteen young people declined to participate at the first stage, when practitioners introduced the idea of the research. Reasons for this centred around concerns that their anonymity could not be guaranteed, the belief that their comments would be shared with YOS practitioners or police, and a general lack of time and/or interest in the research. Where young people were still interested in taking part after this first stage, I arranged a phone call or in person meeting to discuss the research further and answer any questions[78]. During these meetings we arranged a time for the interview. Four young people initially agreed to participate but subsequently decided not to complete an interview[79]. The final interview sample of 17 young people is comparable with existing qualitative research with young people involved in county lines (for example, Robinson, McLean and Densley, 2019 and Harding, 2020). As with the practitioners, I followed a grounded theory approach. Ten young people made up the initial sample, and seven young people made up the theoretical sample. At the theoretical sampling stage, I also conducted follow-up interviews with two young people from the initial sample.

Young people's reasons for agreeing to take part varied. Young people were offered a £20 shopping voucher[80], to compensate them for taking the time to participate (Liamputtong, 2007), and this was definitely a draw for some: 'I'm going to get some new jeans!'[81] (James). Offering compensation was an important part of showing appreciation for young people's time. I also agreed with YOS managers and officers that young people could count

[77] At the time of the research the YOS did not hold centralised data on the number of young people affected by CCE within its caseload. I sought permission to generate this information by collating CCE assessments, but CCE police team managers that had ownership of the assessments refused permission for this on the basis that a practitioner would have to anonymise assessments before I could collate them, and this would take up too much staff time. However, the CCE team did collect data about its caseload, which I was able to access, and which can serve as a proxy. The CCE team worked with 97 children over the year in which data collection took place. The 17 young people represent 18% of this caseload.

[78] How I arranged meetings varied depending on the young person. Some young people preferred to take my phone number and contact me, others were happy to share their number and for me to contact them, others preferred meetings to be arranged through a practitioner.

[79] Two were struggling with mental health, one was admitted to hospital in relation to a longstanding physical health problem, and one experienced a family breakdown and house move during the course of the research meaning she did not have the capacity to take part.

[80] The value of the shopping voucher was agreed with the YOS in advance to ensure that it would not create undue influence for potential participants.

[81] All participant quotes are from interviews unless otherwise stated.

participation in the research towards their hours of reparation if they wanted to. This was only taken up by one young person – who was struggling to find suitable reparation activities during the first COVID-19 lockdown. Others expressed a desire to participate to raise awareness of CCE and county lines as issues that they felt were being overlooked: 'The people - they should know more than what they do know…I wanted to do this interview. The more people that know the better. Especially if it's going into your research as well'. (Alex); 'I agreed to do the research so you understand more…there's lots of different experiences that people need to see.' (Tony). For others, the 'University of Cambridge' brand sparked their curiosity: 'When I saw University of Cambridge I was like…whoa…I'll come and see' (Kazimir)[82].

The 17 young people who took part in interviews for this research ranged in age from 14-18 years, with a mean age of 16. 16 were male and one was female. Ten were White British, five were White Eastern European, one was Romani and Eastern European and one was Black African/Asian and British. These statistics are similar to nationally observed demographics, which put the average age of children involved in county lines as 15.8 years, and the percentage of females at 9% (NCLCC, 2020). These statistics were also representative of the CCE team's 2020 caseload, which was 90% male with a mean age of 15.3. The ethnic diversity of the interview sample could have been more representative. While NCLCC (2020) did not include data on ethnicity, the makeup of the CCE team's 2020 caseload was 59% White British, 16% White Other – the majority of which were White Eastern European - 23% BAME, and 2% unknown. Overall, the small number of girls and non-white individuals in the sample remains a limitation of this research because it limited the extent to which it was possible to fully and holistically assess the influence of gender and ethnicity on processes of victim identification[83].

Only one of the young people was in mainstream education, ten were in alternative educational provision – either in a pupil referral unit or completing online learning at home -

[82] In this case, the consent process provided a useful space to talk through Kazimir's impressions and perspectives regarding the University of Cambridge, and his expectations of involvement in the research, to ensure that the draw of the University 'brand' was not exerting undue influence on his participation.
[83] Existing research from Havard et al., (2021) with criminal justice and social services professionals in London suggests that there are dimensions of criminal exploitation in the context of county lines that are specific to women and girls, which merit further investigation.

and six were not in any education or training. 12 of the young people lived at home with their families and five were in local authority care[84].

In terms of their involvement with the YOS, ten young people were serving Referral Orders, one was completing community supervision as part of a Detention and Training Order, one a Youth Conditional Caution, one was in contact with the YOS as part of a bail package, and three were completing preventative work with the YOS[85]. The young people's contact with the YOS most commonly related to the following offences: possession of drugs (six) and possession with intent to supply (four), with other offences including robbery and burglary. Nine young people had been assessed by the YOS as being at significant risk of harm from CCE, two had been assessed as moderate risk, and six as emerging risk. Seven of the young people were being supported by a worker from the YOS CCE team in addition to their YOS officer[86]. With the focus of part of this research on interactions between practitioners and young people in mind, I tried my best to recruit dyads of young people and practitioners who had worked together. However, due to the challenges associated with recruiting young people to take part, this was not always possible[87]. Finally, Coomber and Moyle (2018) identify a hierarchy of three supply roles in county lines models of drug distribution: 'top boys', involved in operational oversight from a distance; 'sitters', who manage the dealing operation in the host market, including the distribution of drugs for sale; and 'runners' who complete sales of drugs to users. All of the young people involved in this research are best described as 'runners'[88].

An additional 15 young people participated in the activities – predominantly in CCE team-led workshops - that I observed as part of the fieldwork. There were few opportunities to collect extensive demographic data from these young people, as their participation in the research was limited to their involvement in these activities. However, the group was slightly more diverse than the interview sample: 12 were female and three were male, seven were White British, six were Black British, and two were White Eastern European. The average age was slightly higher than in the interview sample at 16.6 years.

[84] Data on these demographic characteristics was not available from the CCE team at the time of the research.
[85] The three children completing preventative work with the YOS had been referred to YOS prevention workers by their social workers or children's practitioners.
[86] The ten who did not have a YOS CCE team worker had either refused a worker or had not yet been referred.
[87] For example, of the young people discussed by practitioners, I was not able to recruit: Theo, Ryan, Brandon, Bobby, Olivia, Idzi, Tyler, Elijah, Leo, Jamie, Callum, Cameron, Isaac, Milo, Noah, Ben or Kaya. I am keen to explore a more dyadic approach to recruitment in future research.
[88] Future research could usefully explore victim identification for young people in a wider variety of roles.

3.8.2 Consent

This research used an iterative model of consent (Mackenzie, McDowell and Pittaway, 2007), with the aim of ensuring that the research was flexible and responsive to participants' needs. As part of this process of iterative consent, I obtained written consent from participants. Prior to obtaining written consent, I provided participants with an information sheet (see appendix). To assist with accessibility, I wrote the information sheet for young people and practitioners following 'plain English' guidance (Plain English Campaign, 2018), and I also read through the information sheet with participants. In addition, I provided time for questions, and reminded participants that they were free to ask questions at any time. Practitioners rarely had questions, but young people often had questions around what would happen to the research data[89]. Participants were given the information sheet (see appendix) to take away and the sheet also contained my contact details.

Both practitioners and young people completed and signed the consent form (see appendix)[90]. Young people aged 16 and over were assumed to be legally competent to consent or refuse to participate in research[91] (O'Reilly and Dogra, 2016: 136-7). Young people who were aged 14-16 at the time of the research gave consent to participate themselves without the additional consent of their parent or caregiver under the principle of 'Gillick competency' (Gillick v West Norfolk and Wisbech Area Health Authority, 1985). In the context of social research, Gillick competency is based on the assumption that under 16s with 'sufficient understanding' can provide consent to participate without the need for additional parental permission (Heath *et al.*, 2009: 27). Assessing Gillick competency involved talking with practitioners who knew the young person well[92], and with the young person themselves, in order to ensure that participants understood the research and what participation involved, including potential risks and benefits, and that they were capable of making an informed choice to participate.

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[89] Here, I found it useful to bring along academic books and to use my laptop to show young people journal articles, as well the University of Cambridge's PhD repository website, to provide concrete examples of where the research might end up – these aids prompted a number of interesting discussions about academic research, and young people's future work aspirations.

[90] For the children who participated in the research virtually during the first COVID-19 lockdown, I obtained permission from the ethics committee to obtain verbal consent rather than written consent. I took this approach based on feedback from young people and practitioners that young people lacked access to computers and printers to receive the consent form via email and did not feel comfortable sharing their home address to receive a hard copy.

[91] As an additional safeguard, I spoke with practitioners within the YOS who knew the children well to ensure there was no evidence to the contrary.

[92] In most cases this was the young person's YOS officer, but in two cases where the young people were new to YOS supervision I also spoke to teachers and social workers in addition.

Assessing Gillick competency for participants under 16, rather than seeking to obtain the consent of parents or caregivers, was preferable for two reasons. Firstly, the model was consistent with the commitment of this research to taking a collaborative approach to working with young participants, one that respects their agency and autonomy (Whittington, 2019). Secondly, as Pickles (2020) identifies, a Gillick competency approach is useful where seeking parental consent may involve divulging sensitive information - in this case the nature and extent of young people's involvement in offending and experiences of victimisation - to parents or caregivers in a way that may be against a young person's wishes. This in turn might have discouraged younger participants from taking part and thereby marginalised their voices and experiences.

The iterative approach to consent meant that the consent process was not restricted to the signing of a consent form. I conducted regular 'verbal check-ins' (Morris, Hegarty and Humphreys, 2012), both during the recruitment process, and during and after interviews, to ask whether participants were still happy to continue with the research. This process was useful in working with the four young people described above who initially agreed to participate but then dropped out, by making sure that it was straightforward for them to do so. This approach was also useful during the interviews and observations themselves, to check whether participants wanted to continue if they became upset, as was the case with Bev, a YOS officer, in a discussion about a young person:

> Bev: Sorry that's upset me.
>
> Hannah: Oh bless you…it's really difficult.
>
> Bev: [Starts to cry] She doesn't see it as abuse at all.
>
> Hannah: Yeah. Yeah.
>
> Bev: And you see things a bit differently, sometimes, after that.
>
> Hannah: Yeah, no, 100%. Do you want to take a break?
>
> Bev: Yeah no I'm fine. Sorry, yeah.

While there were no practitioners or young people who exited the study during or after they had taken part in interviews, the iterative approach still provided a useful safeguard and enabled me to remain attentive to participant consent throughout the research process.

3.8.3 Doing Interviews and Observations

The length of the practitioner interviews ranged from 28 minutes to one hour and 36 minutes, and they lasted an average of one hour. The length of interviews with young people ranged from 20 minutes to two hours[93], and they lasted an average of 50 minutes. I made use of two interview guides, one for practitioners, one for young people, as a rough guide for discussion (see appendices), but the interviews followed a semi-structured approach allowing the researcher and participant to respond to and explore the lines of conversation that emerged spontaneously through the course of the interview, in line with the exploratory approach of this study.

3.8.3.1 Positionalities and power

As outlined within the introduction to this chapter, I was keen to challenge the power gradient that exists between researchers and participants, while acknowledging the impossibility of erasing it completely. I focused on disrupting the power gradient between researcher and participant in three main ways: by enhancing opportunities for participant involvement in decisions about the research; by engaging in self-disclosure and reciprocal sharing, and by taking a reflexive approach, examining the influence of my own positionalities in relation to participants on the research itself.

I made efforts to involve participants in decision making about the research where opportunities arose. For example, before beginning the interview, I offered participants a choice between audio-recording and notetaking, to help ensure that they felt comfortable and in control of how our conversations were being documented[94]. I also gave participants the opportunity to review and comment on interview transcripts and any written write-ups of the report. Three practitioners and one young person reviewed their transcripts but did not have any comments. None of the participants expressed an interest in reviewing the written write-ups of the report prior to their completion. From talking to practitioners and young people I inferred that this was because of the time commitment that this would involve. In response, I

[93] The two-hour interview, and one other interview that lasted an hour and three quarters, were split over two sessions.

[94] 49 practitioners opted for audio-recording and one for notetaking. 11 children opted for audio-recording and six for notetaking. Acknowledging that visible notetaking might make participants feel self-conscious, but also that participants might view visible notetaking positively as confirmation that I was listening to, and recording, their insights, I asked participants whether they would prefer me to take notes during the interview, or to write up notes afterwards – all selected the latter. While compiling notes in retrospect undoubtedly resulted in a less detailed and accurate representation of the interview than an audio-recording transcribed verbatim, I was careful to produce detailed notes immediately after the interview had finished and felt that this approach was an important part of putting participants at ease and responding to their needs within the research process.

changed my approach and offered to talk through the emerging findings of the research and hear and implement any feedback. This offer was taken up by two additional young people, and by each of the YOS area teams who invited me to discuss emerging findings at team meetings. These meetings resulted in additional in-depth discussions with three practitioners one-to-one. As well as enhancing collaboration, these conversations provided another valuable method of triangulation, allowing me to engage with participants' views on my emerging reflections, enabling further clarification of these ideas.

Acknowledging the additional power gradient that exists between adult researchers and young participants, with young people I also followed a 'child-centred' collaborative approach during the interviews themselves. This involved both encouraging young people to participate in decision making in relation to the interview, and supporting them to take the lead (O'Reilly and Dogra, 2016: 6). In talking to young people about the research, I emphasised that my role as a researcher was to listen to their views and to facilitate a safe space for discussion. I worked to place young people in control of the interviews, emphasising that exactly what we covered would depend on what young people thought it was important for me to understand in relation to CCE. I also tried to lean into my positionality as relatively inexperienced in relation to the subject matter that we were talking about, and to position young people as teachers or guides educating me about their experiences (O'Reilly and Dogra, 2016: 29).

Self-disclosure and reciprocal sharing is another important part of challenging the power gradient between researcher and participant (Liamputtong, 2007; Dickson-Swift *et al*., 2007; Booth and Harriott, 2021). As I was asking participants detailed questions about their experiences, it felt fair and respectful to share aspects of my own life, to answer questions, and contribute to conversations outside of the research where I felt comfortable. This resulted in some awkward but amusing moments within the YOS, which had a lively culture of banter and good-natured teasing that I never quite mastered; and some easier moments with young people, who were sometimes interested in my own experiences of growing up, and of school, work, and friendship.

I also used reflexive practice to explore the ways in which my own positionalities interacted with those of participants. In terms of the impact of my positionalities as a white British middle-class woman on the research, I found that this was neither static nor fixed. Spaces of difference between myself and participants expanded and contracted as contexts and

conversations shifted[95]. For example, overall, in interviews with female practitioners, I found it easier to develop a collaborative and responsive conversational style. In contrast, in interviews with some male practitioners, it is likely that my positionality as a younger woman contributed to the greater difficulty that I occasionally encountered in steering conversations back towards the broad focus of the research.

Furthermore, there were points at which I could see that expansively different experiences of class and xeno-racialised privilege created a vast gap between my experiences and those of young people, many of whom had experienced substantial socioeconomic marginalisation and disadvantage[96]. Yet there were other moments of exchange in which shared experience brought us closer together. In moments where these gaps were large, I followed one of two approaches. At times it was possible to lean into differences and find ways of using this, as well as my positionality as a young woman, to position young people as experts and teachers. I reflected on this in my fieldnotes after my first interview with James:

> I've come across a few new words in the interviews this week and asking the young people to explain has been really useful – when I asked James to explain a couple of words to me it felt like his confidence just grew and he became much more chatty which was really nice to see. In terms of my interview technique, I do need to create space for young people to educate me, without pre-empting what they mean – so asking 'why is that?' rather than 'is that because x, y, z?' (Extract from fieldnotes).

Emphasising my desire to learn from participants also proved to be a useful strategy in managing interactions where participants expressed feeling nervous about interviews because of the reputation of the University of Cambridge as a 'prestigious' or 'elite' institution. Again, I emphasised that I was there to listen and to learn from participants' experiences and from their expertise.

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[95] In addition, my insight into issues of positionalities evolved as the research progressed. In particular, I was able to unpick some of my assumptions about participants through reflexive practice. For example, in writing up reflections on an early meeting with James, I became aware that I was overly focused on young people as the recipients of care during research interactions. I reflected on my feelings of surprise when James took on a caring role in our interaction by helping me to untangle my coat from the spiral of my notebook. Reflecting on my surprise enabled me to re-ground my approach to working with young people in a more holistic and collaborative understanding of their capacity both to care and be cared for.

[96] Young people described their experiences of socioeconomic disadvantage in a variety of ways including: not having enough money in the family home to cover basic living expenses (such as rent, food, or an internet connection) (James, Shay, Tony, Phoebe, Jakub); growing up in a household that received welfare benefits (Mo, Alex); identifying with and using terms such as 'low class' or 'working class' (Vanya, Dan) and growing up in an area that they described as characterised by deprivation and violence (Carl, Freddie, Patryk).

At other times when gaps between our lived experiences were more evident, it felt more appropriate to listen, and to recognise and validate the frustration and anger that young people expressed towards the white British and middle-class privileges from which I have benefited. I used this approach in the interview with Jakub:

> Jakub: It just feels like the government isn't really doing nothing to help like you get me.
>
> Hannah: Yeah I think a lot of people feel like that, I think that there are a lot of people that are angry with the government at the moment.
>
> Jakub: Yeah fully. That's how I feel.
>
> Hannah: Yeah no, definitely.

and in the interview with Dan, which I reflected on in more detail in my fieldnotes:

> There was an interesting point of tension in the interview with Dan today, we were talking about how he found it difficult to relate to people, including practitioners, who were 'white' and 'privileged', and he added 'from Oxford or Cambridge' – assuming that this last part was probably directed at me I felt it would be most useful to positively affirm what he was saying – by saying I felt it was a useful and interesting point to make, and to encourage him to expand further on how this might influence our conversation– he didn't, but hopefully it helped to hold the space for him to do so had he wanted. (Extract from fieldnotes).

Clearly, the differences in socioeconomic privilege between myself and young people sometimes meant that young people did not feel that I would understand or 'get' their perspectives. My hope was that these strategies worked to acknowledge the areas where I lacked shared experience with young participants, and to create a welcoming and safe space for young people to explore this if they wished.

Of course, power dynamics between researchers and participants are neither static nor one-way. In the observations in particular, I found myself aware of the power that YOS practitioners held within the research. Overall, practitioners in Stonewell YOS were very welcoming and open; in addition to observing official YOS activities I was also invited to eat with practitioners and share lifts, and was able to spend time working at spare desks in the YOS area bases. When observing meetings and other activities YOS practitioners often

introduced me as ‘our PhD student’ and the possessive felt like a sign of acceptance. However, there were times when I became more aware of the power that practitioners had to restrict access to observations. This was particularly the case with the CCE team. While initially I had a lot of access to observe the CCE team’s activities, as the team became fully operational, and their workload expanded, the managers in particular began to withdraw. Partly due to the stresses involved in implementing a new team, they were less forthcoming with details of their activities and requests to attend meetings were often lost in lengthy checks to see if that would be ok. Accordingly, the research includes fewer observations from the CCE team than I would have liked, and this serves as a reminder of the multiplicity of power dynamics that exist within the contexts of research.

Another relevant concern in discussions of positionality and power is the issue of socially desirable response bias among participants. For example, it was possible that practitioners, aware that I was conducting research into victim identification, and often aware of the increased impetus from policymakers to identify victims of CCE, may have felt compelled to overstate their perceptions of young people as CCE victims. Similarly, as being recognised as a victim of CCE can have some limited benefits for young people in the context of the YJS, as outlined in the introduction, it is also possible that it may have been more desirable to present themselves as identifying with the victim label. However, as I will discuss in the findings section it was common for young people in this research to reject the CCE victim label. Furthermore, practitioners provided multiple examples of young people involved in county lines whom they did not see as victims of CCE. This suggests that this form of social desirability bias was not a major limitation in this research[97].

Relatedly, a question that is sometimes raised in relation to research on sensitive topics, particularly those relating to involvement in criminalised activities, is the extent to which researchers can be sure that participants’ responses are ‘truthful’. My approach to this question draws on Dean and Whyte's (1958) assertion of the value of exploring what participants’ statements tell us about their feelings and perceptions, and prioritising this approach over assessing the truthfulness of these statements. Sandberg (2010) offers useful additional guidance here, emphasising that, regardless of whether they are true or false, the

[97] It was very rare that participants asked me anything about my own views on the victim identification process. On the few occasions that this topic came up, to avoid perpetuating any social desirability bias, I tended to avoid talking about my own view: that children involved in drug-related offending should not be criminalised, but that I was increasingly ambivalent about the utility of identifying children as victims of CCE, instead re-focusing the conversation on the participants’ perspectives.

stories that people tell, and they ways in which they tell them, are valuable, providing meaningful insights into 'the complex nature of values, identities, cultures, and communities' (Sandberg, 2010: 447). This approach was particularly valuable for this research, as examining what participants' comments said about their perspectives on the victim of exploitation label was far more important in addressing the research questions than seeking to establish whether or not participants' accounts of victimhood, or indeed of offending, were truthful.

3.8.3.2 Locations and lockdowns

All participants were given as much choice as possible regarding the location of their interview, in order to help ensure that they felt safe, comfortable and in control (Dempsey *et al.*, 2016). For all but one of the practitioners it was most convenient for them to meet in a private room at one of Stonewell's four county offices[98]. Young people chose a variety of different locations for their interviews. Some preferred to meet at a location with which they were familiar. For example, James chose the den that he had constructed in his mum's garden. Here, and in other cases where I went to young people's homes, it felt valuable to be the guest in young people's spaces in terms of putting them at ease and enabling them to take the lead[99]. Some young people, such as Mo, preferred a more neutral and anonymous location that was unfamiliar to us both, and meeting rooms in local libraries were very useful here. Other young people preferred to meet in institutional settings such as PRUs or the YOS offices as it meant that they could complete the interview alongside activities and journeys that were familiar and that were already built into their days. Young people took a variety of approaches and what was important here was offering them the choice and tailoring the interview location to meet their needs.

There were two young people, Patryk and Vanya, whom the YOS recommended that I meet in environments that offered higher levels of security, such as YOS buildings or PRUs, in accordance with the YOS's own guidance for its practitioners on meeting young people assessed as presenting a high risk of violence towards staff. While it meant that I could not

[98] One practitioner chose to travel to the Institute of Criminology at the University of Cambridge for the interview. However, of all the participants this practitioner seemed the most nervous, speaking hesitantly in a marked contrast to his normally friendly and relaxed demeanour, and I felt that the unfamiliar and perhaps intimidating setting may have been inhibiting. Overall, the familiar and convenient environment of the county offices provided a suitable setting for practitioner interviews.

[99] The approach of meeting children in their own homes was risk assessed by the Institute of Criminology at the University of Cambridge. I also discussed my intention to meet children at their homes with their YOS or CCE worker. On the day of the interview, I used a 'buddy system', notifying a designated person of my whereabouts and of the time I expected to return home.

offer Patryk and Vanya much choice of location, in the interest of my own safety and out of respect for the policies of the YOS that was facilitating my access to young people, I chose to follow this guidance. Vanya seemed relaxed, open, and friendly in our interview in a group meeting room at his PRU. The environment was relatively informal, with bright comfortable chairs, and I made my usual effort to dress down in a jumper and jeans. In Patryk's interview, the setting had a more limiting effect. We met in a vast fluorescent-lit conference room deep within a maze of beige low-ceilinged council offices. This was not particularly conducive to a relaxed and informal interview atmosphere. Furthermore, I felt that, perhaps in response to my having chosen the location, Patryk made a particular attempt to convey dominance and to assert his power and capacity to make choices in the context of the interview. This manifested itself as a slight hostility that I was unable to soften, and the result was a limit to the rapport that we were able to build through our discussion.

3.8.3.2.1 The impact of COVID-19

From the first COVID-19 lockdown in March 2020 onwards, I had to change to conducting all interviews and interview preparation remotely via telephone.[100] [101] Initially, I was concerned about the impact that this might have on the quality of the interview data. While comparative research with adults has found that telephone interviews do not reduce data quality (Sturges and Hanrahan, 2004), I was concerned that young people may be less familiar or comfortable with speaking on the phone. However, these concerns proved to be largely unfounded. Eleven practitioners and nine young people[102] participated in phone interviews. By the time I began phone interviews with young people in May 2020 the lockdown had been in place for several months and by that point many young people were more used to phone conversations than they might otherwise have been: 'it's been fine cos most of the conversations that I have are on the phone' (Phoebe) and seemed to feel at ease

[100] I selected telephone rather than remote video interviews due to a lack of reliable internet access among young participants.

[101] In theory, during the parts of the pandemic when government 'stay at home' orders have been lifted, it might have been possible to conduct socially distanced in-person interviews. However, having to remain socially distanced outdoors would have created issues with confidentiality. I also felt that doing in-person interviews would have presented an unjustifiable risk of infection both to participants and their households (for example, many of the young participants were cared for by grandparents), and to myself, and was therefore unethical – particularly as remote interviews proved to be a more than adequate substitute. Furthermore, even when 'stay at home' orders were lifted, government orders to work from home where possible have remained in place. Because it was possible to conduct the interviews virtually, I felt that it was ethical to do so in order not to further exacerbate the pandemic.

[102] This includes two practitioners and two young people who had already taken part in an in-person interview and who were re-interviewed remotely as part of the theoretical sampling.

with talking to me on the phone: 'it's been fine – I can tell by your voice that you're like a happy, cheerful person' (Zayan).

The use of telephone interviews also offered some benefits in relation to working with young people. Primarily, I could offer young people a level of flexibility that did more to place them in control of the interview process. Doing interviews via telephone removed the need to pre-arrange interviews, as, stuck at home during lockdown, I could always pause my home-working and answer the phone. I gave young people my contact number and working hours and asked them to call me when they wanted to talk. This placed young people in control of the timing of the interview. For young people living in complex and often rapidly-changing circumstances the flexibility of phone interviewing provided the opportunity to make an active choice to talk to me when they were in a good place to do so, rather than having to navigate the awkward dynamics of cancelling and rescheduling an interview.

However, it is also important to acknowledge that the 'audio-only' nature of telephone interviews presented some challenges. Not being physically present with participants meant that I lacked visual and other sensory cues that could contextualise participants' comments and provide important indicators of their wellbeing (Sturges and Hanrahan, 2004; Vogl, 2013; Dominey *et al*., 2021). For example, I was unable to see participants' facial expressions or read their body language. Accordingly, I had to be extra conscious in picking up non-visual cues. For example, long silences or a change in tone of voice could indicate that participants were distressed by the interview or needed a break. I also added more verbal check ins to clarify the meaning of participants' comments, and to make sure that participants were ok to proceed. Similarly, I was careful to check in with participants that they had privacy and could not be overheard and asked them to inform me if this changed[103]. These additional steps enabled me to continue to work to provide a safe and comfortable environment for participants while using telephone interviewing.

I began observations at the end of September 2019 and originally planned to continue these observations for 12 months, finishing in September 2020. However, after the first COVID-19 lockdown in March 2020 I was not able to resume observations until September 2020, after which I was able to complete an additional three months of virtual observations. The reasons for this were three-fold: as practitioners within the YOS grappled with the unprecedented

[103] These approaches were informed by both the academic literature on telephone interviewing (including Sturges and Hanrahan, 2004 and Vogl, 2013), and by my training and experience as a volunteer for Fenway Health's LGBTQIA+ Telephone Helpline between 2015 and 2017.

crisis and focused on how best to continue their work, their capacity to facilitate my attendance at activities was understandably very limited. Secondly, many YOS activities such as trainings and workshops were cancelled during the first lockdown. Finally, as the YOS shifted to virtual meetings, seeking renewed permission from YOS managers to attend meetings of this nature took time.

The COVID-19 lockdowns meant that it was not possible to complete as many observations as I had planned. In addition, this restricted additional opportunities for more informal interactions and rapport-building. However, the switch to virtual meetings, conducted on Microsoft Teams, did have some benefits. In in-person observations practitioners sometimes made jokes about my notetaking that suggested that they were a little wary of it at times ('Don't write that down!' was a jovial comment that I heard several times during the in-person observations). However, as the camera view in Teams focuses only on participants' faces, my notetaking was usually quickly forgotten, and I could make detailed and accurate notes without being intrusive.

It is clear that while the pandemic introduced some limitations, reducing the number of observations that I could complete and thereby restricting additional informal interaction and rapport building with participants, it also had some unexpected benefits, in particular, creating new opportunities to afford young people greater control over the research process, and helping some participants to feel more at ease during observations.

3.8.3.3 Care and responding to participants' needs

The primary methods-related concern within this research was ensuring that participants were well cared for during the research process. Care manifested itself in lots of different ways. I found that Witkin and Robjant's (2018) guidance for practitioners working with survivors of human trafficking provided useful common-sense advice in creating a calm and welcoming interview environment for all participants.[104] For example, offering drinks and biscuits where possible, setting up the room in an informal way, and ensuring participants always had as much time as they needed. In the interviews, I aimed to 'turn away' (Patel, 2020) from the damage-centred approaches described by Tuck (2009) by framing questions sensitively and by not probing invasively into aspects of young people's experiences that weren't necessary

[104] I first encountered this guidance while volunteering as a mentor for 'The Phoenix Project', a mentoring and befriending service for women affected by trafficking and exploitation, run by the charity Hestia. Volunteering in this role from 2017-2019 provided me with experience and training regarding strategies to support people affected by exploitation during one-to-one meetings, which I carried over into my PhD fieldwork.

to my research questions and which could be re-traumatising - chiefly traumatic and/or illegal things that they had said or done as part of their involvement (although young people were free to talk about this if they wanted to).

Overall, this approach was well-received by participants. For example, Freddie commented: 'I thought I was gonna be asked questions like: what drugs did you sell, all shit like that but no you've like kept it really professional and I respect that a lot'. While there are debates over how much researchers should 'probe' and push for answers in interviews, Tuck and Yang (2014) emphasise the importance of researcher sensitivity to 'codes of refusal' given by participants. Where young people provided subtle indications that they were not comfortable answering a question, usually conveying this as inability of expression: 'I don't really know how to explain it' (Phoebe), 'I can't explain it' (Mo), my default position was not to push young people to go further. However, I was also keen to hold space for young people who wanted to talk about painful experiences, and this was important for some: 'I just think like it's good that you actually wanna know about all this. It actually shows that people do wanna find out more about it and like some people don't wanna talk about it' (Alex). As always, practicing care in this research involved taking a flexible and responsive approach to participants' individual needs (Girling, 2017).

In terms of care after the interviews, I took a multifaceted approach. During the consent process, I discussed with all participants that our conversations would be confidential unless they newly disclosed a serious risk of harm – in which case I would have had to break confidentiality but would have talked to the participant about this first[105]. This situation did not arise in the course of the research. I provided all participants with my contact details and encouraged them to check in with any questions or concerns and where possible shared where they would next find me in person (for example a particular meeting or activity). I also encouraged participants to reach out to their existing networks for support. For practitioners this meant line managers and psychological support available within the YOS. For young people this meant their YOS worker or CCE team worker, and any additional support workers such as those within social services. The opportunities provided to review transcripts

[105] The reporting of disclosures involving a risk of serious harm was required by County Council ethics approval process and provides a reminder that gradients of power in research contexts are rarely, if ever, erased. It is also possible that this reporting requirement limited what participants were prepared to say about the harms that they had experienced or caused during the course of their involvement in county lines.

and discuss research findings also offered two further opportunities to check in with participants, although no issues arose in either case.

There were also moments during the fieldwork in which I needed to recognise my own emotional needs as a researcher. I struggled with the awareness that I was getting to know a group of young people who are intelligent, engaging, thoughtful, funny, and full of potential – and who all deserved a lot better than the opportunities afforded to them in their lives so far. As the research progressed, young people who took part became NEET, were placed in custody, went missing for long periods, and were admitted to hospital. These situations felt profoundly unfair, and I often felt guilty that I was a bystander to wave upon wave of disadvantage on which I had no impact. While I did draw upon the value of providing young people with a space to be heard within the interviews, and on my commitment to disseminating the research findings with the aim of helping to ameliorate the disadvantage and harm faced by many young people in the UK, I also felt it was important to feel this sense of guilt and frustration as a way of remaining conscious of the many injustices that young people experienced, channelling this emotion into the research work itself.

3.9 Analysis and Grounded Theory

The process of data analysis for this research followed a critical realist grounded theory approach to facilitate a systematic, comprehensive and reliable approach to data analysis (Lewis *et al.*, 2014). Within grounded theory practice, researchers are simultaneously involved in data collection and analysis (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) and I began transcribing and coding interview and observation data immediately. I conducted coding using NVivo 12, as this program was available at the Institute of Criminology, and I had training and prior experience in its use. I used the two primary phases of GT coding practice: initial coding, line by line coding closely exploring what was happening in the data (Charmaz, 2014: 113); and focused coding, drawing out the most significant and frequent initial codes and organising and synthesising them (Charmaz, 2014: 113). I then completed a third round of 'theoretical coding', which enabled me to explore how substantive codes might fit together and to focus on understanding the relationship between them (Charmaz, 2014: 150), with the aim of formulating an explanation of victim identification processes in relation to CCE.

Throughout the transcribing and coding processes, I used analytical memos, in the form of written memos and diagrams, to explore ideas that were emerging from the data. I used memos to collate my initial reflections on hearing the interviews back during the transcription

process, as well as to document, integrate, and interrogate emerging ideas during the three stages of coding. Analytical memos were valuable in helping the theoretical direction and centrality to emerge gradually, allowing me to develop my codes into more theoretically sophisticated insights (Charmaz, 2014), in a way which always remained grounded in participants' voices.

One of the strengths of GT is its ability to facilitate the generation of theories, which state 'relationships between abstract concepts' and aim for 'explanation or understanding' (Thornberg and Charmaz, 2012: 41). Glaser and Strauss (1967: 32) define two types of theory: substantive theory 'developed for a substantive, or empirical area of sociological enquiry' and formal theory 'developed for a formal, or conceptual area of sociological enquiry'. Formal theory offers greater generality, and therefore requires 'comparative analysis among different kinds of substantive cases' (Urquhart, 2019: 5) at a scope beyond that of this research. However, substantive theory is still valuable, in that it allows us to explain and understand the specific area of empirical inquiry at hand, in a way that is closely grounded in empirical data (Urquhart, 2019). In the conclusion of this thesis, I draw together the analysis in the findings chapters to summarise how we can understand the processes by which young people included in this research emerged as victims of CCE. In doing so, I develop a substantive theory of victim identification.

Finally, in writing up these analyses I have taken the approach that best fits with the exploratory nature of this research and with its use of CRGT. Numbers are sometimes used in the write-up of qualitative research, although not typically in descriptions of observational work. However, as Hannah and Lautsch (2011), Neale *et al*. (2014), Mason (2018) and Monrouxe and Rees (2020) all emphasise, qualitative studies employing an exploratory approach, such as this one, in which researchers seek to engage with and respond to the themes spontaneously raised by interview participants, should be wary of quantification. A clear justification for such caution derives from the fact that in exploratory grounded theory studies involving theoretical sampling, the same sets of questions are not asked in every interview. As a result, counts of the number of participants who mentioned a particular theme are not meaningful and could be misrepresentative and misleading (Neale *et al.*, 2014; Monrouxe and Rees, 2020). Here it is far more useful to focus on providing a rich description of the categories that emerged from processes of theoretical saturation than on enumerating every thematic point. As such, I do not use numeric statements in the write-up of this research. Throughout the findings sections, I include detailed fieldnotes from observations

and quotes from interviews that best illustrate my analyses (Eldh, Årestedt and Berterö, 2020). Following further guidance from White *et al.* (2014: 379), I include discussion of the recurrence of particular views or experiences only in order to explain why these patterns occur.

3.10 Evaluating Quality

At the beginning of this chapter, I introduced Birks and Mills's (2011) criteria for quality in GT research: researcher expertise, methodological congruence, and procedural precision. This study meets these criteria in a number of ways. I demonstrate expertise through a detailed presentation of GT as a method in this section, as well as through the in-depth discussion of the relevant research presented in the literature review. I demonstrate methodological congruence by selecting CRGT as the most appropriate method for this exploratory study; through the use of interviews and observations which enabled me to explore participants' perspectives on victim identification in detail and examine how these processes played out in practice; and by examining questions of 'vulnerability' and 'positionality' in order to facilitate ethical work with participants. Finally, I demonstrate procedural precision through a transparent and reflexive approach, specifically my examination of the impact of positionalities, power dynamics, and the physical and virtual contexts in which I carried out the research on the data itself. In addition, I provide a thorough account of my adherence to GT methods, from sampling to analysis – highlighting specific markers of procedural precision with grounded theory, including the production of rich data through the triangulation of in-depth interviews and observations; the use of verbatim transcripts, detailed notes, multi-stage coding, and analytical memos to assist with grounding analysis in data; the process of reaching adequate theoretical saturation; and the subsequent development of analyses into a coherent substantive theory, which is described in detail in Section 7.1.1.

This chapter has illustrated the theoretical orientation and methodological approach of this research, demonstrating its grounding in CRGT and commitment to interrogating questions of vulnerability and power through reflexive practice. In addition, this chapter has provided an account of the ways in which these theoretical and methodological commitments have infused the research process itself, from planning to analysis. In the following three findings chapters, it is the insights that have emerged from this process to which I will turn.

4 Findings: Responding to CCE in the Context of the Youth Justice System

4.1 Introduction

Infused with a complex and often conflicting (Briggs, 2013) mix of justice and welfare (McAra, 2017; Eadie and Canton, 2002), the YJS in England is rooted in 'impulsions both to rescue children but also to punish them' (McAra, 2017: 943; Gelsthorpe and Kemp, 2015). As such, the system has long existed as an 'amalgam of rationales', oscillating around 'care' beyond the caring ethos of social services and the neo-liberal legalistic ethos of responsibility and 'punishment' (Muncie and Hughes, 2002: 1). As Goldson and Muncie (2006: 205) emphasise, these dynamics have an uneasy coexistence, and in certain times and places certain thematic priorities may come to dominate others. At the heart of these tensions is the extent to which children in conflict with the law are constructed as victims, inviting an ethos of 'inclusionary welfarism', or as threats, resulting in an ethos of 'exclusionary punitivism' (Goldson and Muncie, 2006: 214). The issue of CCE throws these longstanding issues into sharp relief, as the closely interrelated experiences of victimisation and offending that are intrinsic to CCE raise difficult questions for practitioners[106] as to which should be prioritised.

Growing attention to the issue of CCE is evolving through, with and within a climate of youth justice policy that is showing some indications of shifting towards a more welfare-orientated ethos once more (Case and Bateman, 2020; Case and Haines, 2020; Taylor, 2016 [107]). The rise of CCE as a major policy concern since 2015 (National Crime Agency, 2015), has seen increasing calls on the YJS to recognise young people who come into conflict with the law as a result of county lines drug dealing as potential victims (Hudek, 2018; The Children's Society, 2019; Ministry of Justice, 2019). Paralleling the recent trajectory of CSE as a policy issue, which has seen a shift from the criminalisation of so-called 'child prostitutes' towards a child protection-led approach, in which young people are re-conceptualised as vulnerable victims of abuse (Brown, 2019), Ministry of Justice guidance for YOTs now encourages practitioners to consider young people involved in county lines as exploited victims rather than as perpetrators of drug-related crime (Ministry of Justice, 2019:

[106] I use the term 'practitioners' to refer collectively to individuals working within Stonewell's YOS and CCE police team. I use 'YOS practitioners' and 'CCE police team' to refer to these groups individually.

[107] While the overall rhetoric of the government's recently launched 'Beating Crime Plan' (Home Office 2021d) is highly punitive, its discussion of children and young people largely focuses on early intervention, support (including therapeutic support) and diversion for those affected by exploitation and serious youth violence, backed up by a £200 million investment in the Youth Endowment Fund. Similarly, although the government's 2021 '10-year drug plan' has a significant focus on punitive responses to drug crime, it also acknowledges the importance of addressing the 'unique needs of children' involved in drug crime and the 'underlying reasons for a child or young person's offending' (HM Government, 2021: 52).

5). The NRM, despite its flaws[108], offers a tool to aid youth justice practitioners in this process of recognition.

However, in practice, achieving this reorientation is far from simple. Practitioners within local YOTs act as mediators of national level policy, with the discretion and autonomy to interpret changing approaches and strategies (Case *et al.*, 2020: 221; Phoenix, 2009: 117). Their interpretations are shaped and informed by the conceptualisations and attitudes towards key concepts, such as victimhood and exploitation, that infuse the wider organisational contexts of which practitioners are a part and in which they work. Despite calls for the reconceptualisation of young people involved in county lines as victims of CCE, as the literature review has demonstrated we know little about how these processes of victim identification are influenced, and often inhibited, by their interrelation with the organisational cultures and wider policy landscapes of youth justice work in which they play out.

This chapter proceeds in three sections. The first explores how practitioners understood and interpreted existing mechanisms for responding to CCE, focusing on the UK's primary tool for identifying victims - the NRM - and exploring why practitioners in the YOS and CCE police team had come to lack confidence in the NRM as a decision-making tool. As this chapter examines, this loss of faith in the NRM opened up a greater role for practitioners' own perspectives on and approaches to decision-making regarding the status of young people involved in county lines as victims of CCE. The next two sections provide an in-depth analysis of how interpretations of two key concepts - 'victimhood' and 'exploitation' - informed the ways that practitioners responded to young people involved in county lines. I examine how practitioners' conceptualisations of these two concepts were shaped by both the wider landscape of the YJS, and its persistent focus on responsibilisation and 'repressive welfarism', and by the organisational cultures of the YOS and the CCE police team. I then analyse how these perspectives influenced practitioners' processes of identifying young people involved in drug distribution as victims of CCE.

[108] Since its inception in 2009, numerous issues have been identified with the NRM including inefficiency (Home Office, 2014b) and a failure to centre the needs of victims (The Anti-Trafficking Monitoring Group, 2014). While a programme of reform was set out in 2018 its impact is as yet unclear. Early evaluations have been somewhat negative. For example, a review by The Anti-Trafficking Monitoring Group (2021) finds that newly-established Multi-Agency Assurance Panels are failing in their objective of assuring robust and transparent decision making within the NRM. Critiques of the NRM's specific application to child victims of criminal exploitation are discussed in detail in Section 4.2. Despite these issues the very existence of the NRM and its application to CCE still represents a shift in approach to young people involved in drug distribution.

4.2 The Declining Influence of the National Referral Mechanism (NRM) as a Tool for Determining CCE Victim Status

The NRM is the UK's official mechanism and primary decision-making tool for identifying potential victims of CCE (Home Office, 2020b). In theory, for practitioners, the process of CCE victim identification should simply be a case of making an NRM referral and receiving a decision. However, in practice, within Stonewell YOS there was a widespread lack of confidence in the NRM as a decision-making body.

This section examines the two core reasons that practitioners gave for their lack of confidence in the NRM, both of which are rooted in how the nature of the NRM itself exists in tension with normative expectations around victimhood. Firstly, the NRM's provision of 'conclusive' decisions about a young person's victim status became a source of tension and concern. As Ronsbo and Jensen (2014) emphasise, victim status is fundamentally precarious and unstable, and must be proven and re-proven on an ongoing basis. The NRM's claims to definitively assign victim status came into conflict with practitioners' anxieties about the need to scrutinise claims to victimhood, and about the possible misuse of the NRM by those they posited as offenders claiming to be victims. Secondly, the NRM was not facilitating timely and effective support for young people, running counter to practitioners' expectations that the designation of victim status should lead to access to specific support that remedies an individual's victimisation and enables them to move on (Strobl, 2010; Holstein and Miller, 1990).

I will conclude the section with a discussion of the practical implications of these concerns. While practitioners still made NRM referrals[109], their lack of confidence in the NRM as a decision-making tool increased the salience of their own perspectives on whether or not young people were victims of CCE in informing their responses to these young people.

4.2.1 The NRM and the Potential for 'Abuse' of Victim Status

Practitioners' confidence in the NRM was undermined by anxieties that both the NRM and the Section 45 defence were at risk of being 'abused' (Melissa, CCE police team). These

[109] In England and Wales, both local authorities and the police have a 'duty to notify' the Secretary of State of any potential victim of modern slavery, under Section 52 of the Modern Slavery Act 2015. This duty is typically fulfilled through an NRM referral. In addition, at the time of the research, NRM referrals were best practice for potential cases of CCE (after appropriate local safeguarding proceedings have been enacted) as recommended by the Ministry of Justice's Guidance for YOTs (Ministry of Justice, 2019) and Stonewell's own YOS and CCE police team CCE strategies. Although practitioners cited many issues with the use of the NRM for CCE cases, the importance placed on NRM referrals by the organisation in which they operated made it difficult for practitioners to abandon this practice completely.

concerns were similar to those raised at a national level (Bristow and Lomas, 2020), and practitioners raised them in two related ways. Firstly, there was anxiety that individuals who were involved in county lines but who were not victims of exploitation would 'abuse' the NRM and the Section 45 defence, treating it as a 'loophole' (Simon, CCE police team) that they could use in order escape prosecution:

> [The NRM] got slightly twisted and abused…What it's giving then is people this get out- especially those where you might have some that have chosen- either chosen to get involved in the supply of drugs or didn't necessarily choose to go in it but have stayed in it. (Michael, CCE police team).

> There's a new thing emerging with the NRM…No Further Action happens, so from the young person's point of view, phew! I've got away with that…and if I get caught again I'll just say I was forced to do it. It's a never-ending cycle that one. (Jeff, YOS Officer).

> My concern is always that the people at the top are like: "Well they'll put this NRM in for you and then you yeah you won't get any criminal convictions- you're a victim". So I don't know if that could pull more people in. (Erica, YOS officer).

Anxieties that non-victims might manipulate the NRM, in order to avoid punishment for drugs-related offences, exemplify perceptions of the boundaries of 'victimhood' as concerningly porous and permeable – as an identity whose application must be closely guarded and policed to keep out 'imposters' who would otherwise easily slip through. These anxieties resonate with what Ronsbo and Jensen (2014: 12) describe as the 'fundamental ambiguity' of victimhood: the idea that from the very moment of its recognition, one's victim status is precarious and insecure, subject to ongoing doubt regarding its authenticity, and to scrutiny as to whether the 'victim card' is simply being 'played' for gain. This particular quality of victimhood meant that a mechanism such as the NRM, claiming to determine victim status, and indeed to do so 'conclusively', inevitably attracted concern that it was being misused by individuals who were not 'genuine' victims, undermining practitioners' confidence in the NRM as a decision-making tool.

A second related concern was that defence solicitors would make inappropriate use of the NRM and the Section 45 defence in order to secure a desirable outcome for their client: 'solicitors are well on to the NRM' (Lauren, YOS officer). This undermined both mechanisms in the eyes of practitioners who felt that: 'solicitors as well will just jump on the

band wagon of anything they think can get a client off.' (Keith, YOS-seconded police officer) and that: 'defence solicitors are aware of [the NRM] so they will probably use it for their own ends.' (Paul, Local area police). The possibility that legal practitioners might manipulate decision-making processes relating to CCE victim status added to concerns that the NRM process could not be relied upon to accurately identify victims.

4.2.2 The NRM and Expectations of Victim Support

As Holstein and Miller (1990: 108) emphasise, victimhood is as much an 'interpretive instruction' as it is an identity or status. The designation of victim status should be kinetic, setting in motion remedies for the harm that has been caused. Practitioners expressed that the NRM was not meeting this expectation for young people affected by CCE in Stonewell. The reasons given for this view centred on two factors: that the NRM provided little or no meaningful support, and that the NRM could actively stymie young people's access to victim-orientated interventions.

4.2.2.1 Nothing to offer: The NRM and benefits for CCE victims

The first concern raised about the NRM by practitioners in Stonewell was the extent to which a positive NRM decision offered any tangible additional benefits for young people affected by CCE: 'the NRM doesn't offer young people a lot.' (Stanley, YOS-seconded police officer); 'they don't really get anything from it.' (Amy, CCE police team). This concern was particularly salient with regards to practical support to help young people to transition away from exploitative situations:

> So you do see in court that [NRM] referrals are going to be made…as a case officer, I do sit there sometimes and I think ok, he's been exploited and what's gonna be put in place to protect them from further exploitation? (Lauren, YOS officer).

> If you look at how many more NRMs we're doing, they're rocketing because suddenly we've been given this tool- oh here you go, this is what we can do with young people, and even that to a degree I feel ok, the NRMs been successful, great, they're absolved of these crimes at the moment. Well now what? Because this young person is still there. Left there, potentially with debts, connections to people that they probably shouldn't have and so on. This is where we need to- and there's nothing really that I know of in legislation that says now we need to x, y and z with this young person. I mean it's great, because the courts are seeing them as a victim, and rightly so a lot of the time, but then what do we do now? (Marty, YOS officer).

The support available to young people who receive a positive conclusive grounds NRM decision is far less clear and coherent than the support available to adults[110]. Support provided through the government's Victim Care Contract is only available to over 18s (Salvation Army, 2020: 5), and under 18s are directed towards their local authorities for support, where they are cared for under existing local authority child protection and safeguarding procedures[111] (Home Office, 2020a). In Stonewell, a positive decision itself did not unlock access to any additional resources, such as accommodation or financial aid, or any other specialist support. This had understandable implications for the value of a positive NRM decision for young people affected by CCE.

A related issue was a shift in prosecution practice towards challenging positive NRM decisions in cases of suspected CCE, further limiting the benefits of an NRM decision for young people: 'we're more and more seeing the CPS…challenge the decision, even when it's a positive decision.' (Kevin, YOS manager). YOS practitioners identified that the CPS was increasingly proceeding with prosecutions despite positive NRM decisions: 'quite a lot are coming back now and [the CPS is] saying yes we're going ahead with prosecuting still.' (Erica, YOS officer) re-emphasising the existence of doubts regarding the implications of an NRM decision for a young person's status as victim rather than offender. These observations demonstrate not only a personal lack of confidence in the NRM as a decision-making tool among practitioners, but also a sense that they were seeing the weight and influence of the NRM decline in the YJS more broadly.

4.2.2.2 The iatrogenic impact of the NRM

The second major issue that practitioners highlighted in relation to the NRM was its potential to increase young people's risk of CCE as opposed to ameliorating it. Practitioners associated this issue with the 'level of delay' (Kevin, YOS manager) in the length of time it took to receive a decision from the NRM:

[110] Adults with a positive NRM are eligible for a range of dedicated additional support delivered at the national level, including safehouse accommodation, subsistence payments, and a specialist support worker to assist with access to education, employment, legal and immigration advice, and medical care (Home Office, 2020a), provided by NGOs through the UK government's 'Victim Care Contract'.

[111] At the time of the research, new national level support provision for children in the form of the 'Independent Child Trafficking Guardians' service had only been piloted in a small number of local authorities and was not yet available in Stonewell.

> What we're finding is that the NRM system was never designed to cope with the amount of referrals that it's getting…And at the minute we're told that they've got a 5000 backlog, and it's taking months to get a decision made. (Anton, YOS officer).

> It's just an absolute backlog…we've seen NRMs go in [7 months ago] and they're still not back so we still don't have a decision. (Erica, YOS officer).

Increasing pressure on the NRM nationally, with referrals having risen 52% between 2018 and 2019 (Home Office, 2020c), has led to increased waiting times for decisions nationwide (Bulman, 2020), which of course affected waiting times for young people affected by CCE in Stonewell. Practitioners' frustrations with delays in NRM decision-making were further exacerbated by the perceived opacity of the NRM process: 'Once [the NRM referral] gets sucked into this hole you don't know where it is until it gets spat out again.' (Simon, CCE police team). Long periods spent waiting for NRM decisions with little idea of when a response was likely to arrive did little to ameliorate concerns about the process.

The lengthy waiting times associated with the NRM process had a number of iatrogenic effects in the eyes of YOS practitioners. Firstly, NRM delays in turn created delays to beginning intervention work with young people: 'we're now getting months in between a referral and a decision. Which is obviously not great for young people because that means that their court case keeps getting adjourned until a decision comes through.' (Kevin, YOS manager). The adjournment of court cases to allow for NRM decisions to come through resulted in lengthy delays to beginning court-ordered intervention work:

> One of the risks is that you go to court, there's an NRM referral that's been made and it can't be dealt with until the outcome of the NRM referral, so then it gets adjourned, you go back to court, the NRM referral still hasn't been dealt with, so it's like young people being in limbo, and that's not always the best outcome for them, because whilst they're in limbo there's no intervention work being done with them, so I'm not sure that an NRM referral in all instances is always the best thing. (Nathan, YOS officer).

As Nathan emphasises, lengthy NRM referrals could create a frustrating obstacle to beginning intervention work with young people, with court-mandated intervention unfortunately being one of the few intensive interventions available to young people affected by CCE (Bristow and Lomas, 2020: 9). This left young people 'in limbo' and YOS

practitioners therefore emphasised that, paradoxically, the NRM was preventing young people from quickly accessing support.

Furthermore, lengthy wait times for an NRM decision could also erase one of the few benefits of the NRM for young people affected by CCE. If young people continued to come into conflict with the law during the time that their NRM referral was being assessed, this could be counter-productive for young people's use of a positive conclusive grounds NRM decision to support a defence under Section 45 of the Modern Slavery Act 2015 against certain existing criminal charges:

> I think a lot of the big problems coming through is that, because of the length of time from initial appearance in court to the NRM being done, and the decision being made by CPS, these kids of course are still being exploited, and they're still doing what they were doing, and then more intelligence builds up. Which is why I think even though they get a positive NRM, the CPS says well look they're still doing this, this and this. If the NRM was working as it should, there's less time for young people to continue being exploited and to be racking up more offences, and I think the delay of 4 or 5 months is really quite harmful to young people. I think it's the delay that's causing more prosecutions because there's more opportunities for them to carry on doing- because then it becomes a pattern. So for example one CPS lawyer said well actually yes this is the first time he's been found with class A drugs, with intent to supply, however he's got a previous robbery, previous this, previous that, so actually this is part of an existing pattern of behaviour, it might be a different type of offence but it's part of an existing pattern of behaviour, therefore we're going to prosecute anyway. (Anton, YOS officer).

As Anton explains, lengthy wait times in which young people were more likely to be left without intervention work created the opportunity for young people to become further entangled in exploitation-related offending. Anton emphasises that the CPS was more likely to view young people with a significant number of offences post-NRM referral as making choices to engage in a 'pattern' of criminal behaviour, as opposed to as victims of exploitation, thereby increasing the likelihood that the CPS would pursue a prosecution even in cases where the NRM decision was positive and weakening the possibility of using the Section 45 defence successfully. This finding supports research from Stone (2018: 6) who concludes that the Section 45 defence is less likely to be initially raised, let alone used

successfully, in cases where the child has a significant criminal history. This was another example of the potentially iatrogenic impact of the NRM, which further undermined practitioners' confidence in the process. Not only did the NRM fail to fulfil normative expectations that identifying an individual as a victim would facilitate their access to help and support, but operational issues also meant that the NRM was seen as having the very opposite of its intended effect.

4.2.3 Practitioners' Involvement in Decision-making About Victim Status

As demonstrated above, practitioners identified a number of issues with the NRM as an official mechanism for determining victim status among young people involved in county lines. In a context in which confidence in the use of the NRM was waning, the views of practitioners at the local level, and the influences of the practitioner contexts which informed and shaped their work, became more important. Ros, a YOS officer, emphasises the importance of YOS practitioners' 'perception and understanding of different young people' on their caseloads. Practitioners engaged in processes of working out 'what's exploitation and what isn't', comparing and contrasting young people in order to ask: 'are they the same level of risk? Are they not? Are they the same level of exploitation? Are they not?' (Ros, YOS officer); 'Is that person vulnerable?...Who's taking advantage of who?' (Ned, YOS officer) and drawing conclusions about young people's victimhood as a result. In order to understand the processes by which young people involved in county lines emerged or failed to emerge as victims of CCE, we must explore practitioners' decision-making within the organisational contexts in which they worked, in this case: the YOS and the police. Central to this is an understanding of the ways in which practitioners working within Stonewell YOS and the CCE police team conceptualised 'victimhood' and 'exploitation'.

4.3 Approaches to Victimhood

As Le Marcis (2014: 84) emphasises in his discussion of victim identification by health professionals, to fully understand the processes through which victim status emerges, we must first examine how conceptualisations of victimhood itself are 'woven' into the cultures of relevant institutions. Accordingly, this section explores the experiences of practitioners within the two primary organisations working on issues of CCE within Stonewell: the YOS and the CCE police team with whom the YOS worked closely. This section examines the ways in which practitioners within both organisations understood 'victimhood', focusing on the barriers that they experienced to recognising young people solely as victims, and the

tensions and challenges of approaches that positioned young people affected by CCE as hybrid 'victim-offenders'.

4.3.1 CCE-related Victimhood and the YOS: Working with 'Victim-Offenders'

While the 'everyday ontologies' (Smith and Gray, 2019: 564) of the YOS, as perceived by YOS practitioners in Stonewell, were relatively favourable to the recognition of young people in conflict with the law as victims, the legacies of the YJS's focus on risk and responsibilisation created barriers to treating young people solely as victims.

4.3.1.1 Everyday ontologies that accepted victimisation as a cause of crime

The perception of the YOS as taking a 'welfare-orientated' (Lola, YOS officer) approach to young people in conflict with the law recurred among YOS practitioners in Stonewell. YOS practitioners emphasised that their approach acknowledged experiences of victimisation, whether at the interpersonal or structural level, as influencing involvement in crime: 'We've always had young people who have actually been victims who have come into the youth justice system, that's always been an issue…obviously this is on a bigger scale in terms of criminal exploitation, but it's always been an issue there.' (Kevin, YOS manager). YOS practitioners already linked young people's general involvement in crime to experiences of 'poverty and lack of opportunity' (Marty, YOS officer) as well as to abuse and other forms of trauma, emphasising that:

> Young people are [with the YOS] for a reason and that behaviour comes from somewhere…They're victims of their own circumstance, generally. Because this thing hasn't just happened over night. There's been certain things that have happened in this young person's life where they've been exploited, bullied, sexually abused at home, or been a victim of some sort of abuse, that other people haven't. (Ned, YOS officer).

As these examples demonstrate, YOS practitioners were already engaged in practices of exploring experiences of victimisation as influencing involvement in offending, and had existing 'models' (Farrell, Pfeffer and Bright, 2015) for recognising an overlap between victimisation and offending. As a result, the possibility of recognising young people involved in drug dealing as victims of criminal exploitation was not an insurmountable conceptual leap, and YOS practitioners were able to apply this familiarity with victimisation as a potential cause of offending to their practice with young people involved in county lines:

> You need to look at what created the risk of them getting involved…so for example, a lot of the young people that I work with have experienced trauma, domestic violence is a really prevalent issue. So you have to look at county lines as the answer, and then ask what were the problems that led to that answer. (Alison, YOS officer).

Alison focuses on the potential ways in which experiences of victimisation may influence young people's involvement in county lines, exemplifying the way in which existing understandings of the relationship between victimisation and offending contributed to the baseline of the YOS's approach to CCE.

4.3.1.2 Keeping the police in check: constructing YOS roles in contrast to the police

In addition, YOS practitioners' sense of their own organisation as better positioned to recognise and respond to CCE than Stonewell's police force, which was cast as overly punitive, was a recurrent theme. As existing research examining practices of multi-agency working has demonstrated, differences in objectives and values between partner agencies can generate friction (Home Office, 2014a; Shaw and Greenhow, 2021). YOS practitioners emphasised that the differences in function and orientation of the police[112] and the YOS meant that the two agencies' approaches to CCE 'don't always marry up, and they don't always work together really well' (Aaron, YOS CCE team) because the police often took a more punitive approach: 'the police they come from different- not always- but sometimes I've had where the police have come from a more punitive approach, perhaps they do see it more as an offender, they've broken the law, and that's it.' (Abby, YOS officer). In contrast, YOS practitioners described both themselves, and the values of the YOS as a whole, as more welfare-orientated:

> So I think the police in general, stereotypically, tend to see young men involved in drug supply as offenders, as a problem, as people to be locked up…and I think from our perspective, our value base is around treating them as children, as young people, and trying to reduce the impact of care and custody. (John, YOS officer).

Among YOS practitioners there was a sense that the YOS and the police were approaching the issue of CCE from different angles, with the YOS practitioners' comments highlighting

[112] YOS practitioners tended not to draw a distinction between members of the CCE police team and other police officers that they encountered during the course of their work on CCE. This was perhaps due to the fact that, at the time of the research, the CCE police team had only existed since 2018 and therefore perhaps had not yet established a team identity that was recognisably distinct from the rest of the police in the eyes of YOS practitioners.

the YOS as offering a more progressive, informed, and enlightened approach, in contrast to the police's more punitive focus, depicted as lagging behind. The existence of this contrast heightened YOS workers' descriptions of themselves as welfare and victim-orientated.

In the extract below, Alana describes coming into conflict with the police over the treatment of Jamie, a young person supported by the YOS CCE team, highlighting the friction caused by the perceptions of different approaches towards victimisation in the YOS versus the police:

> So one of the things that we do in the CCE team is if a young person is arrested, that's one of ours, we go to the custody suite at the police station. So I went, one of my kids had been missing for a month. He's heavily involved. He's like, turned up in trap houses[113] in different parts of the country and all the different stereotypical county lines stuff. And I got there and the impact team, so they're the big police officers that do the like pushing the heads on the pavement kind of, and he was like: "Why are you here?" And I was like: "Because Jamie has been missing for a month and I wanna check he's alright". "Why?" "Well because he's been missing for a month and he's a child and I want to check he's ok and see if he's alright". "Well someone told him his solicitor is here". "Yes, that was me, because he deserves a solicitor and he always has the same one". And he's just like: "Why do you keep trying to keep him out of prison?" And I just said: "How is that going to work? He goes to prison; he comes straight back out again, and it doesn't make any difference". And he was like: "Well he's a criminal, he's a drug dealer, ruh ruh ruh", and they very much see him as like a real like number thing. And one of his colleagues was like: "Well we need to get him arrested. We need to get our figures." (Alana, YOS CCE team).

The brusque exchange between Alana and those who she refers to somewhat disparagingly as the officers that 'push heads on the pavements' exemplifies practitioners' counterpointing of the YOS as an organisation in which practitioners are concerned with the welfare and wellbeing of young people in contrast to the police who are positioned as harsh, uncaring and fixated on meeting targets for arresting those that they have labelled as criminals.

Within this conflict, a key role of the YOS was persuading the police to accept and recognise the possibility that young people involved in drug distribution might also be victims of CCE:

[113] A 'trap house' is a place, usually a house or flat, from which illegal drugs are sold.

‘It has been difficult recently…trying to get police to see the young people as victims.’ (Ros, YOS officer). Practitioners described this as a frustrating and emotionally challenging process. Referring to the difficulty of explaining the role of drug debts in facilitating young people’s exploitation, Alison stated: ‘sometimes it’s like pulling teeth trying to get the police to recognise that when young people are in debt they really lack choices.’ (Alison, YOS officer). The friction that existed between the YOS and the police, as YOS practitioners tried to pull the police perspective towards what they saw as the YOS’s more victim-orientated ‘value base’, further underscored YOS practitioners’ sense of their organisation as offering a particularly victim-orientated approach in contrast to the police.

4.3.1.3 Risk and responsibilisation: Barriers to working with young people solely as victims within the YOS

However, despite expressing that they were better-adapted relative to the police when it came to recognising CCE victimisation among young people involved in county lines, YOS practitioners also described facing barriers to conceptualising young people solely as victims. There were a number of reasons for this. One factor was the continued influence of strategies of responsibilisation of young people that have permeated the YJS from the late 1990s onwards (Phoenix and Kelly, 2013; Case and Haines, 2015; Case, 2022). While acknowledging experiences of victimisation, YOS practitioners also emphasised a need to ensure that young people experienced consequences for the offences in which they had been involved:

> It’s difficult, because although I do see young people involved in county lines and lots of different activities as a victim, I also feel that there has to be an element of that balance. Yes you’re a victim but you have to answer to your actions as well. (Charlie, YOS ISS officer).

> I’m very much for taking into account people’s experiences and their life situation and how difficult that is, but…there has to be consequences for your actions otherwise you don’t understand life. You’ll never change or understand how that affects other people. Therefore, you don’t feel guilty, and guilt is awful and guilt is the thing that kind of stops you from doing that again. (Cassie, YOS CCE team).

The legacy of strategies of responsibilisation in youth justice meant that the fact that young people’s offending was closely rooted in victimisation couldn’t always cancel out or erase the perceived need to hold young people accountable for offending behaviour. The idea that

young people needed to take responsibility for their actions by receiving and adhering to criminal sanctions, even when their involvement in crime was closely linked to victimisation, still permeated the approaches of YOS practitioners in cases of CCE.

Secondly, a pervasive focus on the assessment, management and reduction of risk within the YJS (Phoenix, 2009), which has emerged as a companion to the focus on responsibilisation since the late 1990s, also created barriers to conceptualising young people solely as victims. Concerns with young people involved in county lines as risky, threatening and potentially dangerous: 'you don't know what they're capable of' (Jennifer, YOS manager) reverberated through YOS activities from planning for appointments 'I used to go and do home visits, I don't do home visits any more – they have to be in pairs because there's reference to weapons being used' (David, YOS officer), to finding placements 'it's a very difficult one, supported accommodation…at the end of the day they're still children but it's what risks they bring as well, and whether that can be managed.' (Nadine, YOS accommodation officer). In the following extract, Erica describes her experiences working as Cameron's YOS officer. At the time of the research, Cameron had just completed a custodial sentence for a breach of his existing YOS order, was facing the prospect of an additional custodial sentence for drugs-related offences, and practitioners' concerns about his vulnerability and victim status were beginning to conflict with parallel concerns about the risk of harm that he might pose to others:

> So [Cameron] is vulnerable, and he's at risk of county lines but he's a risk to the community and a risk to himself. So it's like where do you draw the line at? Ok he is victim, he's got all of these offences, but at the same time we still need to protect the public and protect him. And yeah I find it really difficult. If he's not going to comply with ISS, there is no other option for us[114]. That's how plain it is. But at the same time, he is a victim. What can you do? (Erica, YOS officer).

Erica demonstrates the challenges to working with Cameron solely as a victim who was at risk of harm, when his involvement in offending created pressure to manage and contain the risks that he presented to his community and to the public in general. While YOS practitioners stated that it was important to acknowledge young people's experiences of

[114] Here Erica is referring to the possibility that the YOS might not raise objections to Cameron being sentenced to serve time in custody.

victimisation, the YJS's focus on the need to manage young people as potential risks meant that it was difficult for YOS practitioners to conceptualise young people solely as victims.

4.3.2 CCE-related Victimhood and the Police: The Struggle for Recognition

Relative to the YOS, recognising young people involved in county lines as potential victims of CCE required a greater shift in officers' conceptualisations of their core practitioner identities and of the role of the police as an organisation.

Current policy guidance on policing and county lines envisages a new emphasis for the policing of drug-related crime, placing increased focus on recognising victims of exploitation among those involved in drug distribution (Spicer, 2021b), particularly among young people. At the national level, the Home Office's (2017) guidance for frontline practitioners including police provides detailed directions on the identification and support of young people affected by CCE in contexts of county lines. In addition, the guidance offers reminders aimed at avoiding the misidentification of victims as offenders, stating that victims 'may have been criminally exploited even if the activity appears consensual' (Home Office, 2017: 3). Similar policy guidance existed within the Stonewell CCE police team's 'information guide' to its own work, which included statements such as 'criminally exploited children should be treated as victims of abuse not offenders' and which stressed that however 'streetwise' children affected by exploitation may appear, 'they are children and may be extremely vulnerable to multiple risks' (Stonewell Local Authority Safeguarding Partnership, 2020: 6-7). At a policy level, current guidance on CCE appears to form part of what Aliverti (2020: 1124) characterises as a broader 'humanitarian turn' in policing, in which officers are increasingly encouraged to focus on identifying vulnerability and meeting safeguarding obligations. Aliverti (2020: 1119) argues that this approach has already become 'institutionalised' in police work in the UK, and others have similarly noted increased attention to vulnerability even in police work with suspects (Keay and Kirby, 2018), despite significant shortcomings (Paterson and Best, 2016; Dehaghani, 2019).

However, for the police working with Stonewell YOS to identify and support victims of CCE, the prioritisation of vulnerability, and by extension victimisation, among suspects, in their day-to-day work was something to which they were struggling to adapt. As Spicer (2021a: 230) observes in his ethnography of police responses to county lines, resistance to change is a well-documented aspect of police culture (see also Loftus, 2009; and Farrell, Pfeffer and Bright, 2015). Officers working within the CCE police team described this focus

on victimisation as a significant departure from 'usual traditional police work' (Michael, CCE police team) conceived of, in line with Loftus' (2009) description of enduring aspects of police culture, as dealing with offenders and fighting crime. As a result, officers in Stonewell's CCE police team experienced significant barriers to treating young people affected by CCE solely as victims of crime.

This was evident in the difficulties that members of the CCE police team experienced in putting aside a focus on the drugs-related offences that young people affected by CCE were involved in: 'We try not to get involved in the offences that they're being investigated for, but at the end of the day, we are the police and we can't overlook those.' (Michael, CCE police team). Michael's comments demonstrate a conviction that addressing the offences committed by a person is an intrinsic and almost inescapable part of police work. This connection was also made by Billy, another member of the CCE police team: 'It's difficult…we're police officers, and therefore we want to investigate crimes…but then really what we're trying to do is protect these young people so we need to look for a different outcome to what another police officer might look for.' (Billy, CCE police team). As Farrell, Pfeffer and Bright (2015: 326) emphasise, there are 'few models in policing for prioritizing an individual's victimization over any potential criminal involvement…and even fewer models in which police may relabel an individual who has committed a criminal act from a suspect to a victim'. As such, police within Stonewell's CCE team described finding it difficult to step back from the offences committed by young people affected by CCE, and to look past the idea of young people as offenders because this approach stood in tension with the models that existed for their organisational roles and responsibilities as police.

Furthermore, officers' perceptions that CCE work was at odds with the models and modes of policing with which they were familiar, meant that officers approached the identification of young people involved in drug distribution as victims of CCE with a degree of hesitation. The following comments from Simon demonstrate the struggle to adjust to an approach that could feel like it went against conventional models of policing:

> The police role is to protect society and to lock up the bad people…So the police aren't the soft touch, that's not what they are, that's not how they operate. But we are having to adjust to this now because you know- seeing an offender actually being a victim, it's quite a difficult one to get your head around really. It's a whole change of direction. (Simon, CCE police team).

Simon's comments that he has to 'get his head around' this 'change of direction' in 'seeing an offender actually being a victim' imply a view that the increased focus on young people as victims of CCE is an externally imposed reorientation, rather than a response to a concrete need that he has observed. The slight sense of scepticism that this evokes is suggested in Simon's description of his imagined person as an offender, who he is being asked to see as a victim, rather than a victim outright. This uncertainty is tangled up in Simon's perceived function of the police - 'to lock up the bad people' - and thereby with a concern that by 'seeing an offender actually being a victim' this function may not be adequately served.

In addition, the practice of treating young people involved in county lines as potential CCE victims did not always align with wider operational demands placed on police in Stonewell, particularly on officers who were outside the YOS and CCE police teams, but with whom these more specialist officers worked collaboratively. For the police in Stonewell as a whole, performance metrics were interpreted in ways that highlighted punitive facets of police work, with arrests and convictions centred as markers of success. For example, Keith conveyed his awareness that other officers viewed convictions related to drug dealing as the reward for the work that they put into investigating cases, and therefore the NRM process as a frustrating obstacle:

> Police officers put a lot of work in obviously over a case. They've caught a person dealing drugs. He's already been caught, dealing drugs. He's a drug dealer as far as they're concerned… they've done a hard job catching somebody, it takes a lot to get people to court these days, through the hurdles of CPS and everything else and then of course your next hurdle now, a new hurdle now is being thrown in there, the NRM. (Keith, YOS-seconded police officer).

While it was not clear whether these perceptions of conviction as a measure of success in drugs cases had a tangible impact on victim identification, it is worth noting the potential impact on specialist police of an awareness the wider force might not look kindly on the introduction of concerns about CCE. Further practical reasons for reluctance to engage with CCE victim identification processes in the wider force centred on their implications for officers' workloads. As Paul explained:

> What I've had to do, I've also had to raise an investigation because they are a victim as well as a suspect. So I've done both. So you can see potentially on every person like that the workload could double…From a selfish point of view, I want to reduce

> my crime queue…and the longer it goes on and if he were to be convicted – how would [the court] look upon me? I haven't worked expeditiously. (Paul, Local area police).

Paul reminds us of the practical difficulties of navigating the increased pressures that CCE cases could place on workloads and expectations of efficiency. While the officers working in more specialist and CCE-focused roles, who formed the majority of officers participating in this study[115], did not raise these practical barriers as issues that directly affected their work, they formed an important part of the wider organisational context in which they operated.

CCE still represents an emerging issue in policing, and requirements to approach young people involved in county lines as potential victims were still creating unresolved friction and tension with officers' conceptualisations of the organisational role of the police. These findings support the conclusions of Shaw and Greenhow's (2021) qualitative research with police working on issues of exploitation in relation to young people in care within Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hubs (MASH). Although limited in scope[116], this research also found that the police struggled to prioritise young people's status as victims of CCE in an organisational context that required them to prioritise addressing offences. Additionally, my findings also further develop the work of Spicer (2021a), which describes officers' attempts to maintain a sense of ontological security, in the face of county lines as an issue that felt unfamiliar, by relying on traditional strategies for policing drug markets, rather than embracing new strategies geared towards county lines. My analysis demonstrates that this sense of ontological insecurity in relation to policing county lines is connected to wider perceptions of the role of the police as inextricably linked to the pursual of offences, and of the dichotomisation of victims and offenders.

4.3.3 Repressive Welfarism and Criminalisation as a Safeguarding Tool

Furthermore, the process of responding to young people solely as victims was further complicated, for YOS practitioners and the CCE-focused police practitioners working

[115] The inclusion of a larger number of non-specialist officers was not feasible within the timescale and scope of this research but is an important area for future research.

[116] This study focused primarily on the experiences of police and social workers working on issues of CSE and CCE in the MASH specifically in relation to children in local authority care and does not speak to the experiences of other children affected by CCE. The study involved six one-off focus groups (lasting an average of approximately one hour and involving six police officers among 30 other practitioners) and four interviews (lasting an average of approximately 30 minutes, only one of which was with a police officer). It did not include an observational component, and therefore does not fully consider the extent to which officers' perspectives played out in practice.

alongside them, by the erosion of welfare-orientated support for young people in need in Stonewell. This erosion of support meant that punitive interventions were conceptualised as a way of addressing young people's welfare needs. While these interventions were implemented 'in the name of protection' (Phoenix, 2002), in instances when coercion and control were felt by practitioners to be a necessary part of care (Canton and Dominey, 2020), the fact that they involved criminalisation presented challenges for practitioners attempting to reconceptualise young people as victims rather than offenders.

Practitioners described conceptualising criminalisation as a form of safeguarding: 'It's not about perhaps sometimes seeing it as criminalisation but actually seeing it as another safeguarding option...There are times when actually criminalising is the best way to help young people.' (Sally, CCE police team). This approach was connected to a lack of other viable safeguarding opportunities: 'there's a massive push to make sure that everything else has been tried before we go there. But there usually isn't much everything else, and that's the problem really.' (Michael, CCE police team). In an increasingly resource-restricted environment, the kind of intensive support needed to help young people transition away from the harms of CCE was often tied up with their entry into the criminal justice system: 'It's sad, I've said this a long long time, it does sometimes take an offence to happen to be able to get that support which is really wrong.' (Lola, YOS officer). In relation to youth justice, Phoenix (2009) describes this approach as 'repressive welfarism', in which punishment and criminalisation is positioned as a form of welfarism in contexts where more conventional forms of welfare support have been eroded. In practice, this approach manifested itself in Stonewell's response to CCE in three ways: the mandatory YOS supervision associated with criminal behaviour orders, the use of curfews and the use of tags[117], each of which muddied the distinction between victims and offenders, compromising the status of young people affected by CCE solely as victims.

4.3.3.1 Criminal Behaviour Orders as safeguarding tools

The positioning of criminal behaviour orders that young people received at court, such as Referral Orders and Youth Rehabilitation Orders, as safeguarding tools was a recurring theme among the YOS and the CCE police team. YOS practitioners emphasised that the mandatory element of contact with the YOS under an order compelled young people who

[117] The use of welfare placements in secure children's homes could also potentially be considered within this section. However, there were few examples of Stonewell YOS considering the use of secure welfare placements for children affected by CCE. This was largely due to the lack of availability of such placements.

were reluctant, or facing barriers to engagement, to engage with interventions that the YOS felt would be supportive for them. This is demonstrated by the relationship between Idzi, a young person affected by CCE, and his YOS worker Emily. Idzi had a significant drug debt, had experienced threats of violence in relation to this, had a positive reasonable grounds NRM decision and was waiting on a conclusive grounds decision. Despite this, the CPS was proceeding with prosecuting him for a number of drugs and weapons-related offences. Idzi was currently seeing Emily as part of a voluntary Prevention Order and was struggling with engagement, which had been very 'up and down' (Emily, YOS officer). Emily described this as follows:

> I think from Idzi's perspective, he sees what's happened, but it's too late. I think he genuinely thinks it's too late for him, this is just it now, there's no way of getting out. He tells me all the time, "it's fine, it's fine, there's nothing wrong." Are you safe? "Of course". That's his catchphrase: "of course, of course, of course". Everything is "of course". Do you know about this? "Of course". It's difficult. He says everything is fine all the time. But then sometimes he is saying it with tears in his eyes…he's not coping with the situation. But he won't talk about it, and he won't let anyone help because I think he thinks it's too bad and the best thing for him to do is to go back to work and work off the debt. (Emily, YOS officer).

The extract above demonstrates the challenges that arose when a young person's safety was at risk, but they didn't feel able to engage with practitioners. Emily's care and attentiveness towards Idzi's emotional wellbeing and physical safety is evident, and she expressed hoping that a transition, from carrying out voluntary supervisions with Idzi to seeing him as part of a statutory order, would help her to better support him:

> So Idzi is going to go to court soon, and then once all of that is wrapped up I imagine he's gonna come back through to [YOS], and then he'll be open to me on a statutory order, which will make things a lot easier because he will have to see me, you know once or twice a week, and he will. I know he'll engage well. (Emily, YOS officer).

Here, Emily explains that Idzi's conviction at court will make it easier for her to support him, as a statutory order would mean that Idzi would no longer be able to disengage from work with Emily, as to do so would be to risk a breach and a return to court.

Another benefit associated with criminal behaviours orders was their perceived utility as a way of opening young people up to more extensive support and intervention: 'Criminal

sanctions can create time to work with the young person more intensely.' (Stanley, YOS-seconded police officer); 'With YOS interventions you can get a bit of a handle on them because they've got to comply and there's massive consequences if they don't.' (Jennifer, YOS manager). David expressed that the efficacy of interventions for young people affected by CCE

> Depends on what teeth there is that come with it. And that sounds oppressive, but just to really get a foothold. Like with the- you need to come and see me next week otherwise you could be in breach of an order it- it- forges a pathway. (David, YOS officer).

Descriptions of orders as allowing practitioners to 'get a foothold', 'get a handle', and to 'forge a pathway' emphasise the idea that mandatory contact wedges open the door, with this initial coercive act creating the space needed for a supportive relationship to develop, thereby creating opportunities to safeguard the young person.

4.3.3.2 Curfews and electronic tags as safeguarding tools

Within the range of interventions associated with criminal behaviour orders and bail packages, curfews and electronic tags were specifically highlighted as two coercive interventions that were particularly effective in safeguarding young people from CCE, acting as 'both a protective factor and a control' (Stanley, YOS-seconded police officer):

> If people are on bail conditions and they have to abide by curfews and conditions that prevent them associating with other people, then it does safeguard them. (Michael, CCE police team).

> You can better monitor them with a view to safeguarding, you can give them a curfew so they're not being exposed to that criminal lifestyle or to the exploiters or that group of people…it's just trying to do the best we can to safeguard them. (Shona, CCE police team).

Shona and Michael characterise curfews as an effective safeguarding tool because they facilitate increased monitoring and surveillance of young people's movements, and thereby restrict their association with individuals who might otherwise be exposing them to harm.

In addition, practitioners emphasised that tags and curfews provided a method of safeguarding young people because this increased monitoring and surveillance made young people less attractive targets for potential exploiters:

> The idea is that they could then go to their exploiters and say you can't use me because I've got these conditions and I'll just get arrested, and I'll probably get arrested with your drugs…if they realise that they're being policed then they will abide by those and then they can't be exploited any further because it's just too difficult for them to be used. And that's the sort of result we're looking for. (Michael, CCE police team).

In such cases, coercive interventions were seen as an important part of safeguarding young people by indirectly increasing the risk of criminalisation for those seeking to involve those young people in the commission of crime. Coercive interventions were conceptualised as placing a spotlight on young people affected by CCE rendering them more visible and thereby less useful to potential exploiters. In these cases, the use of coercive interventions was seen as the price of keeping potential exploiters away from young people, thereby facilitating a young person's transition away from CCE. As with statutory orders that mandated contact with the YOS, the use of coercive interventions in the form of curfews and tags[118] was about generating an initial opportunity to jump start young people's transition away from involvement in potentially exploitative situations, in a context where there was a lack of resource to support alternative approaches.

4.3.3.3 Criminalisation as a safeguarding tool: Implications for victim status

While it is not unusual to find coercive interventions within practices of care in fields ranging from criminal justice supervision, to child protection interventions, to practices in mental health care (Canton and Dominey, 2020), in the specific context of CCE the use of criminalisation as a safeguarding tool did pose challenges for practitioners attempting to re-position young people as victims: 'it doesn't sit well with us that you're then criminalising somebody who is really only committing these offences because they're a victim.' (Michael, CCE police team). While practitioners in both the YOS and the CCE police team spoke about the safeguarding benefits associated with coercive interventions, they also described a sense of uneasiness with the way they felt this approach traversed the victim offender dichotomy.

[118] Practitioners in Stonewell YOS rarely made use of restrictive interventions recommended by the Home Office's Child Exploitation Disruption Toolkit (Home Office, 2019), such as CAWNs or Secure Accommodation Orders, preferring more established and easily accessible tools such as curfews and tags. This finding is consistent with Spicer's (2021a) research into policing county lines, in which officers tended to eschew newer tools for disrupting county lines (such as Drug Dealing Telecommunication Restriction Orders) in favour of more established approaches.

This sense of unease was demonstrated by the positioning of the 'criminalisation as safeguarding' approach as a last resort, in which young people's cases reached points at which 'it felt like the only thing to do is to drag them out' (Christopher, YOS manager). Referring to a case in which practitioners in the YOS and CCE police team took a joint decision to serve a warrant on two young people who were affected by CCE, Sally explained that 'there was an acceptance that yes they are being exploited but we've done all we possibly can, criminalisation is really the only route left really to safeguard them.' (Sally, CCE police team). It is important to recognise that the criminalisation of young people affected by CCE was not viewed as a desirable first choice safeguarding option, but rather as a last resort that often felt necessary because other routes had been unsuccessful or unavailable.

The tensions that practitioners, particularly those in the YOS, described 'criminalisation as safeguarding' as raising for the treatment of young people as victims were captured particularly well by Arnie, an officer in the CCE police team, who outlined his frustrations with YOS practitioners after a tense risk meeting in which the group has discussed using criminal sanctions with a young person affected by CCE:

> Right, so what do we want out of this? Alright, we want him to be safeguarded. What do we know about his circumstances? Well we don't know anything. Why not? Because he won't engage with us. Right so why is he not engaging with youth offending? Well because he's not currently subject to any criminal conditions that mean he has to…So, my perspective is: give him the caution? Why? Why give him the caution that's not fair. I'm not saying it's fair. I agree. I think it's unfair. Give him the caution, then you can work with him. What do you want most? What do you want most? Do you want to preserve this- your go to sound bite comment in this scenario every given time of: we don't want to punish him twice, or do you wanna help protect that child? And I'll say go for protecting the child. That isn't fair you're right, but we're leaving him to risk if we all just walk away now. And we can go brilliant he hasn't got a caution his life is going to be perfect. No he won't. He'll be left in that swamp and he will be left exposed to risk because no one has got a way of working with him.

In this extract, Arnie captures a debate that recurred across observations in this study between preserving the position that the young person is a victim on one hand and delivering interventions that further criminalise the young person, but which might have a more tangible

impact on extracting them from a harmful situation and ensuring their safety, on the other. As a result of the victim-offender dichotomy, approaches to CCE that involved criminalisation had the potential to create tension, in which the need to find ways of practically supporting a young person conflicted with attempts to preserve their status as a victim.

4.3.4 Drawing the Line: The Pressure to Categorise Young People as Victims or Offenders

In addition, the context of a youth justice system in which victims and offenders are positioned as distinct, polarised and binary opposites (Drake and Henley, 2014: 142; Dignan and Maguire, 2005: 86), also made it difficult for practitioners to adopt an approach in which young people's victimisation was recognised alongside their offending. A key issue here was the role of the victim-offender dichotomy in restricting the extent to which practitioners could treat young people as hybrid 'victim-offenders' and in creating pressure to place young people in just one category. In this context, YOS practitioners described struggling to maintain the liminal position of young people affected by CCE:

> We find it very difficult to acknowledge both…They're both victim and perpetrator and actually we struggle with that. We like to put people in one category or the other and deal with them accordingly. And actually with a lot of these young people that's not possible, so I think we do struggle with that. (Kevin, YOS manager).

With each individual young person, holding the categories of 'victim' and 'offender' in tandem was a struggle. Practitioners expressed that, within the youth justice system, the lines between victim and offender were often starkly drawn; the two categories were positioned as antithetical (Rock, 1998), with very little room overlap: 'there's no space in the system to see people as both victims and as offenders.' (Nathan, YOS officer). In such contexts, there is little space for the nuance or complexity of overlapping and interrelated experiences of victimisation and offending that so often exist (van Gelder *et al.*, 2015), and YOS practitioners struggled to hold this space open for those affected by CCE.

In this context, practitioners described young people as undergoing sharp transitions from victim to offender. Practitioners described this as a 'line' that young people 'cross' (Melissa, CCE police team), a 'seesaw balance' (Arnie, CCE police team) or a 'tipping point' (Christopher, YOS manager) at which the 'professional world switches their perception' (Christopher, YOS) of young people. Christopher further elaborated that:

> You could almost nail it down to a single day when kids go from victim to offender. Kids go from vulnerable exploited kid into [slaps hand on table] drug dealing exploiter. (Christopher, YOS manager).

These phrases evoke the certainty of the transition and emphasise the difficulty of finding a grey area or middle ground in which young people could exist as 'victim-offender hybrids'. Because, as described above, there were numerous barriers for practitioners who attempted to position young people solely as victims, this transition tended to go only one way: from victim to offender. As such, sustaining a perception of young people solely as victims was extremely challenging.

4.4 Conceptualisations of Exploitation

In addition to the challenges associated with conceptualising young people as victims, 'criminal exploitation' was also a complex form of victimisation for practitioners to identify. Practitioners described the definitional boundaries of what exactly constituted criminal exploitation as 'blurred' (Ned, YOS officer; Maddison, YOS CCE team) and unclear, and characterised criminal exploitation as manifesting in ways that were 'subtle' (Kim, YOS ISS officer) and 'insidious' (Christopher, YOS manager). This section explores the challenges that practitioners experienced in determining exactly what it meant for a young person to be experiencing criminal exploitation. For the CCE police team these challenges centred around the lack of a statutory definition of CCE; challenges identified by YOS practitioners related to the elision of experiences of exploitation with wider experiences of violence and marginalisation that were prevalent among many young people in contact with the YOS, and differences between CCE and the more established issue of child sexual exploitation. This section also considers practitioners' perceptions that young people themselves found it difficult to recognise how and when they were being exploited, and the challenges that this created for defining and identifying exploitation.

4.4.1 The Absence of a Statutory Definition of CCE

Currently, there is no statutory definition of 'child criminal exploitation'. Practitioners in Stonewell, particularly practitioners within the CCE police team, emphasised that the lack of a single definition set out in legislation made it difficult for them to take a standardised approach to identifying victims:

> Without a definition that each agency can work to, we all apply our own thresholds, our own personal opinions, our own agency view. You know, and our own

> unconscious bias. Lots of things creep in that mean that we might not all view a situation for a particular child or young person in the same way. And therefore, how can we expect to have a standardised response when we're all working to an unknown definition? (Sally, CCE police team).

Understandably, practitioners' decision-making regarding whether or not a young person should be considered exploited was complicated by the lack of a universally shared definition of exploitation. Members of the CCE police team explained that a statutory definition of exploitation would bring clarity to their work: 'I think it'd be really helpful for the government to deliver a definition of exploitation…this is what it encapsulates, and be really clear about it.' (Melissa, CCE police team); 'I'd like to see a national definition of what child criminal exploitation is. Because you know I think that's where a lot of the problem stems.' (Sally, CCE Police team). As Sally identifies in both her comments, the lack of a statutory definition created problems because where practitioner opinions differed about the extent to which a young person was exploited there was no universal definition to fall back on in order to guide decision making. As a result, the process of determining whether a young person was a victim of exploitation became far more complicated, ambiguous and open to individual interpretation. The concerns expressed by officers in Stonewell resonated with recent reports from The Children's Society (2019) and HMICFRS (2020), which also draw attention to this issue, emphasising that the lack of a consistent definition creates disparities in the decision making and support provided to potential CCE victims.

4.4.2 Exploited Enough? The Spectrum of Exploitation

Another factor that complicated the identification of young people as victims of exploitation stems from the nature of 'exploitation' as a continuum or spectrum (Skirvankova, 2010: 4), which encompasses a range of experiences and situations of varying degrees of severity. As Yea (2015) emphasises, within this broad spectrum, only more extreme forms of exploitation, typically cases in which individuals are subject to severe physical violence and are physically unable to leave an exploitative situation, tend to be viewed as exceptional and problematised as headline-grabbing issues of 'modern slavery'. Less extreme forms of exploitation, for example the experiences of low-paid, risky and precarious work that are widespread at the lower end of the labour market, are dismissed as 'banal exploitation' and are 'normalised and rendered routine' (Yea, 2015: 1096; Davies, 2018; 2020). As Yea (2015) emphasises, many of those in this latter category would meet official criteria for exploitation. However, the vast majority are deemed 'not trafficked enough' (Yea, 2015: 1096), in part because such

experiences are so widespread that to address them all as cases of modern slavery would be to overwhelm existing service provision.

In Stonewell, a similarly broad spectrum of exploitation existed. Practitioners acknowledged the diversity of experience that could potentially fall under the term CCE:

> CCE is an umbrella term isn't it with huge diversity within those labels as well. So I think it just depends on what kind of thing we're talking- like are we talking about say some friends that are dealing amongst themselves and you know maybe there's one sort of higher up the food chain, that arguably could be exploiting these younger ones, or are we talking at the other extreme end where we're finding children in trap houses, with stab proof vests, armed and like several hundred grams of heroin and crack cocaine…It is such a spectrum. (Kim, YOS ISS officer).

As Kim outlines, potential cases of CCE could be both 'subtle and unsubtle' (Christopher, YOS manager) ranging from concerns about slight differences in power dynamics within friendship groups right up to cases where young people were held against their will and subjected to serious violence. As such, practitioners were faced with a range of 'degrees of exploitation' (Billy, CCE police team) and a 'sliding scale' of harm (Arnie, CCE police team). In a context where the definition of CCE was potentially so expansive, practitioners were faced with the difficult questions of 'how far to push the definition' (Sally, CCE police team) and where to 'draw the line' (Erica, YOS officer; Lola, YOS officer) on what they considered problematic exploitation, and of who was 'exploited enough' to warrant a CCE-focused intervention. CCE remains an exceptional category as conceptualised in YOS work and treating all of the wide range of young people whose lives, and reasons for involvement in offending, included elements of exploitation as cases of CCE would create a huge volume of CCE-related work that the YOS was not equipped to deal with. Yet, as with any type of exploitation (Skirvankova, 2010), there were no clear answers as to the point or level at which it was appropriate to draw a line as to what should be counted as CCE.

To complicate matters further, the experiences of young people at the 'less extreme' end of the CCE spectrum elided with the kinds of experiences of poverty, violence, trauma and vulnerability that were also prevalent among the wider population of young people open to the YOS in Stonewell, and which have been observed in research with other youth offending services (Chard, 2021). Where exceptional events such as a young person being held in a trap

house were absent, practitioners, particularly those within the YOS[119], noted that the economic deprivation and subsequent coercion, peer pressure and role of personal vulnerability in young people's exploitation were difficult to separate from the factors that helped to explain 'why young people are involved in many forms of criminality.' (Aaron, YOS CCE team). As Christopher explained:

> Clearly some young people are committing offences and causing harm. Clearly they've been exploited and are being exploited and clearly they are young people. But I was talking to somebody yesterday, and in a way, once you're in that mindset, like where do you stop because most of our young people have been exploited you know and had really miserable lives, the parents are dealing drugs, so actually at what point do you say they're not that responsible for what they're doing? That's a struggle that I suppose has been around in our work for a long long time. This stuff crystallises it a little bit. It really does. (Christopher, YOS manager).

As Christopher describes, it was difficult to separate the elements of exploitation that should be identified as CCE from what Yea (2015: 1096) would characterise as the 'banal exploitation' that featured throughout the lives of many young people in contact with the YOS.

The prevalence of 'banal exploitation' further complicated the identification of CCE. Where young people existed in contexts of multiple and complex disadvantage, the income that young people received, and the relationships that they formed through involvement in county lines, could be conceptualised by YOS practitioners as benefits, which therefore challenged expectations of what it meant to be exploited:

> That's why the lines are blurred isn't it sometimes because it's like…[the young people] are friends with them, there's a genuine kind of relationship there. It might be like a mentoring. They might actually go to these people for advice. You know and actually apart from the drug dealing, they're quite a good role model in other ways, that's why it's so complicated…if you work for the Tescos manager, you might not even have a relationship with them. So what are you getting? All you're getting is early starts and zero hours contract and minimum wage, whereas if you look at it

[119] Perhaps reflecting greater attentiveness within the YOS to sociostructural marginalisation as a cause of offending, as discussed in Section 4.3.1.

> more creatively and contextually and individually it's let's look at the dynamics here, it's not out and out CCE what's going on here. (Ned, YOS officer).

For Ned, the fact that young people might gain both payment and mentorship from their involvement in county lines drug dealing, and indeed that these benefits might be an improvement on those which young people might gain from their unsatisfactory legal work opportunities, introduced the idea that such cases should not be thought of as 'out and out CCE'. Accordingly, contexts of very limited life opportunities had the potential to dilute experiences that might be characterised as CCE, which were instead viewed as a small improvement on young people's experiences of marginalisation, and, in line with the 'wrongful use'[120] framing of exploitation, less credible as experiences of exploitation.

4.4.3 CCE and Existing Narratives of Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE)

The final definitional issue that complicated the process of identifying young people as victims of CCE was practitioners' conceptualisations of CCE in relation to existing narratives of exploitation with which they were more familiar. As Farrell, Pfeffer and Bright (2015) emphasise, when new crimes emerge, criminal justice practitioners will often draw on existing crime schemas to inform their responses. With regard to the emergence of CCE, this meant drawing on pre-existing understandings of child sexual exploitation (CSE), a related issue but one with significant differences. The ways in which practitioners positioned CCE in relation to these pre-existing narratives of exploitation made the recognition of CCE more challenging.

Practitioners in Stonewell, particularly YOS practitioners, were clear that their understanding of CCE had developed in part as an extension of their pre-existing understanding of CSE as a policy issue and media narrative, stating that they were 'aware of [CCE] as a move on from the child sexual exploitation terminology' (Kevin, YOS manager) and emphasising that 'we sort of started worrying about CSE, that was the thing, and then suddenly it was CSE stroke CCE and it was sort of like an afterthought. But now I've more concerns about CCE' (Jess, YOS officer). In addition, Stonewell YOS's CCE risk assessment tool had developed from a

[120] Ned's reasoning recalls the framing of exploitation as 'wrongful use', as opposed to exploitation as 'disparity of value', (Wilkinson, 2003; Munro, 2008; Zwolinski and Wertheimer, 2017). As discussed in the literature review, the wrongful use framing is more prevalent in mainstream policy and practice literature on exploitation (O'Connell Davidson, 2015; Fudge, 2021) and is unable to accommodate the idea that victims can derive any benefit from their experiences of exploitation.

tool designed for CSE: ‘The assessment tools that we use are CSE assessment tools and they were modified and updated to include child criminal exploitation.’ (Alan, YOS manager);

> We’ve got what’s called a criminal exploitation assessment, which has been, I think it’s been around for a long time, but it was primarily used for child sexual exploitation. And so that I think has kind of amalgamated into a document that does both of them. (Emily, YOS officer).

Similarly, the operational activity of the CCE police team had begun with addressing CSE and had ‘developed into CSE and CCE, so we’re covering the whole broad spectrum of childhood exploitation.’ (Sally, CCE police team). Both practitioners’ conceptual awareness of CCE and the practical tools and processes that they used were at times rooted in pre-existing work on CSE.

The legacy of CSE related work did aid YOS practitioners in particular in identifying young people as victims of criminal exploitation in some ways. The media and policy narrative that emerged in the aftermath of the CSE scandals in Rotherham, Rochdale and Oxford - that many practitioners had wrongly treated young girls as making fully consensual ‘lifestyle choices’, overlooking their status as victims of exploitation (Jay, 2014; Bell, 2018) - supported further reflection on the circumstances of potential victims of CCE: ‘I think the child sexual exploitation stuff has helped- has begun a change in people’s perception of how young people make choices. How free they are to make choices.’ (Christopher, YOS manager). YOS practitioners drew on these established narratives surrounding choice in contexts of CSE to help to ‘fight the corner for the young person being exploited’ countering assertions that young people were ‘choosing to deal drugs’ (Alana, YOS CCE team) by evoking the CSE scandals as a reminder of how young people have been misread and their needs overlooked in the past:

> We used to talk about child prostitutes 10 years ago, and about girls making choices, but now we talk about child sexual exploitation. When I first started in the service, we talked about drug dealing and young people being dealers, but then CCE arrived and now we see it as exploitation. (Chloe, YOS ETE officer).

The example of how views on CSE had changed served to bolster arguments in favour of a young person’s victim status in cases where there was a dispute about whether young people was choosing a lifestyle that involved dealing drugs, in order to argue that this assessment overlooked the reality of a young person’s situation.

However, there were also disadvantages to an understanding of CCE rooted in CSE, and with building an approach to CCE grounded in CSE work. In particular, knowledge and practice around CSE does not necessarily provide a sufficient foundation for a victim-orientated approach with young people who commit offences as part of their exploitation. While the local authority and police in Stonewell were 'learning the lessons from Rotherham and Rochdale' (Robert, County Safeguarding Lead) and had developed an approach to CSE in which 'the young people are identified as victims immediately and the whole thing is a safeguarding approach.' (Aaron, YOS CCE team), this was where practice in relation to CCE began to diverge, particularly in relation to policing and the response to young people as having committed offences:

> We were dealing with the grooming gangs...and that was good because we were working with the [specialist police team]. The problem we're finding with dealing with county lines is that it also sits in an environment of local policing, and there is no understanding in local policing that it's a victim-led crime. (Robert, County Safeguarding Lead).

Practitioners attributed this divergence to the fact that, unlike with CSE, offending was an intrinsic part of CCE: 'with CCE I think it's different because those kids are actually breaking the law, whereas the CSE girls aren't.' (Chloe, YOS ETE officer). Understandably, because young people's offending is not a core feature of CSE, approaches to CCE based on responses to CSE are not best placed to deal effectively with ways in which involvement in offending creates barriers for the recognition of young people as CCE victims, as a result of the dichotomisation of victimisation and offending (Sturrock and Holmes, 2015; Stone, 2018; Shaw and Greenhow, 2020). The YOS required a more specific, tailored approach to CCE than approaches grounded in CSE work could offer.

4.4.4 Exploitation, Young People's Agency and the 'Unknowing Victim'

As demonstrated above, 'exploitation' was described by practitioners as an ambiguous concept that was often difficult to grasp and identify. In this context, the insights of young people themselves into their own experiences could potentially play a useful role in supporting practitioners' understanding and decision making in relation to this complex set of experiences. However, the view that young people not only struggled to identify that they were being exploited, but that they often failed to recognise this completely, created a barrier to practitioners drawing on young people's insights in this way. When asked to talk about the

biggest challenges of working with young people affected by CCE, perceptions that young people 'don't see that they're exploited' (Lauren, YOS officer; Cassie, YOS CCE team), 'don't understand that they're being exploited' (Anton, YOS officer), 'don't realise the exploitation' (Alison, YOS officer), and were 'not aware that they're becoming a victim' (Jeff, YOS officer), recurred in practitioners' answers. Practitioners conceptualised young people as 'unknowing victims' who needed to be educated and brought to realise the reality of their exploitation. As such, young people were not positioned as collaborative partners who could aid practitioners in the identification of exploitation.

There were two main factors that practitioners mentioned with regards to perceptions of young people's inability to recognise themselves as exploited. Firstly, conceptualisations of young people as lacking in the capacity and agency to fully comprehend their experiences. Practitioners in Stonewell positioned young people affected by CCE as having 'a kind of Stockholm syndrome' (Alison, YOS officer), and as 'groomed' (Demi, YOS officer) into a false understanding of their situations and relationships. This perception is further exemplified in the language used by practitioners to describe exploiters as 'drawing' (Alan, YOS manager; Kevin, YOS-seconded police officer), 'pulling' (Charlie, YOS ISS officer) 'dragging' (Jess, YOS officer) 'luring' (Agatha, YOS officer) or 'hooking' (Michael, CCE police team) young people in. This language evokes the sense of passivity and powerlessness that is often difficult to escape in mainstream discussions about exploitation.

Secondly, practitioners positioned their perspectives as more valid, and more reflective of reality, than young people's views on the same experiences: 'they still don't recognise themselves as being exploited so that is a massive challenge.' (Kevin, YOS-seconded police officer). 'I don't think that they actually realise that they're being groomed and exploited' (Kerri, YOS CCE team). In both extracts, the use of the terms 'recognise' and 'realise' imply that there are truths there to be seen, namely practitioners' assessments that young people were being exploited, which young people are failing to see.

4.4.4.1 Opening young people's eyes to exploitation: A blind alley?

Despite the difficulties that practitioners acknowledged themselves as having in conceptualising and identifying CCE, they positioned themselves as more able to see the realities of young people's exploitation than young people themselves. Practitioners described their role as to educate, persuade or enlighten young people to the point where they recognised that they were being exploited. Practitioners described this dynamic as follows: 'It

is a challenge in our job to get people to realise that they are being exploited.' (Erica, YOS-officer);

> All you can do is try and help to educate people, to try and see a different perspective… It's a difficult challenge and again it's one we have to take on with each individual. And do what we can. And sometimes we'll be successful and sometimes we won't. That is the challenge. (Kevin, YOS-seconded police officer).

> A lot of them don't actually see anything wrong with what they're doing, and you know so you can go there and "oh we want to try and help you" but well actually, help me from what because I'm alright with this. And then how do you make them realise that they shouldn't be alright with it? No, you are being exploited, you're being victimised. That's a real difficulty. (Billy, CCE police team).

The comments above demonstrate that practitioners strove, often with difficulty, to persuade young people to change their view of their situations, and to instil the realisation that they saw as lacking among young people, and saw this as a key part of their role with young people affected by CCE.

However, the approach of seeking to open young people's eyes to the realities of their exploitation in fact created further barriers to identifying and working with young people as victims of CCE, as this dynamic within practitioners' relationships with young people engendered resistance from the young people themselves[121]. Failure to achieve these dynamics in work with young people had the unintended impact of producing a deadlock, in which practitioners emphasised that they struggled to work with young people who 'who just completely have a wall built up' (Erica, YOS officer) in that they would not accept practitioners' framing of their situations as exploitation. The existence of this deadlock meant that practitioners could feel like they 'just have no way of doing anything in the form of intervention with [young people] at all' (Erica, YOS officer). I return to this conflict between practitioners' and young people's views on their status as CCE victims in the final findings chapter, which explores young people's perspectives and assertions of agency in more detail.

[121] As discussed further in the following findings chapters, young people described resenting what they perceived as practitioners' attempts to 'boss me around' and 'tell me what's good for me' (Dan) and expressed frustration with an approach that often appeared to override their own perceptions and views. Young people expressed a need for an approach that was led by their perspectives on their experiences: 'I want someone who asks me more questions…if practitioners don't have respect for what I'm saying to them then I don't have the time of day for them.' (Freddie); and expressed a need to be listened to and understood: '[practitioners] need to try and understand what's happening before they jump to things.' (Carl).

For now, it is important to emphasise that practitioners' framing of young people as 'unknowing victims' generated conflict between young people and practitioners, which in turn created a barrier for practitioners to identifying and working with young people as victims of CCE.

4.5 Chapter Conclusion

This chapter has provided a multi-layered analysis of the organisational contexts that inform youth justice practitioners' decisions about young people's status as CCE victims within Stonewell, offering an insight into the landscapes of youth justice and exploitation-related policy and practice in which practitioners' responses played out. This chapter has demonstrated the loss of confidence in the NRM as an official mechanism for decision-making in relation to young people's status as victims of CCE among practitioners in Stonewell, creating a space for individual practitioner opinion and discretion to play a greater role in decisions about young people's status as CCE victims. However, numerous barriers inhibit practitioners' identification of young people involved in county lines as victims of criminal exploitation. As a concept 'exploitation' is complex and difficult to pin down: ill-defined, elastic, and often counter-intuitive in terms of the benefits it may offer its victims, with these victims positioned as unable to offer insight into the experience of exploitation itself. If the challenges posed by the concept of exploitation were not enough, organisational cultures, in the YOS and to a greater degree in the police, both created barriers to recognising young people affected by CCE solely as victims, and to recognising them as hybrid 'victim-offenders', exerting pressure to categorise young people solely as offenders.

My analyses contribute three key insights to the wider literature on CCE. Firstly, I demonstrate that there are significant ideological and practical barriers within the current youth justice system to fulfilling the Ministry of Justice's (2019: 5) recommendation that practitioners consider young people involved in county lines as exploited victims rather than as perpetrators of drug-related crime. Although the emergence of CCE as a policy issue may be pointing towards the rise of a more welfare-orientated approach to young people in conflict with the law, the experiences of practitioners in Stonewell show that we are a long way from reaching this goal. At present, the issue of CCE shines a light on the ways in which the organisational contexts of the YJS, the YOS and the police ultimately restrict processes of victim identification. Within the police, the enduring focus on addressing offending created pressure to abandon the conceptualisation of young people as CCE victims. While the YOS had greater bandwidth, both practically and ideologically, for acknowledging the interrelation

of victimisation and offending, an ongoing concern with responsibilisation and risk still created pressure to abandon the recognition of CCE. Furthermore, for both groups of practitioners, the dichotomisation of victims and offenders within the justice system, and the ongoing erosion of welfare-orientated support for young people, continue to reify the treatment of young people affected by CCE as offenders rather than as victims or as hybrids of the two.

Secondly, my analysis provides additional insight into our understanding of issues of 'exploitation'. In the literature on CCE, media and policy discourses around exploitation have been criticised for their narrowing effect, for erasing the structural influences on young people's experiences by reducing the issue of CCE to the violent and malevolent actions of an individual perpetrator or exploiter (Moyle, 2019; Spicer, 2020). Yet the experiences of YOS practitioners in Stonewell demonstrate that terms like 'exploitation' can also be interpreted as hugely expansive, as exposing the ways in which inequality, marginalisation and violence permeate the pathways of many young people into crime. This exposure reminds us of the uncomfortable truth that we cannot pigeonhole exploitation as an exceptional experience that rarely affects young people in conflict with the law. However, as demonstrated by the experiences of YOS practitioners in Stonewell, the implications of acknowledging the widespread role that exploitation plays in youth crime, in terms of the increased recognition of and response to the links between structural victimisation and offending that this would demand, are radical.

Finally, while existing research in the NGO and policy sector has already demonstrated that practitioners lack confidence in the NRM as a decision-making tool, particularly for young people affected by CCE (McCoig and Durán, 2020; HMICFRS, 2020), I provide a detailed analysis of the specific reservations held by practitioners in relation to the NRM, and the implications of this for decision-making in relation to CCE victim status more generally, namely the greater role of practitioner discretion at the local level. My analysis demonstrates that the NRM is failing as a tool for the identification of young people involved in county lines as victims of CCE because it is not tied to tangible support that helps young people to transition away from their experiences of victimhood. In addition, I identify that the static character of NRM decisions struggles to content with 'victimhood' as an identity that is subject to ongoing scrutiny and suspicion, that must be repeatedly re-negotiated. These findings emphasise that the practical tools that we use in processes of victim identification

will struggle to perform this task if they are deemed incompatible with normative expectations of victimhood.

This chapter has examined responses to CCE among practitioners. However, processes of victim identification are not the sole preserve of practitioners. The next chapter deepens my analysis by examining the role that interactions between practitioners and young people affected by CCE played in influencing processes of victim identification.

5 Findings: Relationships and the Emergence of Victim Status

'They're a victim if they allow themselves to be treated as a victim.' (Jess, YOS officer).

5.1 Introduction

Research within the sub-discipline of critical victimology recognises that becoming a victim is dependent on more than simply experiencing harm, it also requires the social recognition of one's status as a victim (Strobl, 2010). The status of an individual as a victim is 'optional, discretionary, and by no means innately given' (Quinney, 1972: 314), and as a result, victim identities are contingent and subject to ongoing processes of negotiation, with the possibility for redefinition always present (Dunn, 2001: 289; Holstein and Miller, 1990). This is particularly the case for so-called 'deviant victims' (Dunn, 2016), including young people affected by CCE, whose lack of conformity to the 'ideal victim' (Christie, 1986) archetype already renders the possibility of victim status precarious (Strobl, 2004; Miers, 1990). With all of this in mind, critical victimologists have sought to examine the social processes through which individuals come to be known and understood as victims (Holstein and Miller, 1990: 103), and indeed the social processes that inhibit the emergence of victim status (Miers, 1989; Mawby and Walklate, 1994; Holstein and Miller, 1990).

The field of critical victimology has long emphasised that one's status as a victim emerges 'interactionally' (Holstein and Miller, 1990). Holstein and Miller's foundational work in this area advocates for a greater understanding of the 'interactional dynamics of how persons become "victims"' (1990: 104), examining the ongoing interactional processes through which victim identities are offered, negotiated, and produced, as well as the emotional and political contexts in which these processes unfold (Holstein and Miller, 1990). However, despite this work, detailed explorations of the specific ways in which interactions and relationships help to constitute victim status have been scarce (Mawby and Walklate, 1994). As Rock (2002: 13) emphasises, there exists a 'conceptual void that has yet to be filled by an adequate description of the victim as a situated, reflective self in interaction with others'. We are yet to fully examine the emergence of victimhood as interactional in its most literal sense: through dialogic, micro-level, interactions, exchanges, and relationships.

To counter this, drawing inspiration from the growing field of 'relational sociology' (Emirbayer, 1997; Donati, 2010; Dépelteau, 2018), and its application to criminology (Weaver, 2015; Weaver and Fraser, 2021), in this chapter I take relations and interactions themselves as the central focus of my analysis. A relational approach to the study of social

phenomena emphasises that we develop as individuals 'through, with and within our relationships to the other' (Donati, 2010: 193). I apply this idea of the relational emergence of the self to examine the ways in which relationships and interactions between young people and others around them shape the emergence of young people's status as victims of CCE.

This chapter proceeds in four sections, each of which draws on observations and on interviews with young people and practitioners. Section 5.2 explores the micro-level interactions between young people and practitioners that gradually build relationships that can either aid or inhibit the generation of victim status. Section 5.3 takes a deeper look at the challenges that young people affected by CCE and the practitioners working to support them encounter when trying to develop relationships conducive to the emergence of victim status. Section 5.4 considers the work of the YOS's specialist CCE team, its attempts to overcome these barriers to building relationships with young people affected by CCE, and to minimise the extent to which their status as victims was conditional on these relationships. Finally, Section 5.5 turns to the other types of relationships that influence the development of victim status, examining the additional impact of relationships between young people and peers within the same drug distribution network, as well as between young people and their family members.

5.2 Relationships Between Young People and Practitioners

Relationships between young people and practitioners within the YOS had a significant bearing on the emergence of young people's status as victims of CCE, not least because YOS practitioners were primary gatekeepers of victim-orientated support. This section focuses on two relational acts relevant to the emergence of victim status: young people's acceptance or rejection of victim-orientated care and support from practitioners, and young people's sharing or withholding of information with/from practitioners.

5.2.1 Producing Victimhood Through the Acceptance of Care and Support

The first relational act that could determine whether young people were recognised as victims of exploitation was the extent to which young people were prepared to accept victim-orientated care and support where it was offered to them by practitioners. If young people were able to accept and engage with offers of practitioner support, then this could help to facilitate their status as a victim. In referral meetings for the YOS CCE team, claims that young people were: 'very well engaged with professionals' (Aaron, YOS CCE team, Fieldnotes), 'could engage really well' (Nathan, YOS officer, Fieldnotes) or were 'open to

talking about his situation' (David, YOS officer, Fieldnotes)[122], were used to support the case for a young person receiving a support worker from the YOS CCE team. This is not to say that the CCE team did not accept referrals from young people whose engagement was low - reasons for rejecting referrals were complex - and I observed at least one case of a referral that was accepted despite the fact that the referring practitioner noted that the young person 'struggled to engage on a voluntary basis' (Fieldnotes). However, the assurance of a young person's track record of engagement with practitioners functioned as important leverage in securing the allocation of a practitioner from the YOS CCE team to a young person. Receiving support from a member of the dedicated CCE team helped to reinforce the perception of a young person as a victim of CCE.

Even relatively brief and sporadic engagement with support could play a role in facilitating the emergence of victim status. Keith, a YOS-seconded police officer, described his decision to go against one young person's assertion that he was not a victim of CCE on the basis that the young person, Jamie, had reached out for help from the police[123]. Describing the aftermath of an incident in which Jamie had turned up, partially clothed and 'terrified' at a police station over one hundred miles from his home, Keith stated: 'But in the interview, and this is where this kid who I suspect is a victim is going no, I'm doing it on my own choices, but why were you naked? Why were you running to the police there scared? That would suggest otherwise…I see him as he is a victim, personally, because I've seen that' (Keith, YOS-seconded police officer). While Jamie's subsequent refutation of his victim status might have deterred Keith from pursuing the case on this basis, the fact that he had reached out for help once convinced Keith otherwise. Keith's response in this case demonstrates the powerful role that even brief engagement could play in producing victim status. Engagement, or even the prospect of likely engagement in the future, construed as act of accepting support, facilitated access to the assignment of victim status.

[122] Mason and Prior (2008: 12) describe engagement in the youth justice context as the development of young people's active 'personal motivation and commitment to involvement in activities'. However, for practitioners at Stonewell YOS expectations around engagement for CCE-affected young people were slightly lower. Attending supervisions, sticking to conditions set by the YOS, and being willing to chat with practitioners (and potentially share information, as discussed further in Section 5.2.3) were all highlighted by practitioners as examples of good engagement.

[123] Jamie's case demonstrates one way in which different facilitators of victim status interacted with each other. Although Jamie wasn't willing to share specific information with Keith – a potential barrier to the emergence of victim status as discussed below – the impact of that barrier was reduced because Jamie had reached out for support.

Relatedly, young people's access to victim status also weakened where practitioners perceived them to be unwilling to engage with the support that they were offered. For example, young people who received a positive NRM decision and/or had charges dropped on the basis that they were a victim of CCE often struggled to conform to normative expectations that victims will engage readily with support offered and move on from their experiences of harm (Strobl, 2004: 297; 2010). This perceived failure to engage with support compromised their status as victims in the eyes of practitioners:

> You can use, I'm a victim, I'm a victim, I'm a victim and in actual fact there's got to come a point when you can't argue that anymore and you've got to take the help that's there for you. (Michael, CCE police team).

Practitioners highlighted young people's rapid transition away from drug distribution as a strong indication of their engagement with support. When young people were arrested for subsequent offences their status as victims became problematic:

> If subsequently they got [the charges] kind of dropped because of them becoming the victim, and then were to get caught again dealing drugs…that would have a bearing on an NRM because they've been given opportunity to get out of the situation. Practitioners have offered them help. And it's less likely to result in anything other than a court action…We've dealt with you as a victim. During which process you've had ample opportunity to request any help and support that you would need and all practitioners involved have been there to offer you that. (Simon, CCE police team).

Both Simon and Michael connect the perceived failure to accept help with the loss of victim status. While some practitioners, predominantly those within the YOS, did acknowledge such engagement could be extremely challenging for young people - 'most of them have got too much to lose for them to engage. They're already being threatened, their families are already being threatened…so it's actually please leave me alone, I don't want to engage with you because if I do I'm in danger' (Josie, YOS manager) - in general the view pervaded that in order to retain access to victim status young people needed to accept support, and thereby rapidly transition away from offending. Second chances were rare:

> You sit there and you think, weighing this up, where does it all fall. I see that exploitation must have occurred, and obviously they are being exploited, but what point I suppose, if things have been put in place and they choose to go back…it does come down to in some respects some choice. (Lauren, YOS officer).

> There are people who…have tried to go down the route that I am a victim on numerous occasions at court, that I'm aware of, to the point where that will soon start to be ignored- not ignored- but complete disbelief. (Billy, CCE police team).

In order to retain a claim to victim status, young people had to engage with support, which in the eyes of practitioners meant transitioning away from offending and needed to do so within a relatively limited timeframe.

5.2.2 Why Does the Acceptance of Care and Support Influence the Production of Victimhood?

5.2.2.1 The incompatibility of choice and victimhood

Three factors explain the relationship between the accepting or rejecting care and support and the production of victim status. Firstly, the connection is related to normative conceptualisations of the nature of victimhood itself. Practitioners tended towards characterising young people who they perceived as having rejected support by continuing to offend as making a choice, something which they viewed as incompatible with their ideas about it meant to be a victim:

> With CCE there has to come a point as a professional where you start saying: are they choosing to do this? Nobody wants to make that decision as a professional, but if you've thrown all the support at them, the NRM etc. and they are still getting picked up for PWITS[124] then you have to make that decision. (Chloe, YOS ETE officer).

> If you carry on doing it, arguably, you're not really still a victim you're choosing a lifestyle…ultimately the system as it is looks at those people and says well the outs are there and you don't take them so you're choosing to be a criminal. (Michael, CCE police team).

Young people who receive victim-orientated support and continue to offend were understood as 'choosing a lifestyle' or 'choosing to be a criminal' and it is this act of 'choosing', and the agency that it implies, that jarred both with normative conceptualisations of victims as passive and lacking in agency (Meyers, 2011), and normative assumptions that suffering resulting from an individual's explicit choices should not qualify for victim status (Miers, 1990: 222).

[124] Possession With Intent to Supply (Drugs).

This perceived incompatibility of choice and victimhood was further exacerbated by the specific normative expectations surrounding victims of exploitation. Victims of exploitation are frequently stereotyped in media and policy discourse as highly vulnerable: passive, powerless and helpless (Snajdr, 2013; Broad, 2015; Robinson, McLean, and Densley, 2019; Gearon, 2019), 'truly objectified, eviscerated of will, empty ciphers' (O'Connell Davidson, 2015: 208), waiting to be 'saved' or 'rescued' (Gadd and Broad, 2018; Broad and Turnbull, 2018). Accordingly, when young people presented in ways which contradicted these pervasive perceptions of victims of exploitation, it was particularly difficult for practitioners to conceptualise them as such. As Simon put it: 'You've chosen not to take that help and to continue on the path that you were on before. Therefore, it is your choice. And to say that you've been exploited would be very difficult.' (Simon, CCE police team). Here choice is counterpointed not just with expectations of victimhood, but with expectations of exploitation as a specific form of victimhood.

Furthermore, when young people appeared to resist offers of help and support this also conflicted with practitioners' expectations of the presentation of exploited victims as weak and helpless:

> And people just don't see some of these kids- because they can be really difficult. As in, you know, sullen won't speak, passive aggressive, suspicious, no chink in the armour to kind of get in, and no willingness to engage in conversation. It just makes it really challenging for some of the workers…it's quite easy to just then think of them as offenders. We've had some interesting supervisions with people just to try and explore that cos some people say well I can't see how he could ever be exploited. (Jennifer, YOS manager).

As Jennifer emphasises, it was a struggle for practitioners faced with behaviours that came across as obstinate and hostile to see young people as 'exploited'. Young people's behaviour often ran counter not only to the kinds of presentation most conducive to the 'ideal type' victim more generally - 'persons who give the impression of being shy, weak and vulnerable' (Strobl, 2004: 306) - but also to specific expectations around the presentation of victims of exploitation, who were expected to be both particularly helpless and willing to be helped.

5.2.2.2 The emotional impact of perceived non-engagement

Young people whom practitioners perceived as resistant and unwilling to engage were also less likely to be defined as victims because of the emotional impact that this kind of presentation had on practitioners:

> If you've got a young person that's quite surly, quite fuck you and all the rest of it, then yeah some people are gonna automatically go 'uh! well if you're gonna be like that then you're obviously not [a victim]'. So yeah it does affect, it can affect, some of the perceptions of someone. (Charlie, YOS ISS officer).

As Powell-Williams, White and Powell-Williams (2013) identify, victims' rejection of care and support can place significant emotional strain on practitioners, which can affect their perceptions of individuals as victims. For practitioners in Stonewell, these negative emotional experiences ranged from feelings of hurt, anger and rejection, expressed here through curt, closed phrases: 'I do think there is cut off points…to go no you're not being exploited. We've helped you. We've done this. You're still doing it.' (Keith, YOS-seconded police officer); frustration and exasperation: 'There's *all those offers* there that would get them out of it, but they *still* go back.' (Michael, CCE police team); feeling affronted and disrespected when their normative expectations that victims would accept support gratefully (Miers, 1990: 226) were not met: 'we're not doing another NRM, he's rejected the support that's been offered to him, he's stuck two fingers up at the police.' (Richard, CPS Prosecutor, Fieldnotes, YOS office); and a sense of sadness that young people did not feel able to accept their care: 'we are not ever gonna know if they don't want us to. Where do you go with that? Sorry, that's upset me.' (Bev, YOS officer). Youth justice work is imbued with emotion, and as a result with emotional labour (Robinson, 2020). But although much of the time practitioners successfully deployed strategies of 'emotion work' (Hochschild, 1979) to manage these emotions, there were understandably times in which the emotional strain of having one's offers of support repeatedly rejected made it more difficult to work with young people as victims.

In contrast, positive emotional connections with young people could motivate practitioners to continue to advocate for young people's status as victims. In the extract below, Marty encapsulates the relationship between high levels of engagement and the development of a relationship of advocacy in his description of discussing criminal exploitation with a young person, Leo, in supervision:

> A lot of young people will look out the window or tut or kiss their teeth or whatever, and say oh what are you talking about I'd know if that was happening, it was just- Leo maintained eye contact, he listened, he looked down at the resources I was giving him, he was sort of- when I was summarising what I was saying he was nodding, and acknowledging. He was listening to me. He was engaged. I could tell he was engaged. And we [practitioners] worked quite hard on trying to keep him, he almost lost his place at college. The fact that he did engage with us, he did re-engage with college, his mum was just really persistent and consistent with him and kept the lines of communication open with him. I think those things helped turn it around. (Marty, YOS officer).

The striking intensity with which Marty recalls the micro-level details of his interaction with Leo: the small specific gestures that showed him that Leo was taking the information in, highlights that a young person's willingness to engage can have powerful emotional significance for a practitioner. Marty links these feelings of being listened to, of connecting with Leo (he later stated: 'it was like a light switch went on in [Leo's] head'), and of sensing the potential to really make an impact on a young person's life, to the act of working hard to advocate on the young person's behalf.

5.2.2.3 Relationships of advocacy

Finally, young people's acceptance of victim-orientated support helped to foster relationships in which practitioners could then act as advocates for the young person's status as a victim. For example, when a young person engaged with a support worker from the YOS CCE team, the relationship that they developed through spending time together gave workers a more holistic understanding of the young person's situation, allowing them to challenge other practitioners' conceptualisations of the young person where they centred solely around risk, dangerousness, and offending. Discussing her relationship with James, Laura emphasises that the experiences that she had shared with him helped her to challenge practitioners' overriding focus on James's offending:

> I'd sat in on [the risk meeting] last time and all I'd heard was the negatives: He's done this, he's done this, he's done this, he's done this. And I was almost thinking: you're adding to this, you know, and so they said to me: what do you think? So I said…actually, who you're describing to me, I don't recognise this young person you're talking about…we had this whole discussion. I find a very intelligent young

> person who's had a traumatic background, who has got empathy for others. Who is kind and polite and when we go [on outings], holds the door open for me, always does. And this isn't who you're talking about. (Laura, YOS CCE team).

Laura's experiences of micro-level interactions with James, such as him holding the door open for her, were significant because they enabled her to recognise and relay other aspects of James' character, such as his empathy and kindness, when discussing his case with other practitioners. Similarly, Karo's relationship with Jakub gave her a more holistic perspective that helped her to counter a narrow focus on Jakub as dangerous and risky:

> [Jakub] is obviously classed as one of the most dangerous young people in Stonewell, but I kind of don't see him like that. Because if you put it in context of what he was faced with…he doesn't get in trouble at school, he's not aggressive. He comes out and goes off to the boxing club, and for food with me, and stuff like that. He's not a threat. He doesn't feel like a risk. (Karo, YOS CCE team).

Again, the time that Karo and Jakub spent together enabled Karo to look beyond the assessment of Jakub as one of Stonewell's most dangerous young people. In both cases, we can see how over time practitioners' experiences of small positive interactions with a young person - from sharing food together to going on day trips - could accumulate to build a up an impression that could counter existing understandings of young people that revolved solely around their offences, contributing to the gradual opening up of spaces for the recognition of young people as vulnerable and victimised. Where these relationships did not exist, practitioners were unable to carry out this role.

5.2.3 The Role of Information Sharing in Producing Victimhood

> If they spoke about what was going on when they were being interviewed, they probably would never get charged, they'd be looked at as victims rather than offenders. (Michael, CCE police team).

Young people's sharing of information about their experiences was an additional relational act that helped to generate a view of young people as victims of CCE in the eyes of practitioners: 'the first time when I thought it was obvious that he was being exploited was because he was telling me everything.' (Marty, YOS officer). Young people talking openly about their situation could help to shift practitioners towards an understanding of the young person as a victim:

> If a young person came into me in a general supervision session and talked about a situation, and they were expressing that they feel trapped, exploited, there's threats being made to them, there probably would be a more sympathetic response. (David, YOS officer).

Practitioners expressed that such openness to communication was quite rare. As such, where young people did share information, this was taken as a sign that they were genuinely at risk of harm: 'I knew he was very frightened, because normally he wouldn't even speak about it.' (Marty, YOS officer). Practitioners interpreted young people's acts of telling, and in particular of openly and readily disclosing the details of their experiences, as indicators of genuine victimhood. This demonstrates that the sharing of information was an important contributor to the emergence of victim status.

However, it was common that, rather than young people's sharing of information facilitating the emergence of their status as victims, the difficulties that young people experienced in sharing information with practitioners inhibited the emergence of victim status. For example, Kerri described the issues that not sharing information created for Callum:

> [Callum] has never been in trouble with the police at all, he has quite significant additional needs – he has autism, he has OCD, so he really is vulnerable, but because he won't tell anybody that he's being exploited, or that he was forced to do something that he didn't want to do – the police aren't even going down the NRM route. So he's actually going to be taken to court. He's actually going to be charged. (Kerri, YOS CCE team).

As Kerri emphasises, despite indicators of Callum's vulnerability, the fact that he could not disclose his experiences to the police meant that he was being taken down the path of prosecution and was not being referred to the NRM. Similarly, in a risk meeting for Milo, aged 16, who had been arrested for PWITS after being found during a police raid in a house known for drug dealing, the YOS manager, case officer and YOS-seconded police officer agreed that the police could not investigate him as a victim 'without him telling them anything' (Stanley, YOS-seconded police officer, Fieldnotes) and that if Milo did not meet with the police then it would restrict the supporting evidence that police could present for any potential NRM application, likely resulting in a 'negative [NRM] decision from the Home Office' (Jan, YOS manager, Fieldnotes). In both cases, young people's referral into the NRM was predicated on their willingness to share information with practitioners.

Furthermore, unwillingness or inability to share information could also impact negatively on young people's access to additional victim-orientated support services. This was demonstrated in discussion about Kaya, aged 16, who had been referred into the YOS CCE team after being hospitalised following an assault relating to a drug debt. Her children's practitioner's request for the police to install a panic alarm in her accommodation was turned down on the basis of her unwillingness to share information with the police: 'Frankly, she's not engaging with us at all, it might change if she tells us more and engages with the officer.' (Billy, CCE police team, Fieldnotes). Accordingly, the sharing of information affected not only the referrals made for a young person in the initial stages of their engagement with practitioners in relation to CCE but was an ongoing influence that had continued relevance throughout journeys of seeking and accessing victim-orientated support, and throughout ongoing processes of negotiating and renegotiating victim status.

5.2.4 Why Does Information Sharing Influence the Production of Victimhood?

5.2.4.1 The practical need for information in order to deliver support

On one level, the role of sharing information in the production of victim status was a practical issue. A potential victim's clear communication of information about their situation and the support that they require is key to the generation of victim status, as practitioners simply can't implement victim-orientated interventions if they don't know enough about the nature of the victimisation that an individual is experiencing (Strobl, 2004). Practitioners within Stonewell YOS emphasised that information from young people helped them to implement suitable supportive interventions: 'from a safeguarding point of view…we've got more information and we can sort of do the right thing for the victims if they'll engage.' (Michael, CCE police team). As Milo's YOS officer emphasised in the same risk meeting discussed above, it was difficult to know what protective support to provide if young people were not able to talk about what was happening to them: 'he's got to engage with the police or we're not going to get enough information to protect him.' (Abby, YOS officer, Fieldnotes). Unsurprisingly, a lack of specific information from young people presented a significant barrier to understanding their needs, and it was 'difficult to do anything in the form of intervention' (Erica, YOS officer) that engaged with young people on the basis that they were victims if they were not able to disclose any details of their experiences. As a result, a lack of disclosure of information could create a practical barrier to the generation of victim status.

5.2.4.2 Meeting normative expectations of victimhood

In addition, young people's sharing of information also influenced the emergence of their status as victims because it helped young people affected by CCE to meet normative expectations of victimhood. Marked as 'deviant victims' (Dunn, 2016) because they were in conflict with the law, young people's status as victims was often met with a degree of scrutiny and suspicion. Although, as Strobl (2004: 297) emphasises, cooperation with the police is an important baseline expectation of the victim role in general, Flacks (2021: 203) highlights that expectations of honesty are particularly heightened for children in conflict with the law, for whom truth-telling is conceived of as a central component of their ongoing moral development. Police were particularly concerned that young people involved in county lines should cooperate and provide additional information about their victimisation in order to try to gain an indication that they were telling the truth:

> They need to throw us a fish…to throw us a fish would be like "ok, I get taken to the railway station, I'm not going to tell you who by, but it's generally on a Thursday morning. If you look at CCTV you'll see me being taken by him, so if you do your legwork you'll find something. But I ain't gonna tell you"…so even if they go: "I'm not going to tell you who, but I am being forced into this, I owe him", if they came up with some figures, so even if we can't investigate them more to go: they're telling us the truth, at least there's something. (Keith, YOS-seconded police officer).

Individuals who did not share information with the police were liable to be seen as having something to hide, and were therefore liable to lose access to victim status:

> You can't just hide behind the [NRM] form, and you've gotta give us more information. And if you're not willing to give us more information either in court, or in your police interviews or by any other means, then we're gonna throw it out essentially and you're going to be dealt with for the offence you've been charged with. (Michael, CCE police team).

Conversely, if practitioners viewed a young person as transparent and honest, it could help to consolidate their status as victim. Discussing the case of Noah, who he had referred to the NRM, Simon emphasised that he was confident in the referral in part because he felt Noah was sharing his experiences openly: 'he's saying the things that I don't want to hear. And he's an open and honest young man, ask him a direct question and he will answer. He just ticks all the boxes for me.' (Simon, YOS-seconded police officer). Simon connects the 'open'

and ‘honest’ provision of information with ‘ticking the box’ of exploitation. If we imagine a spectrum of victimhood, from ‘ideal’ to ‘deviant’, the act of sharing information could move young people away from their starting point as deviant victims (because of perceptions of their involvement in drug dealing) towards the ideal victim: cooperative and open to sharing information – and therefore transparent, honest and respectable (Christie, 1986; Strobl, 2004). Acts of information sharing helped to produce young people’s status as victims by moving them closer towards practitioners’ normative perceptions of the ‘ideal victim’.

As we have seen, the extent to which young people involved in county lines drug dealing were considered to be victims of exploitation developed ‘through, with and within’ (Donati, 2010: 193) their interactions and relationships with practitioners. The findings presented within this section resonate with Brown's (2014b, 2017) research, which identifies that the recognition of young people as ‘vulnerable’ is conditional on their ability to demonstrate compliant behaviour, conceptualised by practitioners as sharing information, expressing contrition, and demonstrating willingness to change. The findings of this section build upon this work in three ways. Firstly, by further examining the interactional facets of these dynamics at the micro level. For example, in this study it was not only young people’s compliance that was important, but also the emotional significance of this acceptance of support and care for practitioners themselves. Secondly, by examining *why* the interactions described above were important for the assignment of victim status, and thirdly, in doing so, by demonstrating the importance of examining the conditionality of victimhood as a concept that is distinct from vulnerability. The normative expectations of victimhood and vulnerability are not always the same. While Brown (2014b, 2017) finds that contrition is important to the assignment of vulnerability, this was not mentioned by participants in this study, arguably because ‘blamelessness’ is an important normative component of victimhood, therefore the ‘ideal victim’ should have nothing to show contrition for. Accordingly, this section demonstrates that it is important to examine the conditionality and interactional production of victimhood its own right.

It is clear that processes of victim identification are highly relational. However, as we begin to see in this section, it could often be difficult for practitioners and young people to establish the kinds of relationships described above. Because relationships between young people and practitioners were so important in producing young people’s status as victims, before we move on to discuss the other relationships that influenced victim status it is critical to examine in more detail why these difficulties existed.

5.3 Barriers to Young Person-Practitioner Relationships that Helped to Generate Victim Status

Young people affected by CCE described three core issues that made it difficult to engage in the kinds of relationships described above: concerns about the ramifications of engaging with practitioners, concerns regarding practitioners' lack of shared experiences, and concerns around entering into relationships with practitioners in which they felt they lacked control. I will now consider each of these in turn.

5.3.1 Young People's Concerns About the Ramifications of Engagement

> Shay: I only had a youth worker, but I didn't speak about what I was doing
>
> Hannah: Why do you think you didn't speak about it?
>
> Shay: I didn't want to get in trouble
>
> Hannah: Who did you think you would get into trouble with?
>
> Shay: The police and then the dealer I was working for.

As Shay demonstrates, for young people considering disclosing experiences of CCE, the potentially negative reactions of the dealers that they worked for and of practitioners within the justice system were both an inhibitory source of concern. The web of potentially negative consequences that young people anticipated if they disclosed their experiences centred on the threat of physical violence from others within drug dealing networks and the threat of criminalisation from the justice system.

5.3.1.1 Beliefs that practitioners will act punitively

Young people described feeling reluctant to talk about their experiences of CCE with practitioners because they were concerned that they would be criminalised for their involvement in drug dealing. Young people were particularly concerned about being criminalised if they engaged with the police: 'if you told the police, then they would arrest you for selling in the first place.' (Kazimir);

> I think like kids don't have a good opinion about the police. Especially if they're like involved with drugs cos they don't feel like they can speak to them. Because they think obviously like oh look they're a police officer, they're in the law, they're gonna get us done. That's what people think. And I think that's why there's not many people

> that go to them and speak about it. I just think they're scared, knowing that something bad could come out of it. (Alex).

Alex demonstrates a perception of the role of the police as inextricably concerned with arresting and charging those involved in drug distribution. As a result of this perception, young people described lacking confidence that the police would look beyond drug distribution offences and consider any role that victimisation had played in their involvement: '[The police] just try and look for something to pin on you, not like what's actually happened to you.' (Carl);

> You're just seen as the crime that you've committed and that's more important to [the police] than you being a child and the context and the reason why you've done that, and got involved in something. (Rachel, Fieldnotes, CCE team-led workshop).

This concern that those in police roles would not seek to understand the reasons for young people's involvement, and therefore recognise experiences of victimisation, allowed young people's concerns about criminalisation to inhibit their likelihood of disclosing victimisation to police.

These concerns also inhibited young people's willingness to engage with YOS practitioners, as young people assumed that any information that they gave to the YOS about involvement in drug distribution would automatically be passed on to the police:

> You do have to be very very careful with what you say…[YOS practitioners] do work with the police, if they think you're in danger they will tell the police, if they think you're running drugs they will tell the police. So there is a lot of things that kids can and can't say…A kid can't go up to a practitioner like Laura [YOS CCE team] or Jeff [YOS officer] and have a conversation with them on how they're getting exploited, because the name of the person, their name, their drug debt, it all gets jotted down kind of thing. So you do have to be careful what you say. (James).

Young people emphasised the lines of communication that ran between the different practitioners in their lives, and some therefore created 'rules of what I can and can't say' (Freddie). Young people's concerns that information they shared with YOS officers or YOS CCE team members would be 'jotted down' and passed onto police[125], who young people

[125] James' perspective was also corroborated by practitioners. For example, Erica, a YOS officer commented: 'Definitely with a lot of young people that are kind of more entrenched in that they see practitioners as like the enemy – so like, you're linked to the police, what's the point of your job, we get that kind of thing quite a lot.'

assumed would seek to criminalise them, meant that they also moderated the information that they shared with youth justice practitioners in general.

In order to understand young people's assumptions that the police would treat them punitively, it is important to consider the influence of young people's wider histories of engagement with the police, in which policing was described as hostile and extractive rather than caring and supportive[126]: '[the police] said it to me before: we're trying to help you and that, but I know the police yeah, the police only want information from you.' (Mo); 'I don't like talking to [the police] cos I know what they're like…they just treat you like you're dirt. The police and that they just don't care.' (Carl). The following comments from Jo provide an insight into how broader cumulative experiences of hostile policing made it difficult for young people, particularly young people of colour, to believe that the police would offer them support as victims of criminal exploitation:

> We already live in such a hostile environment, for example even if you're a young person and you're not involved in county lines, or illegal activities, say you're doing a part time job and you just bought your first car, or you have a license or something, like you'll get stopped by police and they'll question you like how did you buy this car, what do you do for a living, so I feel like there's such a- there's a real racial bias like if you're a young black woman or a young black male, like I've seen it so many times like why do you have a car? How comes you can buy a car? We live in such a place where it's like the police don't even wanna see you prosper. I have black friends that are just normal people, not involved in illegal activities, doing normal things…and they're constantly stopped by police, and they're interrogated as if they were doing something wrong which they're not, and I feel like when you live in a place like that it just makes you feel- it makes a view of yourself in someone's brain that the people that are actually victims are not gonna feel like they can get any support, cos they think look at her, look at how she's being treated and she's not even a criminal. And you think me, no one is gonna help me, why would anyone- do you see what I mean? Look how they treat these usual civilians, imagine how they're

[126] Here it is important to note that while practitioners' use of coercion and criminalisation was sometimes intended as a tool of safeguarding, as discussed in Section 4.3.3, it was rare for it to be experienced as such by young people. As Canton and Dominey (2020: 23) emphasise, we must also be attentive to the perceptions of those on the receiving ends of intended acts of safeguarding and care.

> gonna treat someone like me who has got involved in so and so, for so and so reason. (Jo, Fieldnotes, CCE team-led workshop).

As Jo emphasises, cumulative experiences in which young people of colour felt that the police's baseline approach marked them as 'perpetual suspects' (Long, 2018), who felt subject to racialised suspicion and scrutiny even at times when they were simply going about law-abiding lives, served to gradually erode any confidence that the police might recognise any experiences of victimisation in contexts of CCE when they were actually in conflict with the law. Although the police in Stonewell had begun to disseminate the message that they would seek to support victims of CCE, such messaging had to contend with young people's longstanding and deeply embedded experiences of hostility, mistrust and racialised discrimination, which continued to inhibit their confidence that the police would recognise any experiences of victimisation that they disclosed.

5.3.1.2 Concerns about violent consequences from those involved in drug dealing

As emphasised by Shay at the beginning of this section, in addition to anticipating negative consequences from practitioners if they disclosed, young people were also concerned about the responses of others within the drug distribution networks of which they were a part:

> I was scared about what would happen to me if I did accidently slip up and say somebody's name, or somebody's address or what I'm doing for who – I just kept everything I was doing to myself, even though I wasn't doing it for myself. (Freddie).

The reasons that young people gave for these concerns included fear that speaking to practitioners about victimisation would lead to violent consequences, such as: 'getting beaten up' (Connor) or of other forms of violence from associates involved in drug dealing, in addition to violence towards family members: 'they could threaten your family if you don't [stay involved], like ah yeah we know where your mum lives, we know which school your brother and sister go to, and they kind of scare you into doing it.' (Carl). In addition, the emotional burden of worrying about the reactions of the dealers should not be underestimated: 'It's a lot of stress, that's what I struggled with, you've not gotta have an hour spare, cos that hour you'll be dwelling on it, you'll be wanting to contact [the dealers] to let them know you haven't said nothing.' (Alex). The concerns that young people have about the emotional and physical consequences of disclosing experiences of CCE-related victimisation are well documented (Harding, 2020; McLean, Robinson and Densley, 2019)

and for young people in Stonewell they could easily become all-consuming and were a clear barrier that inhibited young people's engagement with practitioners.

This barrier was further compounded by the fact that there were some cases in which practitioners acknowledged that protecting young people, and ensuring that they felt safe enough to engage, was indeed a significant challenge:

> As soon as they leave they know they're going to be contacted by the drug dealers, they're threatened with being stabbed and the family being stabbed, so the consequences of our engagement just pale into insignificance compared to the consequences that they experience on a day-to-day basis. (Alan, YOS manager).

Although the YOS did extensive work with young people affected by CCE (and with their families, schools, and others) around safety planning in an effort to protect them from harm, both practitioners and young people acknowledged that it would be unrealistic for practitioners to suggest that they could guarantee young people's safety. Particularly where young people had large drug debts that were unlikely to be forgiven, practitioners were aware of limits to their ability to protect: 'The reality is there are people after them and they still owe that money…there's a real feeling of just doing what we can.' (Ros, YOS officer) Describing her work with Isaac, Demi further explained:

> I think [Isaac] worries about, like I said his own safety really, and where that could take him with people finding out. And there is also the: "ok, so what are you going to do about it? If I tell you that this is what I'm doing, what are you doing to do? How are you going to keep me safe? What are the police going to do? What's anyone going to do?"…And he's got a point. Really. Cos he's asking me: "So this has happened to me, this is my experiences, and then you're telling me that you can keep me safe, so how are you going to do that?" And it's very difficult to come up with the answers. Cos I will never say anything that I can't actually promise. And then I don't like to promise. (Demi, YOS officer).

Demi describes arriving at a difficult place in her supervisory relationship with Isaac in which both are aware that there were limits to how much she can do to ensure Isaac's safety if he

chooses to disclose his experiences[127]. It was not only young people's concerns about violent ramifications from dealers, but also an awareness that was expressed by young people and practitioners - that the YOS might indeed be unable to prevent this violence from happening - that presented another significant barrier to young people's engagement.

5.3.2 Young People's Concerns About Practitioners' Lack of Shared Experience

The second factor that made it difficult for young people affected by CCE to form relationships with practitioners was the lack of shared experience between practitioners and young people within Stonewell YOS. This undermined practitioners' credibility in the eyes of young people, for whom a sense of shared experience with those who attempted to influence their lives was important: 'if someone is trying to talk to me, and trying to tell me, boss me around, tell me what's good for me, they need to be someone who has been in the same position.' (Dan). What having 'been in the same position' meant in practice varied according to the young person's intersecting identities and lived experiences and was discussed in CCE team-led workshops. Lack of shared experience was raised as an issue in relation to racialised marginalisation and racism: 'You're all white snitches and that's why we don't talk to you.' (Lucas), lack of shared class identity: 'I feel like the higher class and the middle class don't want everybody on the same level as them…they don't wanna see people succeed.' (Tori), and the difficulty of connecting with individuals embodying a 'professional' role: 'they ask questions and sound like a robot do you know what I'm saying. It doesn't really feel like you're talking to a real human cos they got rules and regulations on how they have to ask questions about certain things.' (Kyle). Across these examples, lack of shared experience recurred as a barrier to building relationships with practitioners in the eyes of young people.

Practitioners were similarly concerned that young people's perceptions - of them as lacking shared experience as a result of differences in class, race and age: perceptions of them as 'that posh old woman' (Agatha, YOS officer), 'a white middle-aged man' (Danny, YOS ETE officer) - made it difficult to build relationships:

[127] Similar concerns were also expressed within the CCE police team: 'the problem is, we are actually quite limited in what we can offer at the moment other than sort of the normal policing safeguarding options' (Billy, CCE police team). Such options included informing frontline officers that a young person was affected by CCE, both by putting markers on particular addresses associated with the young person, and by talking directly to relevant officers, with the aim that this would increase the priority of any calls relating to the young person. However, participants from the CCE police team tended to reflect less on their capacity to directly protect young people from harm. This was perhaps because, in comparison to the YOS, officers in the CCE police team did not have the same direct supervisory relationship with young people and were less involved in responding to their needs on a day-to-day basis.

> When you're working with a kid and you're this white middle class woman, the first thing I say to these people is d'you know what I'm not even gonna pretend- I'm not going to insult you by letting you think that oh I understand, because how can I understand what it's like from their shoes? (Agatha, YOS officer).

As Nathan put it: 'I don't necessarily immediately strike a rapport with the young person because they see me as being part of the establishment.' (Nathan, YOS officer). This sense of difference was often a barrier, creating dynamics of resistance or hesitancy, that had to be gradually broken down in order to facilitate the formation of productive relationships between YOS practitioners and young people.

In addition, while lack of shared experience might seem to be an issue that affects the engagement of any young person with YOS practitioners, there were also factors that were more specific to young people affected by CCE in contexts of county lines. Important here were practitioners' perceptions of drug dealing and county lines as particularly alien, as part of a 'different world' (Ros, YOS officer), or a 'secret veiled world' (Jennifer, YOS manager), that felt inaccessible, incomprehensible, and very much at odds with their sense of what was 'normal'. This gulf of experience presented genuine challenges to developing supervisory relationships with young people affected by CCE:

> "Let's talk about x, y and z". "No." Because that's just normal. And I think that's the thing. It's normalised. "Everyone does it". And I suppose when young people are coming out with things like that it puts that barrier up: "you don't understand my situation, you don't get it, you don't know what it's like on the streets". You hear that so often. "You don't know what it's like". And I think that can break relationships as well. Because it's showing that actually I don't think it's normal…and you've got to take that firm stance, but it's also proving to them that you haven't got a clue what goes off in their daily life...it just creates that division, and I think that can be damaging. (Lauren, YOS officer).

Practitioners coming from this standpoint were in something of a double bind, in which necessary attempts to suggest that young people's experiences were not normal in fact drove a wedge between practitioners and young people by highlighting the differences in their experiences and ideas about what was normal. Practitioners' unfamiliarity with what they perceived as an 'alien' world of county lines drug dealing could be alienating for young

people and could undermine the foundations of supervisory relationships that could help to facilitate the emergence of victim status.

5.3.3 Young People's Need For Participation and Sensitivity to Lack of Control

In circumstances where young people did feel able to share details of victimisation with youth justice practitioners, young people's experiences of a lack of control within these interactions could inhibit their willingness to engage further. Existing research has identified the value that young people place on co-production and participation in their relationships with youth justice practitioners (Drake, Fergusson and Briggs, 2014; Case and Haines, 2015; Smithson, Gray and Jones, 2020), and this need was particularly strong for young people in Stonewell who were affected by CCE. Young people found relationships with practitioners in which they felt that they lacked choice or control frustrating and off-putting.

Over the course of my field research, I observed a series of school-based workshops for girls at risk of harm from CCE, run by Laura, a member of the YOS CCE team. Throughout the course of the workshop, the fact that the school had not given the girls a choice about whether to attend was a persistent source of tension and resentment for participants. While Laura made impressive progress in engaging a reluctant group with kindness and creativity, the girls' perceptions of having been 'forced' to be there sparked many small acts of resistance ranging from using humour to divert the focus of sessions to refusing to participate in activities at all. This was best exemplified by Flo, aged 14, who walked into the classroom halfway through the second session, announced: 'Ms Green says I *have* to come here', and sat down with her head on the desk until it was time to leave. In most cases, the instant that the bell rang, pens and phones were swept off the table into bags, conversations were ended mid-sentence, and many participants made a beeline for the exit without saying goodbye[128]. In the examples of these workshops, the view that participation was 'not on my terms' (Ellie), spurred young people to offer the absolute minimum engagement possible on multiple occasions.

Relationships with practitioners that were on the young person's own terms were particularly important to young people because they had specific concerns about the impact of information about their lives being shared too widely without their consent. Young people

[128] Particularly as these were group sessions, it is worth reflecting on whether this lack of engagement might have only been performative, 'put on' so as not to lose face in front of other students. However, there was a notable lack of behaviours that might suggest this; for example while young people were aware that they could meet with Laura privately outside the session none chose to do so.

described valuing practitioners who worked to keep certain information confidential: ‘David [YOS officer] has been really supportive, obviously I’ve told [the YOS] things - confidential things - that they’ve promised to keep confidential and they have. So obviously it’s good in that aspect.’ (Freddie), but felt that this didn’t always happen. Girls participating in the school-based CCE workshops emphasised that they were reluctant to talk about their experiences of victimisation because, in the past, adults had ‘told lots of other people without asking them, and that they felt overwhelmed, too visible, and like too many people were interfering.’ (Fieldnotes). When young people felt that they lacked control over the information that was circulating about them among a wider network of practitioners, whom they often perceived as threatening rather than supportive, this inhibited them from sharing additional information. In an interview, Phoebe highlighted the importance of feeling able to control the dissemination of information about her experiences of CCE:

> [Practitioners] need to actually reassure the young person that they’re actually working with that they are trustworthy and that the information is not going to get out, that they can actually have someone to talk to…cos this is the worst thing for me, it was talking to someone and then knowing that it would go back to my Grandma. Because I didn’t want my family to know anything about what’s going on in my life. Cos I felt like I was just gonna get judged by ‘em…I think like, if people could actually trust the people that they have, then it would be a completely different story. It’s probably the same with everyone in a way, where you’ll tell them bits and pieces, but you won’t tell them the worst part of it. (Phoebe).

Phoebe highlights young people’s concerns about being ‘judged’ if they were open about the ‘worst parts’ of their experiences, emphasising that young people needed additional reassurance about how information that they disclosed would be shared.

In addition, practitioners found that being able to afford young people control over information sharing helped to strengthen their relationships:

> Olivia said to me: at first I didn’t tell you hardly anything. She said: but now I tell you everything. Because what I like is that you just listen, and what you do is you always say what you’re going to do, and you always tell me if you’ve got to tell someone else…She said what I like as well is that I know sometimes you do have to tell, she said but you always say to me: I’m going to have to tell this person, she said you

> don't just go off and do it, we do have a conversation about it. (Laura, YOS CCE team).

Situations in which young people are unable to manage the conditions in which they relay personal information to practitioners can feel 'exposing and unsafe' (Hallett, 2016: 2147). For young people in Stonewell, it was both the feeling of lacking control over these interactions and the consequences of this lack of control - feeling overwhelmed, feeling hyper-visible, feeling judged - that created a barrier to engagement, while feeling that they were active participants in determining how and when information was shared had the opposite effect.

Finally, for young people affected by CCE, the impact of feeling a lack of choice or control in relationships with practitioners was a particular issue because it could reproduce aspects of the dynamics of exploitative relationships that they had experienced in contexts of drug distribution, in which young people routinely lacked choice and control over their lives. This is evident in the concerns that Phoebe raised regarding her interactions with the CCE police team, in which she describes feeling viscerally controlled, trapped, and forced:

> I have felt like they have been really controlling over my life. Like they've actually been physically in my body controlling me…There was one policeman that I've had who's been very very forced. At first it was you can do what you want, you can give me that information when you need it. When you feel comfortable. And then he kept coming over, and over, and over. And it was: you need to give me this information or I will do it, I've got enough information to do it. Yeah I'd have no say in it, but I've got enough information to start a court order, and you're gonna have to attend. So I felt very trapped and forced to actually give the information. (Phoebe).

For Phoebe, this experience of feeling repeatedly pushed and forced to act contains echoes of her experiences of exploitation, in which demands were repeatedly made that pressured her beyond her limits. In the following extract, Phoebe provides an example of how dynamics of coercion and control resulting from CCE affected her life:

> I came home one night and [the dealer] messaged me and he was like you need to get out, you need to open the door, and I was like, I can't I haven't got my mum's keys, I haven't got my keys. And I *had* to get the keys, and mum…me and mum had a full-on fight to get her keys...and I just lost it with her. (Phoebe).

While none of the young people explicitly stated that their interactions with practitioners reminded them of interactions with exploiters, young people did describe similar dynamics of coercion, control and pressure. This finding is consistent with that of Hallett's (2016) research with young people affected by CSE who were subject to child protection orders, in which young people expressed experiencing similar dynamics of exposure, judgement and control in both exploitative and social work contexts. Accordingly, it is worth considering the negative impact that these dynamics within youth justice work could have on willingness to engage among young people affected by exploitation-related trauma.

5.4 Re-imagining Relationality: The Work of the YOS CCE Team

As we have seen, barriers to young person-practitioner relationships served to inhibit the emergence of their status as victims. To a certain extent, this was something that the YOS recognised, and there were examples of emerging practice, in the form of the work of the YOS CCE team, that attempted both to facilitate young people's engagement, and to minimise the extent to which victim-orientated approaches to young people affected by CCE were conditional on their relationships with practitioners in the first place. In this section, I analyse the work of the YOS CCE team whose organisational remit and ethos enabled them to implement a tailored approach to working with young people affected by CCE[129]. This approach was significant because it represented a potential alternative to the production of victim status through relationships, by attempting to foster a dynamic whereby young people's status as victims of CCE was 'unconditional'. In this section, I will examine the nature, benefits, and limitations of this approach.

5.4.1 "Unconditional" Victimhood

The ethos of the YOS CCE team focused on providing unconditional support, on minimising the extent to which the work that they did with young people as victims of exploitation was conditional on forming a specific type of relationship: 'it doesn't matter what they do to us, we'll be ok. We'll be there' (Laura, YOS CCE team), and indeed the extent to which it became conditional on anything at all besides young people's experiences of harm.

In particular, practitioners within the team emphasised that their work with young people was not conditional on young people's willingness to share information about their experiences with them: 'it's not about taking information, we don't need to know the when, where or who

[129] Aspects of the CCE team's approach were also employed by several individual practitioners working in the wider YOS, but it was only the CCE team for whom this approach formed a central guiding ethos that was the primary foundation of its work as a team.

of the exploitation as long as we can help them keep safe.' (Aaron, YOS CCE team, Fieldnotes, CCE team meeting). Describing her role in the YOS CCE team, Kerri emphasised:

> I could work for a young person for a year, and them not tell me anything at all and that makes no difference whatsoever. So long as I can be there to support them. To try and keep safe…And I said to [Theo] you don't have to tell me anything. I will still keep coming back to see you if you want me to come and see you, I will support you and I will help you to get whatever it is that we need to get you, until you say you don't want me to. And you don't have to tell me anything.

Here Kerri makes it clear that there is no obligation, explicit or implicit, for young people to share information about experiences of CCE in order to continue to receive support.

Similarly, workers in the YOS CCE team also lessened expectations around the extent to which young people were expected to engage readily with care and support. Describing her working relationship with Olivia, Laura explained:

> Olivia disengaged again. And I said you do know it's ok to do this don't you? Cos sometimes she'll put on the end of the text messages: "sorry". And I was like you know that you don't have to apologise to me, you know it's fine if you don't turn up, nothing is going to happen to you. It's your choice. And she said yeah yeah I know, it's really nice. (Laura, YOS CCE team).

As Laura reassures Olivia in the extract above, the YOS CCE team's approach meant that young people could enter into a variety of different kinds of relationships with practitioners, with varying levels of engagement, free from pressure to meet or the need to explain or apologise, without this having a negative impact on their access to victim-orientated support and therefore victim status. This approach fitted well with the sporadic patterns of engagement of many of the CCE team's young people and enabled them to retain access to victim-orientated support on their own terms.

One specific way in which the CCE team's approach minimised the conditionality of victimhood on specific types of relationships defined by practitioners was its focus on facilitating engagement led by young people themselves. At the heart of this approach was a practice that the team referred to as 'just being': 'You just have to be there. It's ok to just be with them. Just being.' (Kerri, YOS CCE team). 'Just being' with young people involved

existing as a consistently accessible source of support for the young person - 'It's just about being there. Being someone that they can trust. And if anything happens, we are there.' (Chantel, YOS CCE team) - but waiting for the young person themselves to take the lead on the nature of their engagement. In practice, this manifested in a range of different ways, from remaining on the periphery of a young person's life and reminding them that they could always come for support if and when they wanted it, to having regular sessions with young people but focusing on building a relationship on the young person's terms rather than on completing set exercises or assessments, valuing 'every interaction [as] purposeful' (Laura, YOS CCE team) even when they didn't involve direct discussion of issues around drug dealing and exploitation. 'Just being' repositioned the act of waiting for young people to engage with specific CCE-related support, as well as periods of relative inactivity, as an important and valuable part of work with young people affected by CCE – as opposed to as a somewhat frustrating precursor to that work beginning. By taking on this role, practitioners within the CCE team enabled young people to set the terms of the young person-practitioner relationship, thereby minimising the likelihood that young people's access to victim orientated support would become conditional on types of relationships that were often unfeasible for them.

5.4.2 Benefits of Minimising the Conditionality of Victimhood on Relationships

The value of this approach was exemplified by Kerri's relationship with Theo, a young person who was referred into the YOS CCE team after receiving a positive NRM decision, having previously been arrested for PWITS. Kerri described the positive impact of waiting for Theo to engage on his terms when the time was right for him. She emphasised that at first: 'Theo was referred to me and he just didn't want to know, never even got to meet him, he wouldn't even speak to me'. Rather than closing Theo's case, or pushing for Theo to engage, Kerri worked over the course of several months to develop a relationship with Theo's mum instead: 'I just kept communicating with her via email and I went and met her and just sort of told her what we could do as a service to support him if he changed his mind'. This ongoing communication meant that when Theo did change his mind, after reaching a crisis point involving an escalation of violence and intimidation from drug dealers and hospitalisation for a drug overdose, Theo's mum felt able to contact Kerri who was able to respond quickly with renewed offers of support. Kerri explained: 'So he took this overdose cos he just couldn't deal with it anymore. And actually, that was a bit of a breaking point for him, and he agreed to see me. And I met with him…I went round and introduced myself and actually he agreed

to meet with me again which is amazing.' This initial engagement led to Kerri finding Theo support with housing and from social care, as well beginning to build their relationship through activities such as meeting for coffee and going on walks and drives. As Kerri and Theo's relationship demonstrates, the 'just being' approach created a flexibility in which young people could choose when and how they engaged.

'Just being' also helped to meet the heightened need for collaborative and participatory approaches among young people affected by CCE, as described in Section 5.3.3, and young people highlighted the importance of times when practitioners from the YOS CCE team had spent time with them on their own terms:

> The other day, I'd missed an appointment, because I'd slept in. I'm one of those that will sleep in until like 2 o'clock in the afternoon, but [Kerri] came to the field that's round the corner from me, and I was sat there with my boyfriend and she's quite happy to talk to him, she bought us a bottle of Vimto to share. (Phoebe).

Working on the young person's terms not only afforded practitioners more of a chance of meeting with young people, it also enabled practitioners to connect with young people on a more personal and meaningful, level and engaging in valuable practices of hearing and responding to young people's voices (Drake, Fergusson and Briggs, 2014: 23). This approach helped young people to feel valued, listened to and understood - 'it's how they speak to you as well, they've kind of got to know how you are and come to your level' (Alex) - which young people felt in turn helped them to 'start listening' (Alex) to what practitioners were saying.

5.4.3 Challenges to 'Unconditional Victimhood'

The practices described above demonstrate that the work of the YOS CCE team did go some way towards providing an alternative to the relational emergence of victimhood, in a way that was beneficial for young people affected by CCE. However, there were also challenges to the provision of this approach.

5.4.3.1 Organisational structures and resourcing

Firstly, it is important to recognise that the approach of the YOS CCE team was only possible because as a non-statutory voluntary service within the YOS it did not face the same restrictions as other YOS practitioners, or as the CCE police team, who were required to

complete specific work with young people within a set period of time[130]. As a result, the extent to which the CCE team's approach could be replicated across the YOS was limited. While conditions from the courts or service management meant that other agencies would have to close or breach cases where young people were not sufficiently engaged, the CCE team's rules and processes ensured that workers could continue to offer support to young people who weren't yet engaging:

> [My manager] is not going to say why haven't you met her? They don't question it. They do not question it at all. And that's really lovely. To have that flexibility to be able to do that. Compared to being in other jobs where it's: Why haven't you met? When are you rearranging? You've only got till so and so to see them or you'll have to close. (Laura, YOS CCE team).

Unlike in the YOS CCE team, for the wider YOS and CCE police team, young people's engagement in relationships with practitioners that adhered to specific terms and conditions was much more of a requirement. For alternatives to the relational production of victimhood to proliferate more widely, this would have to change. Overall, it was difficult to see how the YOS CCE team's approach could be replicated across the wider YJS in its current form.

It is also important to acknowledge that a non-statutory, highly flexible, casework support service that allowed young people to engage on their terms (a process which often took several months), and which did not close cases unless young people explicitly asked for this, could not exist and operate effectively in the longer term without substantial and sustainable funding. The CCE team was precariously funded, initially by a yearlong grant, which was subsequently renewed but only for another year, and existed in the context of a county council that 'lurch[ed] from one funding crisis to another' (Robert, County Safeguarding Lead), faced with a serious shortfall in government funding for children's services (The Children's Society, 2019) and a fickle and 'short-termist' (Melissa, CCE police team) national funding landscape that practitioners viewed as only likely to fund CCE-related work until the next 'buzz thing' (Alana, YOS CCE team) or 'flavour of the month' (Robert, County Safeguarding Lead) emerged. Four months after first becoming operational, the CCE team was already nearing capacity, but even securing permanent funding for the team's existing provision was a significant challenge, let alone funding its expansion – all of which was a

[130] For example, unlike the CCE team, YOS practitioners completed time-limited orders with young people, with set contact hours, and were required to breach young people if they did not engage. Similarly, the CCE police team did not have the resources to make multiple attempts to engage young people.

problem for the team's time and resource-intensive processes. Accordingly, it is important to remember that approaches that fostered alternatives to the conditionality of victimhood on specific types of relationship could not exist without a proper level of investment, something which was disappointingly difficult to come by in the current funding landscape for children's services.

5.4.3.2 Reaching emotional limits

Finally, although the YOS CCE team attempted to provide unconditional support for young people, they were still susceptible to the emotional strain that resulted when young people did not engage with care and support. Despite the YOS CCE team's higher level of tolerance for non-engagement, experiences of rejection could still gradually cause their relationships with young people to fray and fracture, with a knock-on impact on team members' capacity to push for the recognition of young people as victims.

This was exemplified by the relationship between Brandon and Cassie. In the early stages of working with Brandon, Cassie emphasised that she understood 'why people see him the way that they do because he is difficult' but emphasised that he had 'such potential' and that she would 'go to battle for him' against other practitioners for whom she argued 'the endgame [for Brandon] is jail.' However, over the course of six months, Cassie began to find Brandon's refusal to see her, to provide updated contact details, or to attend the activities that she arranged for him at his request, increasingly 'frustrating'. Cassie expressed anger at having 'bent over backwards' to support Brandon only to feel like her efforts were 'thrown back' and stated that the relationship had 'fallen apart' (Fieldnotes, risk meeting)**.** Following these difficult months, it was notable that when practitioners in a subsequent risk meeting for Brandon agreed to conduct additional bail compliance checks that would likely result in his arrest, Cassie did not challenge this course of action, as she had previously challenged similar approaches. This change in approach was not because Cassie lacked compassion or skill as a worker; over the course of six months she showed impressive patience and dedication in a challenging relationship. However, even within a team that was encouraged to actively work on providing unconditional support, repeated experiences of rejection and non-engagement understandably took their emotional toll and became demotivating. It is impossible to completely expunge the relational and emotional dimensions of support work, highlighting that the production of victimhood will always be relational to a degree.

5.5 The Scarcity of Victimhood: Peer Relationships, Family Relationships, and the Production of Victim Status

The interactional emergence of victim status through relationships between practitioners and young people affected by CCE was an important but difficult task. I now turn to the other types of relationships that were important in influencing young people's status as victims, which in turn presented their own challenges. In making decisions about whether to take a victim or offender-orientated approach towards young people involved in county lines, practitioners considered the nature of young people's relationships with others in their lives, including other peers involved in the same drug distribution network and young people's families. Specifically, practitioners were concerned with the amount of harm that young people had caused, and/or the risk of harm that they posed, to other individuals within their network of personal relationships:

> We do have to accept that there will be children that at some point will become offenders and we will have to deal with them as offenders. At some point they will cross that line, because they will have committed so much harm to others…We've tried dealing with them as a victim and it hasn't worked and now their risk to others is escalating to the point where we need to start going down the prosecution route. (Melissa, CCE police team).

Melissa is unambiguous about the impact of harm caused to others on the perception and treatment of young people. Her words emphasise a sense of inevitability regarding the eventual transition of young people affected by CCE who harm and continue to harm others from victim to offender. As this section will demonstrate, the perception that young people posed too much risk, or had caused too much harm to others, shifted practitioners away from a victim-orientated approach.

More specifically, this section demonstrates that when young people affected by CCE caused too much harm or posed too much risk to peers or family members, their status as victims was supplanted by that of those whom they had harmed, or risked harming, as opposed to existing alongside it. I describe this as 'the scarcity of victimhood'. I use this phrase to refer to the idea that, in the context of this research, there were limits on the number of people who could be recognised and classed as victims within a particular network of relationships at any one time. When practitioners felt that a young person had caused too much harm to others, these others' status as victims (or potential victims) of that young person often superseded the

young person's own status as a victim of CCE. Accordingly, access to victim status was scarce, and it was difficult for multiple connected individuals to all be recognised and treated as victims simultaneously. As before, we see that the emergence of victim status is highly relational, in this case partially dependent on an individual's impact on others within a wider network of personal relationships.

5.5.1 Young People's Relationships With Peers Within Drug Distribution Networks

The first and most significant way in which young people's personal relationships could affect their status as victims relates to situations in which a young person was seen to be harming other young people within the same drug distribution network, particularly where practitioners perceived a young person to be exploiting others. Practitioners emphasised that the longer young people were involved in drug distribution networks the greater the risk that they would become involved in recruitment and exploitation themselves: 'if we aren't able to extricate young people from it quick enough, I think that's a real risk that they then work their way higher up the food chain and then end up becoming recruiters and exploiters themselves.' (Kevin, YOS manager). When practitioners perceived young people as having taken on the role of recruiter or exploiter this affected the extent to which they recognised young people as victims. Christopher described the change in perception of Elijah, who was receiving support as a victim of CCE but was subsequently charged with modern slavery offences after being stopped by police with two younger people:

> Elijah was arrested at the station in Stonewell with two other younger people - so suspected of encouraging them into getting into whatever he is dealing with…So for Elijah, being found at the station with two other young people would have been the day that the professional world switched their perception of him. So now he's exploiting other people therefore he's an offender, therefore we need to do this this and this. Whereas prior to that he is being exploited and we need to do this- instead of doing X we need to do Y. (Christopher, YOS manager).

As Christopher demonstrates, it is the perceived relationship between Elijah and these two young people that informs the transition in practitioners' view of Elijah from victim of exploitation to perpetrator. Elijah's status as an offender is defined relationally, relative to the two younger people on the train, and 'offender' becomes the label that informs practitioners' subsequent course of action towards him.

Officers within the CCE police team also described finding it difficult to continue to treat young people as victims if they caused too much harm to others:

> How much time can you invest in them as an exploited child compared to the amount of time we need to invest in them as exploiters of others? That seesaw balance has tipped and now we have to worry less about them and more about the risk they pose to other young people, and we've now got quite a few young people in that category now, that two years ago we were jumping up and down and screaming and worried about where they were and what was happening to them, and now we're just worried about what they're going to do to other people. (Arnie, CCE police team).

As Arnie demonstrates, when a young person is considered a risk to multiple others, this represents a potential escalation of harm and significant additional resource requirements. In a resource-limited environment, officers described having to 'focus energies where I think it will have the most value.' (Shona, CCE police team). As a result, the focus becomes the risk that that young person poses to multiple others, rather than the risks that they may be experiencing.

It is not uncommon for victims of exploitation to become involved in the recruitment of additional victims (Cockbain, 2018; MSPTU, 2018), and preliminary research on 'victim-victim grooming' in contexts of sexual exploitation has shown that criminal justice practitioners may treat so-called 'victim-offender hybrids' or 'alpha victims' sympathetically, as engaging in necessary survival strategies (Cockbain, 2018). However, this was not the case in relation to CCE victims in this research. As previously discussed, victims of CCE are already far further away from 'ideal victim status' than the individuals in Cockbain's research who were not primarily being exploited to commit criminal acts. Due to their involvement in offending, victims of CCE are already to a certain extent 'on borrowed time' when it comes to accessing victim status. When they were seen to be exploiting other young people this was perhaps therefore more likely to have a negative impact on recognition of their status as victims.

5.5.2 Young People's Relationships With Family

While the perception that young people were exploiting others was the most significant area where young people's impact on others could affect whether practitioners took a victim-orientated or an offender-orientated approach, there were also other relationships that tipped the balance in subtler ways. One of these was the risk that young people posed towards others

within their family networks, particularly those deemed to be vulnerable such as younger siblings, grandparents, or parents with mental health concerns. Where these risks were felt by practitioners to be too great, the victimisation of family members tended to take precedence over the victimisation of the young person.

A good example of this comes from practitioners' concerns about the relationship between two brothers, Brandon and Bobby, and their mother Sue. Across several YOS risk meetings for Brandon and Bobby, practitioners expressed concerns about the brothers' visits to their mum's house and the impact of this on her as a 'vulnerable adult' with pre-existing mental health conditions. Specifically, practitioners were concerned that the boys' behaviour towards her was controlling, about possible financial abuse, and about comments made by Sue that she was scared of the boys and did not want them to visit the house but was anxious about the ramifications of trying to prevent them from doing so. Over the course of several months, in the risk meetings themselves concerns about Sue's vulnerability to her sons, rather than the vulnerability of the boys, became the fulcrum on which practitioner action turned. This culminated in the decision to ask local police to conduct additional monitoring to ensure that the Bobby and Brandon were not visiting their mum's address together, as this would be contrary to their bail conditions, in the hope that 'if we catch them it will safeguard mum' (Stanley, YOS-seconded police officer, Fieldnotes). The team was mindful of the fact that this course of action 'could lead to [Brandon and Bobby] being remanded or locked up' and that this might be 'counterproductive to the work that we're doing' (Stanley, YOS-seconded police officer, Fieldnotes) with the boys as victims of CCE. However, in the end the team took the decision to proceed with the additional police checks on the basis that 'mum is vulnerable, so we have to take charge' (Jan, YOS manager, Fieldnotes). This example demonstrates that in cases where young people's harm to others within their familial network was an increasing concern, attitudes towards young people affected by CCE could shift towards a more punitive approach if practitioners felt that this would safeguard other family members.

These kinds of shifts in attitude were also influenced in subtler ways by practitioners' perceptions of the risk that young people might pose to younger siblings, a factor that could gradually add weight to the view of a young person as an offender rather than a victim. For example, concerns about a young person's potential to put younger siblings in harm's way could alter perceptions of a young person, as in Tyler's case:

> Tyler was bringing random people home. People turning up to his house and asking for him in a threatening manner…and he's got younger siblings, so that was the end of it, the police advised [the family] to not have him there because of the younger siblings…I think their advice was change the locks. Because he was coming back and being quite- I don't think he actually assaulted anyone, but he was just being aggressive, and threatening and stuff, and when you've got a seven-year-old in the house... (Lola, YOS officer).

In this situation, the perception of Tyler as bringing threat and risk into the family home is clear. It is important to note that this behaviour might not have been viewed as *as* problematic or concerning had it not happened in front of his younger siblings, and the fact that it did mean that that the practitioner response to Tyler shifted to one that was more punitive. This further demonstrates the importance of understanding the impact of the interactions between young people and others within their family network on the extent to which they are viewed and treated primarily as victims.

Normative expectations of victimhood help us to understand the scarcity of victimhood in relation to young people affected by CCE who were perceived to harm, or risk harming, others. Firstly, when young people harmed, or risked harming, others this centred their identities as offenders, or potential offenders, rendering it more difficult to recognise their victimhood in a justice system that dichotomises 'victim' and 'offender'. Involvement in harming others was positioned as an agentic act on the part of young people, again conflicting with the expectation that victims ought to display a significant degree of passivity and powerlessness (Strobl, 2004; Van Dijk, 2009). In addition, while practitioners did not talk about this explicitly, based on what we know about the characteristics of 'ideal victims' (Christie, 1986), it is fair to assume that it was easier for practitioners to recognise Tyler's siblings as victims, in place of Tyler, and Elijah's peers as his victims of his exploitation, due to their younger ages and resulting assumptions about their greater vulnerability. Similarly, it is likely that Sue's status as woman with mental health issues rendered her a more easily recognisable victim than her teenage sons with their already substantial list of convictions. Young people's likelihood of losing victim status was intensified if others within their relational network better conformed to normative expectations of victimhood.

5.6 Conclusion

This chapter examines the ways in which young people's relationships with practitioners, peers within drug distribution networks, and families influence the emergence of young people's status as victims of CCE, thereby emphasising the value of analysing interactions and relationships for our understanding of processes of victim identification. The analyses presented in this chapter make several contributions to literatures on critical victimology and CCE.

Firstly, while research in critical victimology has made the theoretical case for the interactional emergence of victimhood (Holstein and Miller, 1990), the field lacks in-depth analyses of how these processes unfold in practice (Rock, 2002; Mawby and Walklate, 1994). This chapter takes steps towards addressing this gap in the literature by offering an in-depth empirical investigation of how micro-level interactions and relationships themselves influence the emergence of victim status. While existing research in critical victimology tends to focus on the individual characteristics that are conducive to the emergence of victim status, for example innocence and vulnerability (Christie, 1986; Strobl, 2010), this chapter demonstrates that victim status also emerges through interactions, and it is relational acts themselves, such as the sharing or withholding of information, the acceptance or rejection of care and support, and the practical and emotional implications of these, that help us to determine whether individuals conform to our normative expectations around the victim role.

This chapter also demonstrates that levels of harm caused to others exert a powerful influence on the recognition of victim status. I develop the concept of the 'scarcity of victimhood' as a theoretical tool that explains why the harm that young people caused, or that practitioners felt they risked causing, to others within their social networks restricted the extent to which practitioners could recognise young people as victims. I show that the difficulty that practitioners experienced in applying the victim label to more than one individual within a network of relationships demonstrates the nature of 'victimhood' itself as a scarce resource. Accordingly, in the context of this research the victim status of one individual tended to supplant that of any other potential victims within a particular social network.

Finally, this chapter also makes a specific contribution to the literature on young people's experiences of CCE. While previous research has identified that it is particularly challenging to engage young people affected by CCE in contexts of county lines in practitioner practice (Hudek, 2018), this chapter develops this line of analysis further, exploring why this is the

case. It is clear that young people's beliefs that experiences of victimisation would not be recognised by practitioners, their concerns about violent consequences associated with disclosing their experiences, and the importance of shared experience, participation and collaboration in relationships with practitioners, are all significant hurdles that complicate and often restrict young people's engagement with practitioners.

This chapter has emphasised the need to incorporate young people's voices and perspectives into our understanding of CCE victim identification. Accordingly, it is also vital to consider young people's responses to the victim label, and their processes of claiming, accepting, or rejecting this label. It is to these concerns that I now turn.

6 Findings: Young People's Perspectives on Victimhood

6.1 Introduction

The relational nature of 'victimhood' extends to the fact that, even in cases where practitioners did decide to attribute victim status to a young person, it still remained for the young person themselves to claim, accept or reject it. These processes form the focus of this chapter.

Research within victimology has focused a great deal on why people with certain characteristics may receive or be denied victim status, but far less on the attitudes of these individuals themselves towards victimhood. Existing research has explored why individuals may reject the victim label, focusing on the stigma associated with victimhood, and on the rejection of victimhood as a form of self-preservation that averts the psychological difficulty of confronting one's vulnerability to harm (Fohring, 2015, 2018b, 2018c). Yet research in this area largely presents individuals as avoiding or denying the reality of their victimhood (see also Weiss, 2011). This focus reflects the ways in which existing research into CCE has treated young people's rejection of the victim of exploitation label: as a case of young people simply being unable to admit, or unable to recognise, that they have been exploited (West and Loeffler, 2015; Robinson, McLean and Densley, 2019; Ministry of Justice, 2019).

While these factors offer a partial explanation, we should not limit our understanding of young people's rejection of victim status to avoidance, denial, or false consciousness. In addition, it is important, both for victimology in general, and for our understanding of CCE in particular, to examine the ways in which young people involved in drug distribution may genuinely feel that their experiences do not fit with their normative expectations of what being a victim of exploitation would look like (Van Dijk, 2009: 12). 'Victimhood', as it is typically conceptualised, is a particularly 'cramped identity' (Minow, 1993: 1432) reducing and restricting its inhabitants to a narrow set of traits - most frequently 'weakness', 'innocence' and 'respectability' (Christie, 1986; Duggan, 2018) - and experiences: typically those of total suffering and pain (Van Dijk, 2009). Similarly, mainstream conceptualisations of exploitation as 'wrongful use' (Zwolinski and Wertheimer, 2017; Fudge, 2021) allow little scope for positive or beneficial aspects of one's experiences. As such, normative ideas of what it means to be a victim of exploitation understandably often fail to capture the complex and multifaceted lived realities of young people affected by CCE, for whom, as we shall see, experiences of power, agency, and even pleasure often intersect with those of helplessness

and suffering. Accordingly, we can further develop our understanding of why young people reject the victim of exploitation label by examining the impact of the incongruity of young people's experiences of drug distribution with their normative ideas of victimhood and exploitation.

In addition to the paucity of research into the rejection of victim status, the reasons why individuals may accept or claim victim status are also under-researched and have received almost no attention in the literature on CCE. In general, research with those who do identify as victims has tended to focus on individuals engaged in victim movements (Dunn, 2004; Christie, 2010), including those seeking to highlight the collective harms perpetrated against a specific group (Killean, 2018), or the role that claiming victim status plays in wider claims to rights such as asylum (Kelly, 2014). In these examples, the focus is often on how individuals operationalise their status as victims in order to pursue a wider cause or goal, and less on how individuals accept and come to terms with the victim label in and of itself. While the former focus has relevance for young people involved in drug distribution, for example those seeking the limited benefits available through the NRM process, we must also explore the extent to which individuals engage in processes of grasping hold of victim status, accepting, and coming to terms with the term victim as a component of their identity in and of itself.

Before beginning this chapter, it is important to make two clarifications. Firstly, young people's acts of claiming and rejecting victim status are not definitive (Leisenring, 2006: 319). As Sandberg (2009) demonstrates, the narratives of individuals involved in drug dealing are often imbued with interdiscursivity, and individuals may foreground different presentations of themselves in different contexts, often balancing seemingly contradictory identities simultaneously (see Jägervi, 2014: 74; Åkerström, Burcar and Wästerfors, 2011). Thus, although the young people included in this chapter are broadly grouped into those who claimed/accepted and those who rejected victim status, it is important to note that for each young person these processes were complex, conflicting, and open-ended. Many of the young people who presented themselves as victims overall also had moments of rejecting and refuting victim status and vice versa, and this is reflected in the inclusion of young people's voices across multiple sections within this chapter.

Secondly, as discussed in greater detail in the methodology chapter of this thesis, this chapter aims to provide a more holistic representation of the young people involved in this research

through the use of brief biographical sketches where space permits this. These sketches are intended to give the reader a small insight into young people's lives beyond their involvement in drug distribution and attitudes towards the victim of exploitation label, with the aim of resisting the reduction of already marginalised research participants to their experiences of harm (Tuck, 2009).

This chapter proceeds in two sections. The first section examines young people's experiences of identifying with the CCE victim label, focusing on how young people could claim the victim label in order to access limited benefits, and on young people's experiences of accepting or trying to come to terms with victimhood. The second section explores young people's experiences of rejecting the victim label, focusing on the role of stigma but also on the role of experiences incompatible with normative conceptualisations of victimhood and exploitation, specifically young people's narratives of restricted agency and constrained choice and young people's assessments of the positive elements of their involvement, including experiences of power, pleasure, and respite.

6.2 Claiming, Accepting, and Coming to Terms With Victim Status

The rejection of the victim of exploitation label was widespread among the young people who participated in this research, and examples of young people describing themselves as victims of exploitation were present but rare. This section examines the two major factors associated with identifying as a victim of exploitation among young people who participated in this research: firstly, the claiming of the label at 'crisis points', in the hope that this would facilitate access to support and assistance, when few other alternatives appeared viable; and secondly, young people's processes of focusing on how they had grown through, and learnt from, their experiences of victimisation, which made it easier to come to terms with the label itself.

6.2.1 Vanya: Reaching a Crisis Point, Reaching For a Way Out

Crisis points, including a young person being arrested and facing a significant sentence, being hospitalised as a result of drug-related violence, or perceiving a sharp increase in the risk of such violence, influenced young people's decisions to talk to practitioners about their experiences of involvement in drug distribution. In addition, the experience of reaching a crisis point could also contribute to changes in a young person's relationship with the idea of being a victim of exploitation.

This was the case for Vanya, aged 15, who came to describe himself as a victim of exploitation in the aftermath of his arrest. Vanya lived at home in Stonewell with his parents and younger siblings. He had been excluded from school and was attending a pupil referral unit. However, he had missed a substantial amount of school due to his experiences of CCE: 'I missed bare[131] school, I was never in school for like a year'. Despite this disruption, he expressed a keen interest in music production and in construction and was optimistic about pursuing either of these careers: 'I'm a positive person and I'm looking forward to the future'. His YOS officer described him as 'bright, charismatic and full of potential' (Nathan, YOS officer). When we met for our interview, Vanya arrived dwarfed by an enormous black puffer coat. He removed this to reveal a t-shirt and a scuffed blue stab-proof vest, the latter wryly explained as: 'to keep warm'. At the time of the research, Vanya was completing a Referral Order with the YOS in relation to possession with intent to supply and was working with Karo on the YOS CCE team.

Vanya's decision to claim victim status had been precipitated by a new arrest for possession with intent to supply class A drugs. At this point Vanya had felt that claiming victim status was his only alternative to a custodial sentence. He explained:

> In the end, I got picked up with so much, I had cash, I had a phone with loads of messages on it, I had drugs – and I was definitely going to prison. And that's not a good place. My brothers are both in prison…and they've told me that it's not a good place, so I don't want that for myself personally. So I told the police what happened…I told them what happened to me.

By 'telling the police what happened' to him, Vanya is referring to a situation in which he describes becoming entrapped and exploited to sell drugs after accruing a spurious debt:

> Me personally I was exploited. I was going to [the takeaway], and I didn't have enough money for the food, and this guy said he'd pay it for me, and then he asked me to hold a bag for him, and then he just didn't come back and I waited but eventually I just threw the bag and then left. And then the next time I came back to [the takeaway], he was like: "What happened to the bag?", and I was like: "I don't know, you said you'd only be two minutes and you never came back" – this was like two days later – and he said the bag had like thousands of pounds of drugs in it – and

[131] A lot of.

> so then I had to go and sell for him to work off the debt...There were lots of times that I wanted to leave but I couldn't, because I had a debt. I didn't have a choice.

In the extracts above, Vanya is clear about his status as a victim of exploitation, emphasising: 'I was exploited' and 'I didn't have a choice', and frames the claiming of this status as a direct response to the implications of his arrest.

Vanya was willing to engage with the victim of exploitation label if it meant avoiding a custodial sentence. After disclosing these experiences in the aftermath of his arrest, Vanya was referred to the NRM, received a positive conclusive grounds decision and the charges against him were subsequently dropped: 'it ended up being no further action. Which was really good'. For Vanya, claiming victim status had a tangible positive outcome and was therefore a desirable course of action. This suggests that young people may claim the term victim more readily if they perceive the use of the term to be associated with an improvement in their circumstances and diversion from further harm.

6.2.1.1 Contested claims

While Vanya provided a rare example of a young person who self-defined as a victim of exploitation, his claim to victim status was not uncontentious. Here it is important to remember that claims to victimhood are precarious and always subject to ongoing scrutiny, suspicion and contestation (Dunn, 2001; Ronsbo and Jensen, 2014). Particularly where young people did not meet the normative expectations associated with victimhood, the possibility for 'redefinition and discrediting' (Dunn, 2001: 289) loomed large. As the data collection for this research progressed, Vanya was arrested for multiple additional offences including possession with intent to supply class A drugs, grievous bodily harm, and possession of a bladed article and was perceived by practitioners as 'rapidly disengaging' (Fieldnotes, risk meeting) from supportive interventions, including his relationship with Karo on the YOS CCE team. As a result of these factors, the practitioners involved began to struggle to hold the concept of Vanya as a genuine victim:

> There's a feeling that [Vanya] maybe gamed the system. He's carried on offending after receiving the positive NRM, he's carried on his involvement in dealing. He kind of got away with it the first time and there's been a distinct lack of engagement from him since. (Stanley, YOS-seconded police officer).

> Vanya has probably got away, because of NRM referrals, with things he maybe should have been prosecuted for. (Nathan, YOS officer).

As demonstrated by the comments above, practitioners began to doubt Vanya's claims to victim status because he was not conforming to normative expectations that victims should accept help and transition away from harmful situations (Strobl, 2004; Strobl, 2010). Vanya's case serves as a further reminder of the relational and interactional nature of victim status. Just because young people claimed victim status, it did not mean that this would be accepted by youth justice practitioners on an ongoing basis. Rather, claims to victimhood must be repeatedly negotiated and re-negotiated between those with the power to claim, and the power to bestow it.

6.2.2 Alex and James: Posttraumatic Growth

The second factor that is important in explaining why young people were able to identify with the victim of exploitation label is the centring of narratives of victimisation around what Calhoun and Tedeschi (2006) characterise as 'posttraumatic growth', and the ways in which this made it easier to come to terms with victim identity. 'Posttraumatic growth' refers to 'positive change that the individual experiences as a result of the struggle with a traumatic event.' (Calhoun and Tedeschi, 1999: 11). This section will explore the experiences of two young people, James and Alex, who, in describing their experiences of exploitation, replaced negative and stigmatising connotations of victimhood with more 'culturally valued' (Dunn, 2005) attributes, predominantly a sense of increased knowledge, awareness and insight that they felt had evolved out of their experiences of CCE. These perspectives emphasised what Leisenring (2006: 312) describes as 'the other side of being a victim', that is, experiences of recovery and resulting growth and strength. Such experiences are often expressed through the use of the term 'survivor' in place of the term 'victim', particularly in discourses around women's experiences of sexual and domestic violence (Dunn, 2005), although 'survivor' was not a term that the young people included in this section used. Young people's emphasis on growth should not be misinterpreted as the romanticisation of victim status (Green, Calverley and O'Leary, 2021). Both Alex and James were clear about the harm that they had experienced. Rather, focusing on posttraumatic growth, as a less stigmatising framing of their experiences, was one way in which they were able to come to terms with this harm and accept victim status.

6.2.2.1 James and Alex

James was 15 years old and had lived in Stonewell 'most of my life, basically, since I was six months old'. James had been excluded from school and was completing online learning, which he did not initially enjoy: 'It's dreadful. [laughs] It's dreadful. Yeah it's not good',

although his feelings about this began to change over the course of the COVID-19 lockdowns during which he transitioned to online learning at college, studying catering, something which he seemed to enjoy far more. James's involvement in drug distribution stemmed from drug debts relating to his drug use. As he explained:

> James: The guys will be like right well I know you don't smoke crack and heroin so take the pebs[132] off me, give me the money back for it, your debt's gone. So then more time you take it off him, you do whatever you've got to do, and then you meet a shot[133] and they take it off you. So that'll happen quite a lot you think this guy's giving me something to help me out, he doesn't want me on his tic list[134], and then they can view him as a mate, treat him well, and then once he's got enough they'll just tell some crackhead go take it off him or something.
>
> Hannah: Yeah, to get that stuff taken off him?
>
> James: Yeah.
>
> Hannah: And would you say that's an example of exploitation?
>
> James: Yeah that's a massive example of exploitation. I've had it happen to me.

James felt that his drug debts and subsequent exploitation were closely linked to his exclusion from school, and the boredom and loneliness that had ensued:

> Hannah: Do you think that being excluded from school played a role?
>
> James: That's how I got into it properly
>
> Hannah: Do you think?
>
> James: When you've got nothing else to do in the day, you find the people that have nothing else to do and that's how it is, you end up with your mates. You've got nothing else to do. You'd rather be mates with these drug dealers that sit at home by yourself.

James was completing a Youth Conditional Caution with the YOS and thought highly of his YOS worker Jeff: 'he's a well good bloke'. He was also receiving support from Laura from the YOS CCE team, whom he felt had 'really helped'. Laura described James as a

[132] Pellets or deals of heroin or crack.
[133] A customer.
[134] A list of customers with outstanding debts relating to drug purchases.

particularly ‘reflective’, ‘empathetic’ and ‘kind’, qualities which he exemplified during the course of our conversations.

Alex was 16 years old and lived with his grandparents in a rural part of Stonewell, which he liked: ‘It’s quiet. Chilled. Out the way. It’s a nice place to live.’ Like James, Alex’s involvement in drug distribution had evolved through debts associated with drug use. As he explained:

> It started off being weed. So you go- ten pound worth of weed, yeah. Standard. Go out with your mates, smoke that. Then it would move on, like you’re at a party and you’d get cocaine or whatever, MDMA, and then you’d have that and then obviously you want more and more of it so then you get more, and then you’re in debt more, if you haven’t got the money to pay for it, then you’ll get started, then they’ll give you stuff to pay and then you’ll let that all out, and then you’ve got to get that money somehow. (Alex).

Alex described this initial situation as having progressed into one in which he had experienced serious harm:

> I had like a really bad experience, and a really bad time with the dealers and the county lines and everything…it brings a lot of pain. Especially to yourself, like in your life, cos you have to evolve everything around that. It’s like they’ve got a hold over you.

Alex felt that these experiences had had a negative impact on multiple areas of his life, including his family relationships - ‘I’ve only just built up the relationships I have with my grandparents again’ - and his education. He was frustrated at having been excluded from mainstream school as a result of involvement in drug distribution: ‘It’s kind of a stupid reason. Well I think it’s stupid’. He was studying part-time in an exclusion unit but hoped to re-join mainstream school before the academic year ended, something that he understood to be conditional on his transition away from drug distribution:

> I’ve gotta show that I’m not involved with the dealers, not doing any drugs, doing drug running. And then hopefully I’ll be allowed back in. Yeah but at the moment it’s quite hard because I’m on a reduced timetable, so I’m on nine until one, that’s only four hours, so for a year eleven, it’s kind of hard because I’ve got my GCSEs.

Alex was interested in travelling and hoped to join the military after he left school: 'I want to go into like the army mechanics, RAF mechanics…Going off like different countries, it'll be all good.' During our conversations Alex came across as exuberant yet thoughtful, and his comments, even when they dealt with serious and difficult topics, were often punctuated with jokes and bursts of laughter. At the time of the research, he was completing a Prevention Order with the YOS with Arthur and was working with Kerri on the YOS CCE team.

6.2.2.2 New eyes, new insights

One significant facet of both James' and Alex's narratives was the assertion that they had gained new insight into the behaviours and motivations of others as a result of their experiences as victims of exploitation, and were able to see, and to scrutinise, potential peer relationships with new eyes. James reflected on his experiences of victimisation as having meant that he now had a clearer sense of his boundaries in relationships and higher expectations of how he should be treated by his friends. Specifically, James described how his approach to choosing his friends had become more discerning as a result of his experiences:

> That's what I do with all my mates, if they ask me something, like a big favour, the first thing I'll say is straight up no. I'll be hella[135] against it. Even if I'm on it. Just to sort them out or whatever. So I see how their reaction is. So I've had a lot of people that are like ah well, that's alright bro I understand. Like you can't put yourself in the situation that I'm in. I shouldn't really be trying to pass it onto you I'm sorry kind of thing. And those are the ones you wanna keep. (James).

James emphasised his ability to 'point out the fake people in life', and to scrutinise the motives of the people with whom he surrounded himself, as a strength that had emerged out of his experiences of victimisation. Similarly, although to a lesser extent, Alex also framed his experiences of victimisation in terms of growth and development, focusing on the insight that he had gained into how others' behaviour could and had affected him: 'At that time, in that situation, I felt like nothing- it was just a normal thing. But now, getting out of it, I can see what their game was and how they've bought me into it, and what their plans were and like how it could affect me. And how it has affected me'. Alex offers a similar narrative of gaining new insight and being able to assess situations more clearly as a result of his experiences but was at an earlier stage in the process of coming to terms with the victim label

[135] Very.

in comparison with James[136]. The nuances of Alex's process here remind us that identifying with the victim of exploitation label is often a process of gradually coming to terms with victim status, rather than accepting it automatically. Notwithstanding this, both Alex and James emphasised the insights that they had gained, specifically regarding navigating peer relationships, when discussing their experiences of victimisation.

6.2.2.3 Becoming "knowledge-holders"

For both James and Alex, although again to varying degrees, the idea of becoming a 'knowledge-holder' - someone who was able to use their awareness and experience to educate and support other young people at risk of exploitation - formed a second important process of positive reframing that made it easier to gradually accept the victim label as time went on. James described this role as follows:

> James: It's good for me, cos I see it from the side lines, so when it's happening to people, I can be like look you're being groomed mate.
>
> Hannah: Yeah, so you've had situations where you've said that to people?
>
> James: Yeah yeah, a couple of my mates like you need to stay away from that guy he's trying to get you to do stuff for him.

James offered several examples of the ways in which he felt that he supported his friends and peers with issues relating to exploitation, including encouraging others to moderate their drug consumption in order to avoid accumulating drug debts: 'they're like ah I do it to support my weed habit…they can do that and still make their daily smoke, with a zed[137] instead of a nine-bar[138]…you don't need to be doing massive bits, you'll get yourself in bare trouble doing that'; encouraging young people to find other ways of making money: 'You're young, you could go and get a legal job, not one that will put you prison'; and encouraging young people affected by exploitation to find a way out: 'best thing that you can do if someone is trying to exploit you is straight away tell your mum…call the police, pay the debt, or just tell [potential exploiters] to fuck off'. Research into 'posttraumatic growth' has emphasised that victims of trauma may come to terms with their own experiences by supporting other victims (Gueta,

[136] However, the degree to which a young person claims or rejects victim status should not be reduced to temporal explanations relating to the stage that a young person is at on a journey of transition away from involvement in drug distribution. There were also young people, for example Carl and Freddie whose experiences are discussed later in this chapter, who continued to reject the 'victim' label, even though they described themselves as having fully transitioned away from involvement in drug distribution.
[137] An ounce of cannabis.
[138] Nine ounces of cannabis.

Cohen-Leibovich and Ronel, 2020). While this research has focused predominantly on formal volunteering roles, for example on helplines or in shelters, James's experience suggests that this sense of coming to terms with the victim label through helping others was also possible through the provision of informal support within existing peer networks.

For Alex, coming to terms with his own experiences through supporting others was a little more complex, but nevertheless important. Alex felt that although he wanted to talk to peers in his community about the risks of exploitation, he often felt self-conscious about doing so. As he explained:

> Alex: It's hard knowing, because you see kids out there like, I dunno, I see like 13-14 year olds, they've just gone and got some weed, they're sitting round in a circle smoking that. Then like you can see what- knowing that you've been in that situation- and you started off like that, you can see where they're gonna go.
>
> Hannah: Yeah so you can see it?
>
> Alex: Yeah yeah. It's quite bad, in a way, because no one- you don't even say nothing.
>
> Hannah: You feel like you don't want to say?
>
> Alex: Yeah you can't say nothing cos then you just look like- well, you look like, what is it? You look like you're the old person that's got all the knowledge if you know what I mean [laughs].

Despite this reluctance, Alex still emphasised that raising awareness of criminal exploitation was important to him: 'they should know, the people, they should know more than what they do know…what goes on and how kids are getting involved with it'. Although he did not feel comfortable talking to his peers, Alex viewed participating in this research as a way that he could help to educate and thereby protect other young people from the risk of exploitation: 'I wanted to do this interview. The more people that know the better. Especially if it's going into your research as well'. Alex took on the role of 'knowledge-holder' in a less direct way than James, but the role still provided a way of connecting with his experiences of victimisation that was more positive and therefore easier to come to terms with.

6.2.2.4 Shifting focus

Despite the fact that both Alex and James described themselves as victims of exploitation, their reflections highlight how difficult it is to directly engage with an identity that could feel unpalatable. Though they claimed victim identities, Alex and James also engaged in discursive practices that shifted the focus of the narrative away from their direct experiences of being victimised. These practices of shifting focus are noticeable in Alex's and James' descriptions above, which place the focus on the new selves that they describe as having evolved out of their experiences of victimisation, and on peers at risk of victimisation, rather than on Alex and James as victims themselves. Similar acts of shifting focus emerged in other aspects of Alex's and James' accounts. Firstly, through the centring of their descriptions of victimisation on condemning the wrongful actions and behaviours of the perpetrators:

> At the beginning I really didn't like [the term 'exploitation']…But then when they kind of explained it more as no this guy is just a prick, he'll do this to everyone, he's not your mate. (James).

> They're sneaky…most of them are quite violent, so they will- if it doesn't go their way or they lose money or- not even a large amount, they will soon come round to your door and start kicking that down, just over one little thing. (Alex).

And secondly, through an emphasis on CCE as a widespread problem that affected many young people and not just them: 'You're not the only one it's happening to. And then once you realise it's kind of happening to everyone you're kind of just yeah that is what it is, that is how it is. It is fucked up.' (James); 'it's happening to a lot of young people as well as like myself.' (Alex). These examples demonstrate that processes of claiming victim status can be intertwined with processes that de-emphasise the victimised person themselves, diffusing the intensity of focus on their individual status as victims, perhaps making it easier to come to terms with the label.

Young people who identified as victims were rare among those who participated in this research. This is perhaps understandable given that, as demonstrated in this section, young people who claimed victim status could find themselves subject to scrutiny and see such claims contested, as in Vanya's case. In addition, Alex's and James' reflections emphasise the difficulty of coming to terms with victim status, demonstrating that in order to do so young people often looked past the experience of victimisation itself and focused on the growth that came with recovering and moving on. It was far more common for young people

participating in this research to reject suggestions from practitioners or others in their lives that they were victims of exploitation, and we will now consider this response in more detail.

6.3 Rejecting Victim Status

The next section of this chapter explores the three primary factors associated with young people's rejection of the victim of exploitation label. Firstly, I reflect on the stigma associated with victimhood, and specifically with being exploited to sell drugs, and how this contributed to young people's refutation of victim status. Existing research into young people's rejection of victim status has emphasised that this stigma derives from the association between victimhood and weakness (Fohring, 2018a; Jägervi, 2014), and our need to maintain a self-concept that foregrounds strength and confidence (Fohring, 2015). This dynamic was important for the young people who participated in this research. However, in addition to the idea that the stigma associated with being a victim of exploitation pushed young people away from the label, we must also acknowledge that many young people did not feel the stereotypical components associated with being a victim of exploitation, such as weakness, passivity, and suffering, fully represented their experiences in the first place.

Before addressing this in more detail, we must acknowledge that there are those, including practitioners whose views were discussed in the first findings chapter, who largely dismissed young people's rejection of victim status as evidence that that they were simply too immature or too groomed to recognise that they were being victimised (West and Loeffler, 2015; Wager and Wager, 2016; Youth Justice Legal Centre, 2018). This section argues for the importance of taking young people's rejection of victim status seriously for two reasons. Firstly, if we do not listen to young people's alternative accounts of their own involvement in risky and exploitative situations, we will not be able to gain a complete understanding of the factors that contribute to their involvement in county lines. As a result, we may miss opportunities to address their full spectrum of need (Phoenix, 2002; Brown, 2019; Melrose and Pearce, 2013). Secondly, as McMahon-Howard (2017) observes, if we fail to engage with young people on their own terms and in ways which respect their perspectives on their own experiences, we risk losing vital opportunities to engage them in supportive interventions.

As this section shows, young people's rejection of the victim of exploitation label was often rooted in their perceptions of their involvement in drug distribution as an economic survival strategy, which represented a 'constrained choice' (Moyle, 2019; Coomber and Moyle, 2017;

Melrose and Pearce, 2013; Scott and Harper, 2006) and an expression of restricted agency (Honwana, 2005; Klocker, 2007; Payne, 2012; Atkinson-Sheppard, 2017; Abebe, 2019). Furthermore, young people's rejection of the victim of exploitation label also derived from the multifaceted nature of their experiences of drug distribution, in which the intermingling of more positive experiences of power, pleasure, respite and protection with violence and trauma, jarred with their normative conceptualisations of what being a victim of exploitation 'should' look like, also contributing to the refutation of victim status.

6.3.1 Connor: Stigma

The stigma associated with victimhood, and the difficulties this presents for accepting victim status, is well-documented (Fohring, 2018a; Fohring, 2015) and was a challenge faced by many of the young people who participated in this research. Young people emphasised that they would feel 'ashamed' (Phoebe) if someone referred to them as a victim of exploitation and described the idea of being known to have been pressured into selling drugs as an 'embarrassment' (James). This stigma centred around two key ideas. Firstly, the equation of this kind of victimisation with weakness, with participants stating that those labelled as victims of exploitation were 'weak and vulnerable' (Charlotte, Fieldnotes, CCE team-led workshop), 'easy to break' (Lucy, Fieldnotes, CCE team-led workshop) and 'mentally and physically weak' (Dan); and secondly, the characterisation of victims of exploitation as social pariahs, described as those who were 'weird, have no friends, and don't fit in with the popular groups' (Jasmine, Fieldnotes, CCE team-led workshop). In these cases, the victim of exploitation label had a variety of negative connotations with which young people did not want to be associated.

In addition, the term stigma connotes exposure, and 'being seen' as a victim of exploitation was a specific concern for young people. When talking about stigma we refer to individuals who are 'stained', 'tainted' or 'marked', highlighting the fact that stigma renders us, or threatens to render us, visible in an undesirable way (Goffman, 1963). Even young people like James and Alex, who identified as victims, struggled with the way in which the stigma associated with being a victim of exploitation felt exposing. Describing his feelings about discussing his experiences with practitioners, James foregrounded his concerns with the emasculating ways in which he felt they viewed him: 'I really didn't like it, cos it made me feel like they knew that I was someone's bitch.' (James). Similarly, Alex expressed a sense of shame and embarrassment at feeling that others had been able to see his exploitation in a way that he had not, which it itself felt exposing:

> I felt like a bit of an idiot knowing that- well I- when it happened, when I was involved in all of that it was like I didn't want to listen to anyone. So when I finally realised that that's what it was, that these people weren't my friends, they were just people that wanted to use me, I felt quite- I felt quite stupid for being brought into that. (Alex).

These examples highlight a specific discomfort not just with acknowledging your experience of exploitation, but also with others knowing about this exploitation and viewing you as exploited. James also expressed concern about the way his peers viewed him - 'they think you're a pussy, and then you've got more people laughing at you, you've got more people thinking you're a pussy.' (James) - further emphasising the stigma surrounding victim status as closely connected with concerns about how others perceive us. Accordingly, there were both personal and relational aspects to the stigma that young people associated with being a victim of exploitation.

The stigma associated with the 'victim of exploitation' label also stemmed from the perception of this label as highly emasculating. In the comments above, participants asserted that they associated being exploited with being 'weak' (Charlotte, Lucy, and Dan) and describe the association of weakness with feminisation through the use of gendered terms like 'pussy' and 'bitch' (James). These responses resonate with the explanation of young people's rejection of the term 'victim of exploitation' as an attempt to uphold claims to masculinised status (Robinson et al., 2019: 706). The conceptualisations of exploitation that are offered by young people above clearly conflict with the qualities typically associated with hegemonic masculinities: particularly with the need to display the qualities of strength, dominance, and control (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005; Kimmel, 2005).

The issue of stigma was a particular factor in the narrative of one young person, Connor. Connor was aged 15 and living at home with his older brothers and parents. He was interested in car mechanics and had been studying this subject at college until an incident in which he had attempted to drive away the car that the class had been working on. Since being excluded from school, Connor had been NEET, but he was hoping to start helping out a family friend who ran a garage: 'he said that if I have friends with cars who need them fixed then we can work on them together'. Connor was completing a Prevention Order with the YOS in relation to concerns about his association with a group of young people within Stonewell that was known for involvement in drug distribution and violence. During our

conversation at his mum's kitchen table, we were joined by two large and excitable family dogs, who settled down at Connor's feet.

Connor's views on the stigma of involvement in drug distribution as a victim of exploitation were particularly interesting because they include the notion of a double-stigma associated with being exploited specifically to sell drugs. Like the young people described above, Connor also emphasised the stigma and shame that victims of exploitation faced in terms of being seen as having been 'mugged off'[139], and as having to do the 'dirty work' of selling for others. However, in addition, Connor emphasised that the there was a stigma attached to the work of drug distribution itself. Connor emphasised that 'cocaine and heroin are dirty, because of where they've been'. Here Connor is referring to the act of 'plugging' - the concealment of drugs in bodily cavities for transportation - emphasising that the practices involved in drug distribution could be a source of stigma in themselves. Furthermore, Connor suggested that young people involved in drug distribution were tainted by their proximity to drug users, whom he positioned as a source of both fear and contempt: 'the crackheads living by the fire escape near Sainsbury's they're scary, they look desperate…you can tell they're using just by looking at them'. Connor described involvement in drug distribution as positioning oneself too close to a world of substance abuse he viewed as both sad and frightening. As Connor's examples demonstrate, young people felt that there was a stigma to being a victim of exploitation in general, but also that this stigma was exacerbated by the fact that young people were being exploited specifically to sell drugs. Unsurprisingly, the existence of this multifaceted stigma disincentivised young people from identifying with the victim of exploitation label.

6.3.2 Freddie, Jakub and Mo: Restricted Agency and Constrained Choice

A second factor that informed young people's rejection of the victim label was the perception that it did not sufficiently capture their experiences in the first place. This section will explore the views of young people who rejected the victim of exploitation label because their perceptions of its connotations of a total lack of agency and choice, deriving from widespread interpretations of exploitation as 'wrongful use' (Zwolinski and Wertheimer, 2017; Fudge, 2021), in which victims are conceived of as passive objects lacking in agency, jarred with their characterisation of their involvement in drug distribution as a way of actively navigating and coping with the pressures of socioeconomic deprivation.

[139] Made to appear stupid.

6.3.2.1 Decoupling choice and exploitation

Young people within this group rejected the idea that they were victims of exploitation on the basis that they felt that they had had a degree of choice in their involvement in drug distribution and viewed this element of choice as incompatible with the victim of exploitation label; 'I never thought I was [exploited], cos I wasn't. I was in it cos I wanted to be in it. It way my own choice to be in it. I made that choice.' (Patryk). This incompatibility of making a choice and being a victim of exploitation was particularly salient for one young person, Freddie.

Freddie was aged 16 and lived at home with his mother and siblings. Freddie described himself as someone whose friendships were particularly important to him: 'If I wanna be a part of your life then you're my family…My circle is really small, I've got three friends, but they're very very close, they're family. It's either you're in or you're out'. The way in which Freddie valued his friendships was exemplified by his comments about a friend who had recently been sentenced, and who would be spending a long period in custody:

> I'm suffering with really bad anxiety because my best friend is in jail for murder…when you can't see the person that you're with every single day anymore it's just, it's just a bit shit – sorry for my language – it's horrible…fair enough he was a criminal, he was a very bad criminal, but never towards me. He was one of the only people who actually understood why I left [involvement in drug dealing], and the things it was doing to my family. And he just kept it real with me…he accepted it, he took it on the chin. There's not many of those people in the world.

As shown by these comments, the loss of this relationship as a result of his friend's incarceration was having a significant emotional impact at the time of our conversation. These few close friendships were a major source of peer support for Freddie, who had missed a large part of his schooling: 'I've messed up my education, I haven't done any of my GCSEs, and I've gotta resit them'. At the time of the research, he was looking to re-enter education and was optimistic about the future: 'the past is in the past. I can't do nothing about the things I've done, I've just got to look forward now…I'm just trying to do a painting decorating course and sort my life out'. Freddie was completing a Referral Order with the YOS in relation to a burglary and was not involved with the YOS CCE team.

In the extract below, Freddie demonstrates a conflict between the label 'victim of exploitation' and young people's sense of themselves as having the agency and the capacity to make choices:

> Freddie: A few practitioners have spoken about exploitation, but exploitation in the meaning of let's say, have they made me sell drugs and I didn't want to…I can strongly say that I've never been part of exploitation.
>
> Hannah: Yeah, right, so you feel like that word doesn't really apply to what you experienced?
>
> Freddie: No. Not at all.
>
> Hannah: Can you tell me more about why that is?
>
> Freddie: Because, yeah fair enough they made me do things I didn't want to do, but I'm a strong-minded person, so the way I see it is if I didn't want to do it then I wouldn't. It's like, fair enough, the things that I was doing were scary, and I didn't agree with some of the things but I still done it regardless. Nobody- nobody put a gun to my head and said do this, it wasn't like that, I made my own decisions. So that's how I know that I was never exploited.
>
> Hannah: And would you describe yourself as a victim, in terms of the things you've experienced, or would you not use that word either?
>
> Freddie: Um, no, because only on the pure reason that I made my own decisions.

Freddie's comments clearly demonstrate the reservation of the status of victim of exploitation for those who had been physically forced to deal drugs: 'nobody put a gun to my head'. Freddie describes both being 'made' to be involved in 'scary' situations and states that he 'didn't agree' with some of what was happening but views the degree of choice that he had in this situation - 'I'm a strong-minded person'; 'I made my own decisions' - as antithetical to the idea that he had been victimised: 'that's how I know that I was never exploited'. Freddie draws sharp distinction between the experiences of victims of exploitation, whom he perceived as lacking any choice at all, and his own experiences which he described as involving a degree of choice, even where this felt relatively restricted.

6.3.2.2 Constrained choice and restricted agency

It was not the case that, in rejecting the 'victim of exploitation' label because they felt it didn't adequately reflect their capacity to make choices, this group of young people were stating that they made choices to engage in drug dealing that were completely free from pressure or coercion. On the contrary, young people described their involvement in county lines as a response to a range of socioeconomic pressures. Throughout the fieldwork cases recurred of young people using money that they had accrued from county lines to pay for everyday expenses such as food, rent and bills, in light of a lack of viable alternatives: 'young people at our age can't go out and get a job and make money. So that's kind of like the only option on the table.' (James); 'Mum doesn't always have ten pounds, twenty pounds, every day, drug dealing is the easiest way to make money, because there aren't other opportunities.' (Tony). While existing explorations of young people's involvement in drug dealing for economic reasons have focused on relative deprivation and young people's desire to access luxury consumer goods (for example, Irwin-Rogers, 2019), the young people included in this section demonstrate similarities with existing research into adult involvement in drug distribution (Grundetjern and Sandberg, 2012; Fleetwood, 2014b; Moyle, 2019), and forthcoming research from Koch (in press) with young people, describing their involvement in county lines as a strategy of day-to-day economic survival.

In describing themselves as using county lines involvement as an active survival strategy through which to navigate socioeconomic pressures, these young people replaced narratives of victimhood with narratives of 'constrained choices' (Moyle, 2019; Coomber and Moyle, 2017; Scott and Harper, 2006) made 'not in conditions of their own choosing' (Phoenix, 2002: 362). Young people reflected on overlapping experiences of both being constrained and exercising choice. For example, Jakub's assertion: 'if you choose to work then it's not exploitation because it's your own choice and you need that money' describes a space in which the freedom of 'choice' and the pressure of 'need' are intertwined. Similarly, commenting on his reasons for becoming involved in county lines, Tony emphasised: 'money made me drive for it, nobody can really make me do things they want me to do for them.' This statement acknowledges the role of economic pressure in his involvement: 'money *made* me drive for it' but in the same moment Tony rejects the idea that anyone else can 'make' him do anything– thereby asserting a greater degree of control.

Jakub further explained how he saw himself as neither a victim of exploitation – envisaged as trapped and forced to deal – nor as being involved in dealing simply because it was something that he felt like doing:

> It's like there's a difference between wanting to make money and needing to make money you get me? Or being trapped in it, and you ain't got a choice to do it. So it's like three things, it's not even two things, it's like three different things: wanting to make it, having to make it, or just being forced to make it. (Jakub).

Jakub describes a spectrum with 'wanting' to make money at one end, and 'being forced' to make money at the other, carving out a space in the middle of 'having' to make money in which he can exist as both a young person struggling in the face of socioeconomic marginalisation, and as a young person who is able to exercise agency and make choices. To explore these dynamics of constrained choice in further detail, I will now turn to a more in-depth consideration of the experiences of two young people: Jakub and Mo.

6.3.2.3 Jakub

At the time of the research, Jakub was aged 16 and living in Stonewell with his mum and sister. He had spent time growing up in Eastern Europe, and in the UK where he wanted to remain: 'I prefer it here, it's way better', although he was excited about the possibility of travelling more in the future: 'I wanna go to Spain, I don't know why but I wanna go there, or California'. Jakub was currently studying at a pupil referral unit after being excluded from mainstream school, and his aspirations for his education centred around business:

> I like business a lot. I wanna have my own business…I wanna do a business apprenticeship. I'm going to study I think it's level 2 construction, because that's what type of business I want to go into,

a subject in which he had previously excelled:

> in my old school I was doing business and I was actually doing like proper good – I had a distinction in business. But then stuff started happening and like going on, and they moved me down to a merit like my work just started dropping and yeah…it's just a bit shit.

Jakub was completing a Referral Order after being convicted of possession with intent to supply but was also receiving support from Karo in the YOC CCE team. At the time of our conversation, Jakub had just finished his first day back at school, after having been held in

police custody and subsequently bailed in relation to a new charge of possession with intent to supply class A.

Over the course of our discussion, Jakub situated his involvement in county lines in relation to the need to help support his mum through financial difficulties: ‘for me it’s to help my mum, to get her out of that debt, that she’s put herself into, or got put into’. Jakub explained his frustration with this situation:

> Jakub: [The government] put my mum, like my parents, in debt. You get what I’m saying. So it’s just shit.
>
> Hannah Tell me more about that?
>
> Jakub: Like just- just debt in general you get me like, they charge them for things that they haven’t actually done, like my parents get fines for just the most stupid shit like, literally.
>
> Hannah: And then it builds up?
>
> Jakub: Yeah it builds up, and it just feels like the government isn’t really doing nothing to help like…you get me.

Within Jakub’s family, the pressure of debt, combined with a low income, had made it difficult to afford basic necessities: ‘my house doesn’t have enough money to fucking feed us all you get me?’ and Jakub was left feeling angry and disappointed by the lack of state support that they had received: ‘I just feel like they failed my- like the government in general failed my whole family innit’. In Jakub’s case, this sense of anger and hurt was heightened because it represented a failure to fulfil the hopes and expectations that he and his family had had regarding migrating to the UK from Eastern Europe: ‘obviously we didn’t really have like much [in Eastern Europe], you know what I’m saying, so we came here to have a better life’. In response to his mum’s struggles with debt, Jakub described feeling a sense of responsibility to ‘help my mum’ by finding a way of providing her with additional income, and by being more financially ‘independent’ himself. Jakub stressed: ‘I haven’t taken money off my mum in like seven months’, emphasising that ‘more time I do have my own money to buy my own food and clothes and shit like that’. Jakub described his involvement in county lines as an attempt to navigate the challenges posed by intersecting experiences of migration into a hostile environment, a struggle to afford basic necessities in a context of low income and debt, and to fulfil a sense of responsibility to support his family.

6.3.2.4 Mo

Mo, aged 18 at the time of our meeting, had been living in a children's home in a rural part of Stonewell, followed by a move into supported accommodation in Foxport, one of the county's major cities. Like Jakub, Mo was an Eastern European national, but he had spent the majority of his life in the UK and had moved between a number of different cities in the regions surrounding Stonewell, with time spent in Dunhey, an hour's drive from Foxport, forming a particularly significant part of his life so far. Following a number of violent incidents, Mo had been relocated from Dunhey to Foxport 'for his own protection' (Agatha, YOS officer), which Mo described as being 'banned from Dunhey', and at the time that we met for our interview reflections on this transition, and its impact on his friendships, was at the forefront of his mind:

> Mo: I still miss Dunhey. Even with like all the problems, I still like, I've had loads of fun times there if you know what I mean?
>
> Hannah: Yeah? What do you miss about it?
>
> Mo: It's just like, summertime and that it's just like…I think when everyone just used to be together and be out cos now it's changed like everyone's just got problems with each other.
>
> Hannah: That's hard when that happens with friends.
>
> Mo: Yeah, it's just changed innit.

Mo reflected on his move into supported accommodation, which had happened shortly after his eighteenth birthday, with a degree of resignation: 'I've just got to go with it for now' but found cause for optimism in having recently regained access to a phone, enabling him to better keep in touch with friends and family: 'now I've got a phone so I still chat to my mates and that from Dunhey ring my mum and that' and he was hopeful that they might be able to visit Foxport in the future.

Mo was completing a Referral Order for possession with intent to supply class A and was not currently supported by the YOS CCE team. Mo described his reasons for becoming involved in county lines as follows:

> Mum works two jobs and that and not enough pay. Obviously, you're still in school so you can't get benefits. So this is why like I say to people like it's hard for youths

> like to- I dunno innit…if their family is struggling for money and they're still in school, they're not 18 yet, what else are they like supposed to do?...Myself yeah like my mum…even now she's struggling with money cos my step dad obviously broke his leg. And my stepdad, yeah, he couldn't work for like eight months. So they had to apply for Universal Credit. Cos they never received benefits before. And obviously my mum and my stepdad they're not from the UK, but they're UK residents, I think it's- they're UK residents- I think it took some time.

Mo described his initial involvement in drug distribution as a response to his family's financial struggles and his perception that there were no other viable options available to him in terms of making money. Mo's experiences of economic hardship were exacerbated by the UK's hostile environment towards migration, which has created additional barriers for migrant families navigating the welfare system and accessing benefits (Dwyer *et al*., 2019; Harris, 2016). Like Jakub, Mo expressed a sense of responsibility to help support his family financially, asking 'what else' he was 'supposed to do?'.

Mo and Jakub's narratives both resonate with the range of theoretical constructs that deal with child agency that is heavily restricted but nevertheless still exists. These constructs include 'tactical agency' (Honwana, 2005), 'thin agency' (Klocker, 2007), 'ambiguous agency' (Payne, 2012), 'protective agency' (Atkinson-Sheppard, 2017), and 'interdependent agency' (Abebe, 2019), and while each has its nuances all five capture how young people like Mo and Jakub actively navigate, and find ways of coping with, harsh and challenging socioeconomic circumstances over which they had little control. These insights demonstrate the importance of acknowledging young people's explanations of their entry into exploitative situations as survival strategies. As Phoenix (2002), Brown (2019) and Melrose and Pearce (2013) all point out in relation to the issue of CSE, the failure to do so risks decontextualising young people's experiences, and obscuring their service needs.

6.3.2.5 'For me it's to help my mum': Relational agency

Both Jakub and Mo emphasise that their involvement was linked to a perceived need to support their families financially, and there was a strongly relational dimension to young people's involvement in county lines as an economic survival strategy. Young people often described a sense of responsibility to support their immediate families, which most often

meant mums and siblings, with everyday living expenses[140]. Further to the examples provided by Jakub and Mo, describing a recent offence for which he had been arrested, Tony explained his actions as motivated by a need to support his mum with housing costs:

> We needed some money for rent, I didn't have any money, because that friend has been my source of money and he's been locked up, so I thought I would make money quickly to pay mum's rent. I thought I'd sell it quickly and we'd be happy, food on the table. (Tony).

Tony described his involvement in county lines as relatively sporadic, precipitated by instances in which his mum was in financial need. This was also the case for Callum, whose 'on and off' involvement in dealing revolved around the need to help his mum 'to pay rent, electric and for food' (Fieldnotes, risk meeting).

As Abebe (2019) emphasises, restricted agency is not simply a facet of young people's experiences as isolated individuals, but unfolds through and within young people's relational networks, and is shaped by 'familial notions of care, obligations and reciprocity' (Abebe, 2019: 10). In turn, for Mo, Jakub, Callum, and Tony, these notions also connected to a system of wider social expectations, specifically the conceptualisation of 'breadwinning', and the ability to provide for and look after one's family, as important social markers of hegemonic masculinities (Coston and Kimmel, 2012: 109; Wojnicka, 2019). Accordingly, to characterise the young people in this section as refuting victim status because they saw themselves as engaged in solo struggles of resisting economic deprivation would be to erase the role that close emotional and relational ties played in shaping their decisions.

6.3.2.6 'They don't know how to handle themselves': Perceptions of privilege and exploitation

While young people in this group might well have identified as victims of exploitation because of the role that socioeconomic pressures played in their involvement in county lines, they often represented acts of navigating and coping with this pressure as highly agentic, and therefore as antithetical to their perceptions of victims of exploitation as passive and weak. Young people demonstrated this idea by contrasting their own experiences of drug distribution with those of other young people with comparably greater socioeconomic

[140] The perspectives of families themselves on young people's involvement, particularly regarding those who described becoming involved in order to bring additional income into the household, were outside the scope of this study, but remain an important area for future research.

privilege, who they described as more likely to become victims of exploitation precisely because they lacked the knowledge and skill to navigate hardship. Vanya explained this distinction as follows:

> There are two different types of people that get involved in selling drugs – one is the group of people that are doing it for their families, they might have not that much money, parents aren't working and if you're a kid then you can't get a job. But they've got a mum to support, a little brother to look after. 13 or 14 is young but you can still provide for your family. I was 13 when I started and I have seen kids younger than that involved. These are the smart kids…Then there are the dumb kids who are doing it for the money for clothes, flashy cars, girls – they watch all their music videos on YouTube and then when a big Black guy comes up to them and says do you want to make any money they're like aw this is gonna be great. But then they'll probably find themselves going to trap houses…These other boys, they're not living poor. They've got decent pocket money, they're living at home, they've got their own room – and the guys in charge think they don't know how to handle themselves, so they can take advantage of them. So they get exploited. They're vulnerable. Kids that are doing it for their families…they're gonna be smarter, they've got their heads screwed on, they know what they're doing and they're more in control of the situation. (Vanya).

Strikingly, Vanya subverts the typical use of the term 'vulnerable', applying it to young people whose privilege and, he argues, resulting naivete and foolishness, makes them more vulnerable to exploitation[141]: 'the guys in charge think they don't know how to handle themselves, so they can take advantage of them', than young people dealing as a survival strategy, whom he describes as 'smarter', 'more in control', and as having 'their heads screwed on'. This view was echoed by Dan, who explained that he felt that, in entering into county lines: 'high class kids' were getting involved in something that they 'didn't understand' in the same way that 'us lower class kids' do and that they would therefore be unable to navigate situations as effectively and be more at risk of exploitation. Through the use of these contrasts, young people who positioned their involvement in county lines as a

[141] Here it is important to acknowledge that in making these differentiations, young people's assertions of their own capabilities may also have been infused with a reluctance to engage with stigmatising aspects of the victim of exploitation label. However, even if this was the case, young people still used the differentiations described in this section to distance themselves from narratives of victimhood.

‘constrained choice’ sought to differentiate[142] their experiences from narratives of victimhood.

While young people represented in this section often characterised themselves as smarter, more capable, and more in control than those who had greater socioeconomic privilege, they did not romanticise their own involvement in county lines. For example, in the following comments, Jakub expressed palpable frustration and anger with white English middle and upper-class young men involved in dealing for reasons that he deemed to be frivolous:

> Some people just do it to look bad innit, like they got money from their parents but they choose to be a drug dealer for some fucking reason. And I will never understand why…I think those people are little fucking idiots, and they don’t know what they doing. Cos they’ve got so much chances in life that they could take. And they’re wasting their whole life….If you’re a white English man, like kid yeah, and you’ve got money because of your parents are rich, you should never bother to do drugs…Just go do your own thing, get a legal job, live off your parents’ money while you can. (Jakub).

Like Vanya and Dan, Jakub expresses the view that more privileged young people who become involved in county lines ‘don’t know what they’re doing’, but his words also demonstrate clear frustration and anger at not having the same privileges around familial financial security, and, as discussed previously, ‘having to deal’ as a survival strategy. This view was echoed by Mo, who also questioned why people would become involved in dealing if they didn’t have to: ‘Some people just do it for fun, but yeah it’s just it’s the wrong thing to get involved in if you don’t need to… what’s the point of doing it?’ (Mo). The anger and confusion expressed by Mo and Jakub underscores the fact that while young people represented in this section in some ways asserted a sense of superiority over those who weren’t dealing as a survival strategy, reminiscent of the construction of hierarchies of offending among people in prison (Sykes and Messinger, 1960; Crewe, 2009; Ugelvik, 2015),

[142] The inclusion of Vanya’s and Dan’s perspectives here is not to suggest that any of the young people who took part in this research could navigate experiences of drug distribution more successfully than anyone else because of their level of socioeconomic privilege. The violence and trauma experienced by young people who become involved in county lines is well-documented elsewhere (The Children’s Society, 2019), and the young people whose insights are included in this section all also relayed experiences of serious violence; found that money that they did accrue from dealing was often either confiscated by the police, robbed, or was subsumed in the payment of spurious debts; and were aware that their criminal records would ultimately limit their prospects of earning a living and supporting their families in the long run.

they also viewed these comparatively privileged individuals with a degree of envy and frustration and resented their freer entry into a risky and violent income generation strategy about which they felt they had less of a choice.

The perspectives of young people within this section provide an interesting contrast to the findings of Sandberg's (2009) research with men involved in dealing cannabis. Sandberg describes his research participants as choosing to deploy either ‘oppression discourse’, emphasising their entries into drug-dealing as the product of unemployment, racism, and the failure of the welfare-state, or ‘gangster discourse’, seeking to portray themselves as smart and tough, depending on the context. Sandberg positions these narratives as paradoxical and in tension with one another (2009: 524). However, the reflections of the young people in this section demonstrate that these two conceptualisations can interrelate. Young people described making decisions to deal resulting from socioeconomic marginalisation and also emphasised that they were ‘smart’ and ‘tough’ in having done so. The key here is the subtle differences in conceptualisations of choice and victimhood among participants in these two studies. While Sandberg argues that, in using ‘oppression discourse’ his participants are stating that they ‘had no choice but to engage in a criminal act, because of the lack of other forms of income’ (2009: 530), and that the oppression narrative was a way of identifying as a victim (2009: 531), young people in this research rejected the victim label, and portrayed themselves as making constrained choices in order to navigate oppressive circumstances. As a result, for the young people in this study, narratives of oppression, and narratives of resilience and control, could intertwine.

6.3.3 Patryk and Phoebe: Perceptions of Positive Aspects of Involvement in Drug Distribution

While the hardships described within narratives of stigma and of constrained choice are important, it is also necessary to recognise the role that young people’s perceptions of more positive aspects of involvement in drug distribution played in influencing their rejection of the ‘victim of exploitation’ label. Despite well-established observations on the associations between involvement in crime and experiences of pleasure, excitement and thrill (Katz, 1988; Fenwick and Hayward, 2000), most associated with work in cultural criminology (Ferrell, Hayward and Young, 2015), discussions of young people’s involvement in county lines have largely overlooked aspects that young people might experience positively. It is important to acknowledge these dynamics as, while young people’s experiences of county lines are so often also violent and traumatic, assertions of positive aspects of involvement formed an

important component of how young people taking part in this research conceptualised and relayed their experiences. While perceptions of positive dimensions of involvement in county lines alone did not account for young people's refutation of victim status, they did complicate young people's relationships to the 'victim of exploitation' label by introducing aspects of enjoyment to their experiences. These ran counter to normative expectations about experiences of victimhood as wholly negative and harmful experiences of suffering and loss (Miers, 1990: 226; Bayley, 1991; Strobl, 2004) and widespread interpretations of exploitation as 'wrongful use' (Zwolinski and Wertheimer, 2017; Fudge, 2021), in which victims can derive no benefit from their experiences. This section explores the role of three positive dimensions that young people described in relation to involvement in county lines: the power and freedom to gratify material desire; thrill, excitement, and playfulness; and support and respite, reflecting on how these experiences weakened young people's sense of a connection to the label 'victim of exploitation'.

6.3.3.1 Power, freedom, and the gratification of material desire

The ability to use income generated through involvement in drug distribution to fulfil material desires, above and beyond their day-to-day living expenses, was a factor that complicated young people's relationship to the CCE victim label. Dan, aged 18, explained the enjoyment derived from the freedom associated with earning money from drug distribution: 'It's the feeling of getting money, more freedom, doing what you want. A lot of people like that…it's knowing that you can do things, you don't have to- but knowing that you can'. As Dan emphasised, this positive element of involvement in drug distribution was as much about the feeling of freedom, power and potentiality that came with 'getting money' as it was about the money itself.

In Stonewell, the spectre of relative deprivation (Young, 1999) loomed large: 'How am I supposed to feel? There's just money everywhere. I haven't got anything.' (Ryan, Fieldnotes, CCE team-led workshop). This was exacerbated by high levels of inequality in the county itself: 'In Stonewell, the difference between those that have and those that don't is so significant…you wonder why [young people] feel the pressure…look at what's around them' (Alana, YOS CCE team). As wider research within the field of cultural criminology, particularly that of Fenwick and Hayward (2000), demonstrates, in the context of a broader cultural milieu that places inexhaustible pressure on young people to consume, and to express and constitute their identities through consumption, involvement in acquisitive crime can provide a way of addressing this pressure where other options are unavailable (see also

Hayward, 2004). Crime as a strategy for resolving relative deprivation was relevant to young people's involvement in drug dealing in Stonewell:

> What the dealers tend to do is they'd Snapchat it or put it on social media, and they'd like show how much money they're making. And show like the stuff they're buying like a watch, like any like designer brands, designer clothes. And they'll post that and that will obviously draw kids in. (Alex).

In this context, young people expressed that involvement in drug distribution afforded them with an opportunity to circumvent financial constraints in order to replicate the 'aspirational' lifestyles that they saw playing out around them, which were otherwise out of reach.

This was particularly the case for one young person: Patryk, who had used income from drug distribution to purchase much-coveted luxury goods. Patryk was aged 17 at the time of the research and had lived in Stonewell for the majority of his life, although he had been born in Eastern Europe, had spent a four-month period in custody aged 15, and had also briefly moved to a city outside of Stonewell to live with his mum. He had been excluded from school aged 14, was currently NEET, and was living in supported accommodation. The projection of confidence, even dominance, in the context of our conversation seemed particularly important to Patryk and there was an intensity to his demeanour that was unsettling at times. He wore an enormous black puffer jacket that 'surrounded him like a kind of armour' (Fieldnotes), a thick gold watch on one wrist, and a large gold ring encrusted with diamond insets on his other hand. He seemed keen to position himself as a skilled operator in relation to drug distribution: 'I know what I'm doing. I don't really know how to explain it, it's just I know what I'm doing more, I just do it smart, so I won't get caught', and although he described his involvement as having been dangerous - 'my life was at risk everyday' - he played down any hint of vulnerability: 'I can look after myself'. While Patryk appeared to enjoy talking about some aspects of his involvement, there were times at which small changes in his body language - 'looking down at the table, picking at the skin on his thumb' (Fieldnotes) - particularly when he spoke about his relationships, suggested that talking about his experiences was not always easy. Patryk was completing a Referral Order in relation to a robbery and was not receiving support from the CCE team.

Patryk disagreed with practitioners' suggestions that he was a potential victim of CCE. A key element of this refutation of victim status was Patryk's focus on the benefits that he had accrued from his involvement in dealing, specifically the relative economic freedom with

which it had afforded him. Patryk described his involvement in dealing as primarily motivated by a desire to buy luxury and designer goods:

> Hannah: And you mentioned that you were thinking about having money, and to buy stuff, what did you want to buy?
>
> Patryk: Stuff I really wanted. Expensive clothes and everything. All brands, Gucci tracksuits, Gucci trackies and stuff like that at the age of 15. It's how I got this ring, and this Rolex watch. This was like, I think £8000. I've got a Gucci jacket at home that was £500, and then I've got a Gucci tracksuit at home that was £1000.

For Patryk, the ability to gratify materialistic desire, and to do so with items the price of which placed them beyond the reach of the majority of the population, was imbued with a sense of power and pleasure. His comment that: 'I can get whatever I want. I can walk into a shop and get whatever I want. It's the best feeling ever', emphasises a particular pleasure associated with instant uninhibited gratification (Hayward, 2004). For Patryk there was also a sense that the income that he had derived from drug distribution removed constraints and gave him a sense of freedom. The way in which he spoke about spending his income conveyed the pleasure that he took in satiating a hunger for designer and luxury products with ease: 'I wanted it so I got it. It's as simple as that really…I thought it was cool. It's what I wanted. And that's what I got'. For Patryk, the pleasure associated with feeling able to act on his every material whim, and to have 'fun – that's what I mean it was fun' while doing it, was antithetical to the way in which he understood what it meant to be a victim of exploitation, as having no choice but to serve somebody else's needs[143]: '[victims of exploitation] get told, "you're gonna work for me". And then they have to'. As a result, Patryk did not concur with practitioners' view that the label 'victim of exploitation' described his experiences.

6.3.3.2 Excitement, thrill and creating space for play

A second factor that complicated young people's relationship with the victim of exploitation label was where involvement in drug dealing was associated with excitement, thrill, and a sense of fun. Again, this ran counter to expectations of victimisation and exploitation as

[143] Patryk's emphasis on agency, choice and freedom provides an interesting contrast to Irwin-Rogers's (2019) research, in which descriptions of 'unreserved commitment to the diktats of consumer capitalism' (2019: 598) and captivation and obsession with consumer goods, paint young research participants involved in drug dealing as 'pacified' and 'assimilated' into capitalism's 'symbolic order' (2019: 608). While Patryk is clearly very committed to owning luxury goods, his language is far from passive. Notably, he describes goods he 'really wanted', rather than 'needed' or 'had to have'. The active language that Patryk uses to talk about his actions demonstrates the importance of exploring young people's assertions of agency even within their subscription to a culture of consumer capitalism.

exclusively experiences of harm. Criminologists have long recognised that transgressing the boundaries of the law, and getting away with it, can be an exciting, exhilarating, and playful experience (Katz, 1988). In relation to county lines, Alex and Freddie linked evading detection by the police a similar set of feelings:

> It's like you wanna play a game with [the police]. Yeah, like you wanna play a bit of hide and seek. That's what it was like for me cos obviously when you get involved in that sort of thing…the police will know you. So when they speak to you, you know in your head that you've got stuff on ya and you know where it is, and you sit there and you're like yeah you don't know where it is [laughs] and all this, that's what it's like. I think that's what most people do, they know…you get quite a rush from it, because you've got stuff illegal on you and there's police trying to get you out of it, there's police trying to pick it from ya. (Alex).

> There'd be times when I'd be walking around the street with thousands of pounds in my pocket and walking past police officers like it's a normal day…you've just got to walk past them, maybe even say hello, act like a civilian, putting on a performance. (Freddie).

Alex and Freddie both describe the thrill of being able to successfully conceal money and drugs from the police, of the rush of gaining a brief upper hand over the long arm of the law. These evocations of performance and playfulness support observations in previous research that demonstrate children's and young people's abilities to carve out space for fun and for play even in violent and transgressive circumstances (Honwana, 2005: 49). This ability creates a barrier to identifying with the victim of exploitation label that is therefore particularly salient for children and young people. Play forms an important and very prevalent part of youth experience, yet in the context of young people's involvement in county lines, the inclusion of acts of play ran counter to normative expectations of victimhood and exploitation as states of total suffering.

6.3.3.3 Respite and protection

Young people's attitudes towards the victim of exploitation label were also complicated by associations of involvement in drug distribution with feelings of respite and protection. This was particularly the case where young people felt that their involvement in drug distribution

provided them with relationships that, though imperfect to say the least, felt like preferable alternatives to the situations that they otherwise faced[144].

Carl, aged 15, and Freddie, aged 16, had both struggled to find friends before becoming integrated into friendship groups involved in drug dealing: 'I was getting bullied. I was getting bullied for quite some years of my life.' (Freddie); 'I was on my own cos I didn't even have any mates round here because I moved to a new area I didn't know anyone.' (Carl). Both offered descriptions of their subsequent relationships within drug distribution networks that emphasised dynamics of support and belonging that they had previously lacked: 'I'd call it a big group of friends just enjoying their life.…it started off it was brilliant, absolutely brilliant, like I thought these aren't friends, these are family.' (Freddie). Describing his relationship with the network of young people with whom he was involved in drug distribution Carl added:

> They were all really nice, you'd see them on the streets like ah you wanna bit of money? You wanna go to the shops? Just normal things. They didn't seem bad…Like when you actually met 'em they're nice, they actually sounded like decent. (Carl).

In these cases, relationships formed in contexts of county lines, though they could be volatile and abusive in themselves[145], were positioned as the lesser of two evils: 'I'd had enough of just walking to the shop and getting chased home. I had enough of it. So I just thought right if I join [the group] I might like be able to do the things I want to do.' (Freddie). Understandably, this complicated young people's relationships to the victim of exploitation label because, at least initially, they felt that their circumstances had improved through the relationships they formed within drug distribution networks.

The idea of the relationships that one had within involvement in drug distribution as being preferable to, and offering some respite from, even more difficult and traumatic relationships in young people's lives was something that also resonated with Phoebe. At the time of the

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[144] The idea of involvement with a group of individuals who participate in offending as offering protection and friendship to young people is a relatively common theme within the literature on 'gangs' (Thompson, 2019). However, as discussed in the introduction, this section will not use this framing, particularly as none of the young people included used the term 'gang' to describe their friendship groups. The wider absence of the 'gang' framing among young people who participated in this research itself further underscores the limitations of the use of the 'gang' framing in existing policy work (for example in: Ministry of Justice, 2019; National Crime Agency, 2018; NCLCC, 2020).

[145] Both young people expressed that there had been negative aspects of these relationships as their involvement in drug distribution progressed: 'once you get to know them a bit more, that's when it starts changing.' (Carl); 'people just switch up…they could be one of the nicest people you meet in your life and then the next day they could come and beat you up or something.' (Freddie).

research, Phoebe was 16 and introduced herself as follows: ‘everyone really describes me as like the funny, energetic one, but at the same time they describe me as the fierce, “don’t P me off” one’. She had lived in Stonewell her whole life (‘unfortunately’), for the most part with her mother and grandparents. Phoebe’s relationships at home were complex and had involved experiences of bereavement, physical and emotional abuse that she described as ‘very toxic’. These issues had led to long-term social care involvement, which had in itself been difficult: ‘social just want to fuck people’s lives up’. This situation had eventually led to Phoebe moving to live with her boyfriend’s family, and then subsequently into supported accommodation. Phoebe had been excluded from mainstream education, and practitioners had struggled to find suitable alternative provision for her. However, she was enjoying volunteering at a local animal sanctuary: ‘apart from the chickens, which I’m actually petrified of cos I feel like they’re gonna peck my eyes out’, where she felt that she had been able to ‘build up the trust’ with practitioners and find some breathing space: ‘it helps so much with my anxiety...it’s just really nice and chilled out there’. Phoebe was also dealing with depression and self-harm, and the difficulties of navigating long-waiting lists for accessing mental health support. In addition, she was working with Kerri from the YOS CCE team but was not working with a YOS officer at the time of the research.

Phoebe’s experiences of involvement in drug distribution emphasise the complex and contradictory dynamics that many young people experienced, whereby risky and problematic situations could sometimes still feel like they offered respite from the even greater challenges that they faced in their lives outside this involvement. Describing her involvement in transporting and selling class A drugs, Phoebe emphasised:

> I was made to do it in a way, where if I didn’t get the money- I don’t really know- I don’t really know how to explain it. It was- it was hard. Because it was like I wanted to do it, because it cleared my head from everything that was going on, but at the same time I didn’t want to do it because I knew what it was doing to me.

Phoebe’s comment describes the conflicting emotions of feeling that her involvement was negatively impacting her life - ‘I knew what it was doing to me’ - yet also feeling like involvement in drug distribution, in particular the periods spent away from home that this involved, ‘cleared my head from everything that was going on’. For Phoebe, these emotions unfolded in a complex set of relational dynamics, in which she found it difficult to be around her family, describing her relationship with her mother as ‘distant’ and emphasising that ‘I

can't even class her as my mum anymore'. Practitioners in Phoebe's life were also concerned that her mum 'lacked understanding', was 'acting like she didn't really want [Phoebe] around' and described Phoebe as 'a problem, blaming her for her supposed choices rather than viewing her as exploited' (Fieldnotes, risk meeting). In this context it was perhaps understandable that individuals involved in drug distribution who messaged her repeatedly - 'every time she gets into a WiFi signal, her phone just constantly goes goes goes' (Kerri, YOS CCE team) - were offering a sense of 'belonging' and of 'feeling wanted' (Fieldnotes, risk meeting). Despite the negatives that these relationships also brought, at times they also presented a form of escape[146] from difficult experiences at home.

6.4 Conclusion

This chapter has provided an analysis of attitudes towards the 'victim of exploitation' label among young people involved in county lines. While it was rare for young people to identify as victims, claiming or accepting victim status was associated with attempts to access perceived benefits of victim-orientated support in the context of a crisis such as arrest, and with coming to terms with victim status by focusing on a sense of personal growth and increased insight in the aftermath of victimisation. In contrast, young people's rejection of the victim label was a more recurrent theme. While stigma, particularly young people's concerns at being exposed to and seen by others as weak, in addition to the specific stigma attached to the practices associated with CCE and county lines, did play a role, what was more significant for young people was the fact that their experiences of involvement in county lines often deviated from the kinds of experiences typically encompassed by the victim of exploitation label. While normative conceptualisations of victimhood and exploitation typically connote passivity, helplessness and weakness, young people in this group saw themselves as engaging in agentic struggles for socioeconomic survival through their participation in dealing. Furthermore, while the victim of exploitation label is typically

[146] As with the previous section on 'constrained choice', the discussion of positive aspects of dealing in this section is not to suggest that the experiences of young people discussed here were in any way desirable. It goes without saying that young people should be able to enjoy supportive positive relationships, spaces for excitement and play, and be protected from the impact of relative deprivation, in ways that are not connected with involvement in an activity that is criminalised. However, this account of young people's involvement in drug distribution, and their relationships to victim status, would be incomplete if it did not acknowledge and address the positives that young people stated that they felt they received from their involvement. As is the case in relation to young people's narratives of constrained choice, work intended to understand and support young people at risk of harm will benefit from engaging young people in a way that is consistent with their self-perceptions (McMahon-Howard, 2017: 141), which in this case means confronting the elements of county lines involvement that young people experienced more positively.

associated with experiences that exclusively involve pain and suffering, young people in this group emphasised that there were positive aspects of their involvement, including feelings of freedom and power, excitement and thrill, and support and respite.

This chapter makes three main contributions to the research literature. Firstly, it is important to highlight that young people's accounts of their own experiences of county lines and CCE are rarely found in the research literature. As such, one contribution of this chapter is to increase the representation of young people's voices in this area of research, and in victimology more broadly.

Secondly, while existing research and policy literature on the issues of CCE and county lines flags young people's rejection of victim status as an issue (Ministry of Justice, 2019), this chapter goes beyond the recognition of this issue, and offers a detailed examination of why young people reject the victim of exploitation label. In addition, the analysis in the chapter contributes a greater understanding of why young people claimed victim status in relation to CCE, a topic which has received even less attention than the rejection of victim status. Through this analysis this chapter highlights the precarity of victimhood, a status subject to ongoing negotiation and renegotiation.

Thirdly, this chapter offers insights and perspectives that are valuable to the wider sub-discipline of victimology. The analysis in this chapter extends and develops existing research from Fohring (2015; 2018a; 2018b), which explores the rejection of the victim label in terms of the avoidance of stigma. My analysis considers cases in which the victim of exploitation label simply fails to contain and represent the multifaceted experiences of young people involved in drug distribution, and which often fails to resonate with them as a result. In doing so, the findings of this chapter respond to calls for youth victimology (Muncie, 2003), which offers a critical engagement, in the same way as critical victimology more broadly, with young people's experiences of processes of victim identification. It does so by explicitly engaging with young people's reflections on victim identification, and by exploring aspects of these reflections that were particularly salient for participants as young people, namely the roles played by experiences of excitement, play, and thrill within contexts of county lines, and expressions of restricted agency in navigating socioeconomic deprivation to support mothers and siblings, where opportunities for income generation were limited, in complicating young people's identification with the victim of exploitation label.

7 Conclusion

This section provides a summary of the main findings of this thesis. It also outlines the contributions that these findings make to the research literature and the implications of these findings for policy and practice relating to CCE, discusses limitations and makes suggestions for future research.

7.1 Main Findings

In addressing the research question: 'How and why do young people involved in county lines drug distribution attain, or fail to attain, the status of CCE victims in the context of the youth justice system?' this thesis has examined the perspectives and experiences of youth justice practitioners, young people affected by CCE, and the interactions and relationships between these two sets of individuals, all as situated within the wider organisational and structural contexts in which they unfold.

With regards to youth justice practitioners, the first findings chapter of this thesis demonstrated the significance of practitioners' influences on the emergence of victim status in relation to CCE. The analysis in this chapter demonstrates that while the NRM is intended, in theory, to provide definitive designations regarding young people's status as CCE victims, in practice youth justice practitioners lacked confidence in the NRM as a decision-making tool. This lack of confidence stemmed from practitioners' sense that the NRM process jarred with their expectations of the outcomes of victim recognition. Positive NRM decisions did not set in motion the provision of adequate victim-orientated support and the process itself was often iatrogenic. Furthermore, the definitive nature of NRM decisions conflicted with practitioners' expectations that victimhood in contexts of CCE needed to be continually proven and re-proven, and with their concerns about the potential abuse and misuse of victim status. As a result, while practitioners still made the mandatory NRM referrals for young people whom they believed to be affected by CCE, they viewed the resulting decisions as lacking credibility.

Because practitioners lacked confidence in the NRM as an official mechanism for determining victim status, their own discretion and judgement came to play a significant role in influencing victim identification for young people affected by CCE. Within this, practitioners' conceptualisations of 'exploitation' and 'victimhood' were particularly important and created a number of challenges. This thesis shows that practitioners' conceptualisations of victimhood, inflected through the organisational cultures in which they

worked, created pressure to abandon processes of victim identification. For the police working with and within the YOS, recognising young people as victims of CCE meant overlooking their offending, an act which felt like a counter-intuitive departure from the core of traditional police work, and was therefore difficult to sustain. The everyday ontologies (Smith and Gray, 2019: 564) of the YOS itself were more favourable to the recognition of young people in conflict with the law as victims. However, for YOS practitioners, both the emphasis on responsibilising young people for their involvement in crime, and on the management and reduction of risk, that has characterised the YJS since the late 1990s (Phoenix, 2009; Case and Haines, 2015; Phoenix and Kelly, 2013), made it difficult to overlook offending among young people affected by CCE completely.

In the context of a criminal justice system that positions 'victim' and 'offender' as binary opposites, and which therefore lacks space for the complexities of interrelated experiences of victimisation and offending, practitioners struggled to hold space for the liminal status of young people affected by CCE as 'victim-offenders'. As a result of the numerous barriers to victim identification, young people were often drawn into the offender category and criminalised. In some cases, practitioners attempted to reposition the treatment of young people as offenders[147] as an act of safeguarding aimed at reducing their risk of further victimisation. This approach, which reflects what Phoenix (2009) describes as the rise of 'repressive welfarism' in youth justice, placed control and care in a somewhat uneasy alliance, one which positioned criminalisation as the appropriate, or at least pragmatic, response to all young people involved in county lines, whether or not they were felt to be victims of CCE. In light of the victim-offender dichotomy, this approach further limited possibilities of conceptualising young people as victims of CCE.

In addition, practitioners working on CCE found that it was a particularly complex form of victimisation to identify. This was due to: the absence of a statutory definition of CCE; the existence of exploitation as a wide spectrum of experiences and a lack of clarity within that as to who was 'exploited enough' (Yea, 2015) to be considered a victim; the grounding of responses to CCE in policies and practices developed for CSE, meaning that tailored approaches to offending as a barrier to victim identification were lacking; the view that 'genuine' victims of exploitation cannot have derived benefit from their experiences; and practitioners' perceptions that young people themselves were largely unable to assist in

[147] Through the use of criminal behaviour orders, curfews, tags, and secure accommodation.

shedding any light on their status as victims. Practitioners' experiences of 'exploitation' as a slippery and often elusive concept created further pressure to abandon processes of victim identification.

The second findings chapter provided an analysis of the relational production of victimhood, offering a detailed consideration of the ways in which victim status is negotiated and renegotiated through micro-level interactions between young people and practitioners that gradually build relationships that can either aid or inhibit the generation of victim status. In particular, the analysis demonstrated the importance of two types of interaction - young people's responses to practitioners' offers of victim-orientated care and support, and the sharing or withholding of information - in influencing the emergence of young people's status as victims of CCE.

Where young people were able to accept victim-orientated care and support, this aided their identification as victims by conforming to practitioners' normative expectations that victims will gratefully accept help (Strobl, 2004), and by laying the foundations on which to build positive relationships in which practitioners were particularly motivated to advocate for a young person's status as a victim on their behalf. In contrast, where young people were unable to accept such support, this opened up the possibility that practitioners would characterise them as making a choice to offend. Perceptions of young people as agents making an active choice conflicted with practitioners' normative expectations of victims as passive, helpless, and blameless (Miers, 1990; Meyers, 2011). Furthermore, practitioners found what they viewed as young people's rejection of their support as emotionally frustrating and demotivating. This negative emotional impact inhibited their ability to advocate for young people as victims. In contrast, positive connections between young people and practitioners enabled relationships of advocacy to flourish.

When young people share information about their experiences it aids their identification as victims in two ways: practically, by guiding practitioners as to what has happened and what support is required; and normatively, by meeting practitioners' expectations that genuine victims will be cooperative and compliant, honest and open (Christie, 1986; Strobl, 2004).

However, there were significant challenges to developing these kinds of relationships. Specifically, young people were inhibited by concerns about the ramifications of engaging with YOS practitioners, both in terms of the belief that they would be criminalised rather than treated as victims, and because such engagement could put them at risk of violence from

others within the drug dealing networks of which they were a part. In addition, young people and practitioners both felt that their relationships were inhibited by a lack of shared experience. Finally, young people affected by CCE demonstrated a particular need for a sense of collaboration and control in their relationships with practitioners, which often remained unmet. Where young people felt that their interaction with practitioners was not on their terms, this could echo the coercion and pressure that young people experienced in contexts of exploitation and was understandably very off-putting.

To counter the many barriers to victim identification, the CCE team within Stonewell YOS was actively exploring approaches to working with young people as CCE victims in a way that was not conditional on the nature of their relationships with practitioners. This approach was in its infancy but had achieved some success in engaging young people on their own terms. Challenges such as rigid pre-existing organisational structures, short-term and restricted funding, and the emotional strain that practitioners experienced in this approach, demonstrated that the relational emergence of victimhood is difficult to circumnavigate. However, if these challenges could be ameliorated, this is an approach worthy of further exploration.

This research has also demonstrated that it was not only practitioner-young person relationships that were important to the emergence of victim status. Young people's relationships with other victims of CCE, and with their own families, also had an important influence on their status as victims in the eyes of practitioners. Specifically, practitioners were concerned with the amount of harm that young people had caused or might cause towards others within their relational networks. In a phenomenon that I call the 'scarcity of victimhood', when practitioners felt that young people affected by CCE had caused too much harm or posed too much risk to others, their victimisation was supplanted by the victimisation that they had caused (or might cause) others, as opposed to existing alongside it. Victimhood is a scarce resource, and in the context of CCE it was difficult for multiple individuals connected to each other to be simultaneously recognised as victims. As a result, practitioners then switched to categorising young people who caused or risked causing harm to others as offenders.

The final findings chapter of this thesis examined the influence of young people's perceptions and experiences on the emergence of their status as CCE victims, focusing on demonstrating the reasons why young people claim, accept, or reject victim status. The analysis found two

major reasons for identifying with the victim of exploitation label among young people affected by CCE who participated in this research. The first was reaching a crisis point, for example being arrested and facing a significant sentence. In these situations, young people expressed that claiming victim status was a 'way out' that allowed them to avoid these potential harms. The second involved young people who were reflecting back on situations that they had transitioned away from, and who felt more able to describe themselves as victims in retrospect. These young people were able to come to terms with the victim label through narratives of posttraumatic growth, placing emphasis on the ways in which they had gained knowledge and insight from their experiences and now felt able to support others at risk of similar harms.

The analysis in the final chapter also explored young people's reasons for rejecting the victim of exploitation label, an experience that was more widespread among the young people who participated in this research. Rejection of the victim label was attributable to far more than the lack of insight to which it is often reduced and centred around three main influences. Young people's perceptions of the victim label, and its connotations of emasculation, weakness, and passivity as highly stigmatising, were a major barrier. In addition, young people rejected the victim of exploitation label because their understandings of what it meant to be a victim of CCE jarred with their lived experiences of involvement in drug dealing. Young people conceptualised being victimised and exploited as incompatible with making a choice to be involved in drug dealing. Many of the young people described themselves as having made 'constrained choices' (Phoenix, 2002) to become involved in drug dealing as a survival strategy to navigate familial poverty. These demonstrations of restricted agency (Klocker, 2007; Abebe, 2019) were simultaneously sources of pride, anger and frustration. Other young people conceptualised identifying as victimised and exploited as incompatible with other benefits that they derived from their involvement, including the ability to buy high-status goods, to feel a sense of power, freedom and exhilaration, or to gain some small sense of respite from difficult and painful situations in other areas of their lives.

Overwhelmingly, the findings of this research have demonstrated that there are far more barriers to victim identification among young people affected by CCE than there are facilitators. Much of the analysis of this thesis has focused on why young people were not identified, and did not identify as victims, simply because these kinds of experiences recurred throughout the research. The reasons for this are rooted in multifaceted aspects of perceptions and expectations of 'exploitation' and 'victimhood', among young people, practitioners, and

the organisational cultures of which practitioners were a part, but also in the struggle to engage in the relationships and interactions that are conducive to the emergence of victim status.

7.1.1 Victim Identification as a Process of Negotiation

The organisation of findings in this thesis as they emerged from specific groups of participants - young people, practitioners - and the interactions and relationships between the two, is useful in fulfilling the requirement that the analyses of high-quality grounded theory research are closely grounded in the data itself (Birks and Mills, 2011). However, as discussed in the methodology section, one of the strengths of GT is also its capacity for theory-building. The further synthesis of the findings described above into a more abstract theory helps to highlight the insights that this study provides regarding processes of CCE victim identification, offering a summary that can then also be further examined and tested by other researchers within the field of victimology. Accordingly, in this section, I develop the findings of this research into a substantive theory of victim identification in relation to CCE.

The findings of this research indicate that we can understand the processes by which young people involved in county lines identify, and are identified, as victims of CCE as processes of ongoing negotiation and renegotiation. As we have seen, these negotiations play out within and between practitioners with the power to withhold or bestow victim status and young people with the power to claim, reject or accept it – with reference to numerous structural and contextual factors. The most overt examples of these processes come from the production of victim status through interactions and relationships, both between young people and practitioners, and in regard to those between young people and their peer and family networks, as mediated by practitioners. However, also central are the ways in which young people and practitioners negotiate the raft of expectations and pressures that influence victim identification.

Accordingly, within these over-arching processes of negotiation and re-negotiation, there are two important secondary processes that have recurred throughout this thesis. The first of these is finding and maintaining common ground between experiences and expectations of victimhood, specifically maintaining congruence between the experiences, or perceived experiences, of the potential victim, and normative perceptions and expectations of what it means to be a victim of CCE. For example, practitioners engaged in processes of determining whether a young person was ‘exploited enough’ to be considered a CCE victim, and in determining whether young people’s behaviour fitted with their normative expectations of

victimhood. Both of these were challenging processes given the narrow and restrictive norms associated with victimhood, which are, at their core, defined in opposition to normative expectations of what it means to be an offender - and given that definitions of exploitation proved expansive and difficult to pin down. For young people, these processes of assimilation involved assessing whether the CCE victim label fitted with how they conceptualised their past experiences, for example James' reflections on posttraumatic growth; their present realities, for example Jakub's determination that the victim label did not fit with his perception of himself as making constrained choices; and/or with their wishes for the future, for example Vanya's assessment that identifying as a victim would enable him to avoid a custodial sentence.

The second of these processes is resisting pressure to abandon the victim label. As we have seen, 'victim' is a categorisation subject to continuing and multifaceted pressures. Ongoing attempts to defend the use of the victim label, to prove and re-prove victim status, recur throughout this study. For practitioners, pressure to abandon the victim label comes from a variety of sources: an enduring concern with responsibilisation and risk within the YOS, and a deeply engrained prioritisation of addressing offending within the police, both of which play out within a justice system that works in binaries - arrest, release; guilty, not guilty; victim, offender - creating pressure on practitioners to categorise young people either as victims or as offenders. Additionally, in part because of the narrowness of normative expectations of victimhood, practitioners seeking to attribute the victim label often find themselves resisting young people's own rejection of victimhood. The emotional strain of proving and re-proving victimhood, often against young people's wishes, also created its own pressure. For young people, pressure to abandon the victim label came from the stigma that it carried, but also from fear associated with negative ramifications of engaging with professionals on the issue of victimhood – the fear of violent repercussions, of criminalisation, and of losing control of what happened to them during the victim identification process.

Where these processes of negotiation could be successful on an ongoing basis, victim status could be produced and maintained. However, within this study, these processes often failed. Negotiations collapsed as attempts at resistance eventually caved into pressure and attempts to find and maintain common ground proved impossible. In the context of this study, the production of victimhood often felt like a process of wrenching jagged pieces into place and struggling to hold them together as the weight of various pressures and expectations

gradually pulled them apart. In practice, the negotiation of victimhood was both challenging and precarious. Because of the propensity of these negotiations to fail, the assignment of victim status is an insufficient strategy for supporting children affected by CCE. I return to this point in my discussion of the implications of this research for policy and practice.

7.2 Main Contributions to the Academic Research Literature

This section will outline the contributions that the findings of this thesis make to the academic research literature. This is the first study to look in detail at the factors that influence whether young people involved in county lines are identified as victims of exploitation. Therefore this thesis makes a significant contribution to the research literature on both county lines and CCE, which to date has focused largely on outlining the defining features of the county lines model (Windle and Briggs, 2015; Coomber and Moyle, 2018; Harding, 2020), on the risk factors for CCE and on the nature of young people's experiences (Robinson *et al.*, 2019; McLean *et al.*, 2019; Windle *et al*., 2020).

In exploring the CCE victim identification process, and in particular the impact of conceptualisations of victimhood and exploitation on its frequent failure within Stonewell YOS, this thesis also raises wider pertinent questions for the literature on youth justice regarding the lack of space available for the recognition of young people in conflict with the law as victims in the context of the current YJS in England, despite the rise of CCE as a policy issue. This thesis has shown that calls to reconceptualise young people involved in county lines as victims of CCE face numerous practical and ideological barriers. In Stonewell, CCE was not heralding any meaningful break with the punitive turn that has broadly characterised the youth justice landscape since New Labour.

In addition, this thesis takes take the first steps towards establishing a 'critical youth victimology'. It does so by providing a rare insight into young people's own views and perspectives on processes of victim identification. The views of the young people included here raise an important challenge to existing research and policy which has a tendency to dismiss young people's rejection of the victim of exploitation label as the product of their inability to admit or recognise their own victimhood (West and Loeffler, 2015; Robinson, McLean and Densley, 2019; Ministry of Justice, 2019). Through this challenge, I evidence young people's views that the 'victim of exploitation' label can in fact fail to reflect or contain the complex realities of their lived experiences of exploitation, including expressions of restricted agency, and benefits derived through exploitative work. In addition, I

demonstrate the value of considering the roles played by the relationships that are important within young people's lives in influencing processes of victim identification. Finally, the discussion of the roles played by the YOS and the YJS, and the approaches within them to issues of responsibilisation and choice, in influencing processes of CCE victim identification provides further evidence of the importance of developing a youth-specific victimology, one which considers the impact of youth-specific organisational contexts.

This study also addresses a gap in the current victimological literature by providing a holistic and micro-level analysis of processes of victim identification. In doing so, it develops existing literature which has largely focused on macro-level processes of victim identification and on acts of claiming or rejecting and withholding or bestowing victim status in isolation. Through its exploration of the emergence of victim status from the perspectives of both young people and practitioners, this research also adds to the evidence that normative conceptualisations of victimhood have a strong bearing on victim identification and provides further nuance by demonstrating that normative conceptualisations of the specific form of victimisation, in this case CCE, also plays a significant role.

Furthermore, this thesis has been in dialogue with theoretical work in victimology that has called for a greater focus on the interactional and relational nature of victimhood (Holstein and Miller, 1990; Rock, 2002). By examining how interactions and relationships between young people and practitioners influence the emergence of victim status, this thesis has contributed towards filling the 'conceptual void' (Rock, 2002: 13) regarding relationality within the victimological literature. In doing so, this research complicates and deepens our understanding of 'victimhood' itself. The examples of the relational production of victimhood, as well as the concept of 'the scarcity of victimhood', developed in this thesis demonstrate that the recognition of an individual as a victim is intrinsically connected to the relationships that they have with those around them. In demonstrating the relational nature of victim identification, this thesis also contributes to emerging debates in the criminological literature regarding the importance of engaging with relational sociology, and recognising people affected by crime and the criminal justice system as 'individuals-in-relation' (Weaver, 2015: 47).

In addition, this thesis offers some initial insights into the implications of racialised and gendered dynamics for CCE victim identification. Firstly, the findings of this research indicate that normative expectations associated with hegemonic masculinities create barriers

to victim identification. In particular, perceptions of victimhood as emasculating, and as antithetical to qualities associated with hegemonic masculinities - such as strength, control, and the ability to provide for one's family - contributed to young men's rejection of victim status within this study. These findings support existing research that outlines the barriers that expectations associated with hegemonic masculinities can create to identifying as a victim (Burcar and Åkerström, 2009; Burcar, 2013). Secondly, the findings of this research indicate that the ramifications of racist and extractive law enforcement practices experienced by young people of colour also create barriers to victim identification. Specifically, these experiences created barriers to the formation of the young person-practitioner relationships that were conducive to the recognition of victim status. This finding supports existing work from Long (2018), which emphasises the many ways in which people of colour are denied victim status, particularly within the criminal justice system.

I synthesise these insights into the micro-level and relational production of victimhood to generate a substantive theory of victim identification as a process of negotiation. This substantive theory summarises the new light that the findings of this study shed on victim identification as a process and provides a baseline that future studies of victim identification can seek to test, clarify, and expand upon, with the view to developing a more general formal theory of victim identification.

7.3 Implications for Policy and Practice

> Being recognised as a victim still remains a far cry from overcoming such structures and advancing progressive pathways towards social justice and equality. (Furusho, 2018: 137).
>
> Blame and guilt are essential in social life. But I doubt if offenders and victims are. (Christie, 1986:22).

The findings of this thesis demonstrate that there are significant issues with current policy and practice relating to CCE. In essence, the challenges associated with successfully negotiating CCE victim status are preventing young people in harmful situations from benefiting from support to transition away from this harm. One approach for the conclusion to this thesis would be to argue for improvements to the issues within the existing system of victim identification, and to call for: a statutory definition of exploitation, increased training for practitioners to define and recognise exploitation that meets this statutory threshold, an expansion of NRM capacity to reduce waiting times, and the introduction of more tangible

support for young people who receive a positive NRM decision. However, while these changes may offer a slight improvement for some young people affected by CCE, this thesis has shown that the issues with the negotiation of the CCE victim label run too deep to be corrected by minor adjustments within the current status quo.

As this thesis has demonstrated, processes of negotiating and renegotiating victimhood struggle to succeed. From a campaigning perspective, calls to recognise young people involved in county lines as victims of CCE (The Children's Society *et al.*, 2018; Ministry of Justice, 2019) have been extremely useful in introducing the possibility of interventions other than criminalisation. However, when processes of negotiating and renegotiating victimhood collapse, as the pressure to abandon victim status becomes too great, and the task of finding common ground between experiences and normative expectations of victimhood proves unfeasible, young people are criminalised anyway.

Furthermore, because exploitation exists as a wide spectrum of experience, and affects many young people who come into the contact with the YOS, it does not make sense to concentrate supportive interventions only on a subset of YOS-involved young people deemed 'exploited enough' (Yea, 2015) to be counted as victims. Simply tweaking the existing victim identification system would continue to exclude a large number of young people from supportive interventions that could improve their quality of life.

Relatedly, the victim identification process reifies reductive conceptualisations of CCE as solely the result of harm committed by an offender. As Carlen (1996), and Phoenix (2002) in relation to CSE, both recognise, a decontextualising rhetoric of victimisation risks obscuring the need for discussions of and responses to young people's agency and experiences of poverty and survival. This thesis has shown that young people offer multifaceted and complex reasons for their involvement in exploitative work, beyond contact with a perpetrator of exploitation. A grassroots approach that seeks to address the factors that perpetuate young people's experiences of exploitation, such as poverty, relative deprivation, and familial abuse, holistically therefore has the potential to be far more impactful than revising the current system.

Finally, it would be hypocritical to advocate for policy and practice changes that do not challenge the current system of victim identification when many young people who participated in this research expressed that the CCE victim label did not resonate with them. This thesis has shown that pushing young people to accept the 'victim of exploitation' label

resulted in conflict or stalemate, or, worse, threatened to reproduce the dynamics of exploitative situations in which young people felt pressured or coerced. Therefore, it is important to reflect on how we might improve the language around, and approach to, young people's experiences of involvement in county lines, in ways that speak to the experiences and perspectives of young people themselves, and which seek to work with young people on their own terms.

It is not possible to simply modify or develop the concept of victimhood to rectify these issues. Gracia (2018) calls for a more 'inclusive' approach to victimhood, which resists distinctions between ideal and deviant victims, and which acknowledges the imperfections of 'real victims'. While this aspiration for a broader and more flexible approach to the victim label is commendable, here we are met with another problematic facet of victimhood as a concept. Its boundaries are rigid and inflexible but also extremely brittle. As a concept, 'victimhood' lacks the elasticity required to accommodate shades or degrees of experience[148]. While there is no denying that the young people involved in this research had all experienced significant and unacceptable levels of harm, the concept of victimhood alone fails to contain the complex and messy realities of their lived experiences, which spill out over its rigid boundaries. As a result, the concept of victimhood fails to adequately serve the needs of young people affected by CCE.

Rather than attempting to expand or reinterpret the parameters of victim status, thereby facilitating its smoother negotiation, it is more useful look beyond it, to other, less restrictive, concepts which could help to better describe, engage, and support young people involved in county lines. One particularly strong candidate is an increased focus on the concept of harm, and on how to redress the harms experienced and caused by young people. Chris, a YOS manager, reflected on the potential utility of this approach[149]. As he explained:

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[148] A general theory that explains why the concept of victimhood is this way is beyond the scope of this study. However, as a preliminary reflection, perhaps we closely guard the attribution of victimhood, to ourselves and to others, in an attempt to push away two painful realities: that we are all vulnerable, and that, in many places, the mechanisms of social and state support available to those who have experienced harm leave much to be desired. One interesting and related area for future research would be to explore these reasons in greater depth, particularly as the closely guarded nature of victimhood runs counter to wider theoretical ideas about the contemporary role of the victim in society, such as Garland's (2001: 144) assertion that the victim has become 'a representative character whose experience is assumed to be common and collective'.

[149] While it goes somewhat against established practice to include participants' comments in the concluding chapter, I have done so here because, in line with the collaborative ethos of this research, it is important to include participants' voices and views in a discussion of what practical implications this research might have for their lives and practitioner practices.

> Yes, they've caused harm. Yes, they've been harmed…Are they an innocent victim? Are they the little old granny whose had her house burgled and doesn't deserve anything? No. But they might have been at one point. Are they the mad axe murderer who's like pure evil? No. But they've caused harm. So, then I think it's better to think of well what do people need who've caused harm? What do people need who've been harmed? So then if you look at it in that way, I think you arrive at solutions that are better than: "are they an offender or a victim?" …that framework is not useful. It shifts people into two different chunks and if you do that, if you have that sort of binary thing of offender victim, you miss stuff, so it's not helpful…Are they an offender or a victim? It's not helpful. Yes, they've caused harm, yes they've been harmed – what do they need? What do people need to move on? That's a better way of framing things. (Chris, YOS manager).

As Chris emphasises, and as we have seen throughout the findings from this research, the use of a victim-offender binary, in which victims receive supportive interventions and offenders are punished, misses the opportunity to aid young people with the widespread experience of having both caused harm and having been harmed, and does little to enable them to move on from both.

Relevant here are 'social harm' approaches, which ask us to go beyond concerns with the interpersonal acts of harm that are typically the focus of criminologists and the criminal justice system (Hillyard and Tombs, 2004; Pemberton, 2015), to focus on addressing the wide range of physical, financial, psychological, cultural and environmental harms that individuals or groups may experience (Hillyard and Tombs, 2017: 7). By drawing attention to the range of social harms that young people may experience, the social harm approach enables a greater focus on young people's holistic needs, including those that perpetuated their involvement in drug dealing and those that they experience as a result of their involvement[150], and how these might be met (Wroe, 2021). Secondly, the focus of social harm on responding to experiences, rather than affixing identity labels such as 'victim', may make the process less stigmatising. Thirdly, as a framework, social harm creates the space for a 'wider investigation of who or what might be responsible for the harm done, unrestricted by the narrow individualistic notion of responsibility', allowing for productive considerations of collective responsibility (Hillyard and Tombs, 2007: 19). This enables us to look past the assignment of blame, and

[150] Including as a result of contact with the criminal justice system (Mason, 2020; Wroe, 2021).

the assessment of deservingness of support through the allocation of 'victim' or 'offender' status, towards our collective responsibility to help all young people live lives free from harm.

Indeed, regardless of whether they felt overall that they were victims of exploitation or not, the young people who took part in this research expressed that they had experienced harm and emphasised that they wanted the conditions in which they were living to improve. This was the case for young people who felt they were transitioning away from involvement in drug distribution: 'I just think like the life that I was living, it just wasn't nice. And I wanted better like from my life. I wanted to do better things.' (Alex); 'I wanna describe it like a hole that I wanted to get out of, that I felt like I was being pulled into.' (Phoebe); 'It just wasn't the lifestyle I wanted to live, but I was in it.' (Freddie) and for those who were still involved: 'It's not worth it. It's not worth it for what you're doing, and it's just fucking shit.' (Jakub); 'You shouldn't have a life like that, no way…It's not a nice living, for a child to do that.' (Kazimir). It is clear that even though young people were rarely receptive to the term 'victim of exploitation' and found it more difficult to access support that was conditional on them fulfilling the expectations of victimhood, they did express that they wanted their circumstances to change and improve. Accordingly, a focus on addressing harm has the potential to better engage young people in transitions away from involvement in county lines activity.

Yet in advocating for an approach that looks beyond the confines of victim status towards the broader concept of harm experienced by young people involved in county lines, it is important to remain aware of two key issues. Firstly, there are wider conversations to be had about whether the YOS, with its primary focus on young people's offending, would be the most appropriate organisation to deliver supportive interventions to young people affected by exploitation using a 'social harm' approach. While Haines and Case (2018) emphasise the 'normlessness' of the contemporary youth justice system, albeit referring to a lack of coherence and consensus in youth justice policy and practice, the findings of this research on the challenges of CCE victim identification suggest that practitioners working with and within the YOS are still quite restricted by normative expectations of victims and offenders, and of the victim-offender dichotomy. If the extent to which the rise of CCE as a policy issue can create meaningful space for victim recognition in the context of the YJS is in doubt, we must also ask questions as to whether the YOS is best placed to deliver broader social harm-orientated interventions to young people affected by CCE.

Secondly, the assignment of victim status, as well as of related labels such as 'vulnerability', has long played a purposive role in gatekeeping, reducing and restricting access to state funding and support (Brown, 2017). Such a change in approach would necessitate the extension of supportive interventions to a wider group of young people. As it is, funding for services for children in the UK, including for young people affected by drug distribution, is wholly inadequate. Since the beginning of the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition in 2010, funding for children and young people's services across England has been cut by 23% (Action for Children *et al.*, 2020), and, as discussed above, funding for youth services in Stonewell had been cut by more than 80%. Practitioners within this research already described feeling extremely restricted by the lack of resources available to support young people: 'We don't have the resources, we don't have the money, we don't have the funding…We've got so many different plans and projects and that that we can roll out, but we just don't have the money or the time.' (Demi, YOS officer); 'the resources aren't there.' (Charlie, YOS ISS officer). Practitioners emphasised that this lack of resources was already inhibiting the extent to which they were able to make meaningful interventions in young people's lives:

> I often wish that sometimes when it comes to county lines, we had more resources to be able to make intervention effective for them, and meaningful. Because you know you can sit there in a session with one hour and you've got a young person telling you that they don't want this life anymore, but they're terrified because of the repercussions if they come out, and there's nothing. (Chloe, YOS ETE officer).

As a result, many practitioners were already experiencing a sense of futility, emphasising that they struggled to offer sufficient support to young people who identified as and were recognised as victims, let alone to those whose positionalities were more complex:

> We've got nothing to offer as an alternative. We as a society- I don't mean we as a service. But actually, we as a service, I suppose we don't have anything to offer either. (Anton, YOS officer).

> You need [young people] to realise other things that they're passionate about, and other things that they can really build a life around. So it's just a struggle. What's the light at the end of the tunnel? Yeah we can get you out of county lines, but you're going to have no money, all the traumatic things that you've been through are still going to be there, and that needs work too. (Maddison, YOS CCE team).

The fact that a 'light at the end of the tunnel' for young people harmed in contexts of drug distribution was already insufficient in the eyes of practitioners underscores the fact that any attempt to focus on redressing and reducing the harm experienced by young people, regardless of the extent to which they conformed to the 'victim of exploitation' label, would need to be preceded by a substantial uplift in the funding and resources available to facilitate this work.

Sadly, this sense of futility and frustration also resonated with young people who participated in this research. For example, while young people highlighted the need for additional supportive interventions such as alternative opportunities to earn money: 'I don't know many kids who will sell drugs if they've got other options' (James);

> We need to offer more jobs to people, like going schools in areas where they know that kids are involved, and offer ways out, help like people who can't get jobs to get jobs and give them something to live off. (Dan).

Many also appeared resigned and despondent about the prospect of such support actually being put in place: 'So I feel like, I don't know, something needs to be done about it but nothing is ever going to be done about it.' (Phoebe); 'People speak about it and say they're going to do something about it but nothing's happened that's why it's still an issue now and it's still occurring.' (Liam, Fieldnotes, CCE team-led workshop); 'Nothing is being done to help.' (Dan). Young people's comments advocating for additional support were often tempered with disillusionment as they also found the wider services that were currently available to them severely lacking. After over ten-years of successive 'measures' of austerity, the argument that youth services need more funding is hardly a novel or original contribution for this thesis to make. Yet this point remains critically important, and its predictability should only serve to render it more powerful. We cannot realistically expect to embark upon a broader social harm-focused approach to enhance and improve support for young people affected by drug distribution without the necessary funding.

7.4 Limitations and Future Directions

In closing, I will consider the limitations of this research as well as potential directions for future research. As discussed in the methods section, one limitation of this research is that the nature of the young person sample (as predominantly white and male) made it difficult to offer a comprehensive account of the impact of factors such as gender and ethnicity on processes of victim identification. Future research would benefit from further purposive

sampling of girls and young people of colour, to further explore the implications of gender and ethnicity for processes of victim identification in relation to CCE. In addition, while the young people involved in this study are best described as 'runners', it would be useful to explore processes of victim identification for young people occupying other roles in the county lines model such as 'sitters' or 'top boys' (Coomber and Moyle, 2018). I was not able to recruit all of the young people mentioned by practitioners in their discussions of working on CCE, and future research, particularly research with a relational focus, would benefit from an additional focus on recruiting practitioner-young person dyads. In addition, the amount of observation included in this project was somewhat limited by the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Finally, while this project strove towards a collaborative approach, I am keen to develop this focus further, for example through the use of methods such as 'Participatory Action Research', which I plan to explore in future work. Notwithstanding these methodological limitations, this thesis provides a rich and in-depth analysis of processes of victim identification from the perspectives of youth justice practitioners and young people affected by CCE.

This thesis has focused primarily on victim identification processes in the context of the YOS. While YOS practitioners, as a result of their regular engagement with young people over a prolonged period, play a significant role in victim identification processes, there are also other practitioners within other agencies whose roles could usefully be considered. Of particular interest are the decision-making processes of practitioners within the court setting, such as magistrates, judges, clerks, barristers, and solicitors. Research with practitioners in this group could provide additional insights into the influence of markers of victim status such as positive NRM decisions and use of the Section 45 defence for young people involved in county lines. Additionally, the actual NRM decision-making processes of the Home Office itself have yet to receive independent analysis and research scrutiny, nor have the roles of social workers and non-specialist police received sufficient research attention.

In addition, due to logistical constraints this research has focused on one local authority area, Stonewell, and on young people living within Stonewell. However, one of the markers of county lines drug distribution is that individuals travel across county boundaries in order to distribute and sell drugs. Future research could explore the role of 'out of area' practitioners in victim identification processes. This could manifest itself in two ways, for example: the influence of practitioners that young people from Stonewell encountered in the areas to which they travelled to sell drugs, and the influence of Stonewell's youth justice practitioners on the

identification of young people who travelled into Stonewell to sell drugs. While young people arrested outside of their home area were usually quickly returned to their home local authority and YOS, they did have some contact with out of area practitioners, for example: local police making the arrest, duty YOS officers who attended custody suites, and the YOS and court practitioners involved in youth court hearings[151]. Accordingly, it would be useful to examine whether and how the practitioners involved in these initial interactions impacted processes of victim identification.

Research with the families of young people affected by CCE, as well as comparative research that contrasts processes of victim identification for young people affected by CCE in contexts of county lines with those of young people affected by CCE in other contexts, and which compares processes of CCE victim identification with processes of identifying adult victims of criminal exploitation, would also be valuable[152]. Exploring processes of victim identification across this wider variety of contexts would also aid with the development of the substantive theory of victim identification offered in this thesis into a more generally applicable formal theory.

In addition, this thesis has focused on processes of victim identification, and on whether or not young people are viewed, and view themselves, as victims. A further development of this research would be to explore the labels that practitioners and young people use when the victim label is not deemed appropriate in greater depth. For example, what might young people's and practitioners' attitudes be to the 'offender' label, or the term 'survivor', or are there other terms or labels that are more resonant for young people and for practitioners? Exploring relationships with additional labels in more detail would provide further insight into how young people and practitioners understand experiences of CCE and county lines involvement.

Finally, an absent presence in this research has been those who could be described as the offenders or perpetrators of exploitation – members of drug distribution networks who recruit and manage the activities of the young people who may or may not then be identified as victims of CCE. If we are to be critical about how and why some young people are identified

[151] After initial hearings it was often the case that children from out of area were referred back to a court closer to home. In cases where children were sentenced by a youth court that was outside their home area, they still completed their sentence with their home YOS in line with official guidance (Ministry of Justice, 2019).
[152] A comparative approach would be particularly useful in further consolidating critical youth victimology, providing opportunities to better delineate aspects of the victim identification process that are more or less salient for children in contrast to adults.

as victims of exploitation but not others, we must also take the same approach to the identification of some individuals as perpetrators of exploitation. What might we learn from histories of victimisation, victim identification, and the possible transitions from victim of CCE to perpetrator of exploitation, among those who have progressed through hierarchies of responsibility within drug distribution networks? If we are to avoid reifying the victim-offender dichotomy, this is an important area of future research.

Appendix 1: Information Sheet for Young People

Information Sheet

Thank you for your interest in this research. My name is Hannah Marshall, and I am doing this research as part of my PhD at the University of Cambridge. I am interested in learning more about young people's views on county lines and criminal exploitation.

Before we start the research, there are some important things for you to know:

1. It is **your decision to take part** in the research. You don't have to take part. If you decide later that you do not want to be part of the research, just let me know before 31st January 2023 (the end of the research project).

2. I am an **independent researcher,** from the University of Cambridge. I am not part of the police, the youth offending service, or any other government service. **My role as a researcher is to listen** to your views and opinions, and to create a safe and supportive space for discussion. Exactly what we talk about will depend on what you think it is important for me to understand. You should feel free to ask me questions.

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3. Everything we talk about will be **confidential**. This means that I will not share what you say with anyone unless there is a serious risk of harm to you or to someone else. If this was an issue, I would talk to you about it first.

4. When I write about our conversation, **I will not use your real name**. This means that what you say will be **anonymous**, and people who read what I write will not know that it was you that said these things.

5. If you would like, you can review my final write-up of the research and offer feedback. Let me know during or after the session if you're interested in doing this.

6. I would like to **record our session**. This is so I can remember what we have said and make accurate notes. These notes will be anonymised. I will make the notes straight after the session, and then delete the recording. I will then keep these notes stored securely at the University of Cambridge until the end of the research project.

If you have any questions you are always welcome to contact me. You can contact me in these ways:

[redacted]

[redacted]

[redacted]

If you have complaints or questions about the research, please contact [redacted].

Appendix 2: Information Sheet for Practitioners

Information Sheet

Thank you for your interest in this research. My name is Hannah Marshall, and I am a student at the University of Cambridge. I am interested in learning more about child criminal exploitation and county lines, and about youth justice practitioners' experiences of working on this issue.

Taking part in the research involves participating in a short research interview – it should last between 45 minutes and an hour and it will be at a time and place convenient for you. Before the interview, there are some important things for you to know:

7. It is **your decision to take part** in the research. You don't have to take part. We can stop the interview at any time. If you decide later that you do not want to be part of the research, just let me know before 31st January 2023 (the end of the research project).

8. I am an **independent researcher,** from the University of Cambridge. I am not part of the youth offending service.

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9. Everything we talk about will be **confidential**. This means that I will not share what you say with anyone, including other members of the youth offending service, unless there is a serious risk of harm to you or to someone else. If this was an issue, I would talk to you about it first.

10. Participation is **anonymous.** All my research notes, and the final write-up of the research will use pseudonyms.

11. If you would like, you can **review what I write**/how I use data from our interview in my thesis, to make sure that you are happy with what is said.

12. I would like to **record our interview**. This is so I can remember what we have said and make accurate notes. These notes will be anonymised. I will

make the notes straight after the session, and then delete the recording. I will then keep these notes stored securely at the University of Cambridge until the end of the research project.

If you have any questions you are always welcome to contact me. You can contact me in these ways:

[redacted]

If you have complaints or questions about the research, please contact [redacted]

Appendix 3: Consent Form for Young People

Interview consent form.

Researcher: Hannah Marshall, PhD student, Institute of Criminology, University of Cambridge

Research participant's name:

_____

Thank you for agreeing to talk to me as part of this research. As part of the research ethics processes for all universities in the UK, people taking part in research need to read through an information sheet and complete a consent form. The purpose of this is to help to make sure that you fully understand and are happy with:

- What the research is about
- What will happen if you take part in the research
- How information that you give as part of the research will be used and stored.

Please read the information sheet and feel free to ask any questions

By signing this form, you are saying that you agree to take part in the research. However, you can always withdraw from the research at any time.

If you are happy to take part in the research, then please complete the sections below:

Statement	**Please tick** ✓
I have read and understood the information sheet	
I have been able to ask any questions that I have	
I understand that I can contact Hannah with any questions that I have about the research in the future.	
I am happy for Hannah to make a recording of the research exercise	
I am happy for Hannah to take notes during the research exercise	

Hannah can use my anonymous comments in her PhD thesis, academic publications, and conference presentations.	
Hannah can contact me in the future to tell me how the research is going.	

Your name:_____

Your signature: _____

Researcher's signature: _____

Today's date: _____

Please write two different options for names that you would like me to use when I write about you in this research. This is to make sure that what you say stays anonymous:

Name one:_____

Name two:_____

Appendix 4: Consent Form for Practitioners

Interview consent form.

Researcher: Hannah Marshall, PhD student, Institute of Criminology, University of Cambridge

Research participant's name:_____

Thank you for agreeing to talk to me as part of this research. As part of the research ethics processes for all universities in the UK, people taking part in research need to read through an information sheet and complete a consent form. The purpose of this is to help to make sure that you fully understand and agree with:

- The purpose of the research
- What will happen if you take part in the research
- How information that you give as part of the research will be used and stored.

By signing the consent form you are saying that you agree to take part in the research, but you can withdraw from the research at any time.

Please read the information sheet and feel free to ask any questions. If you are happy to take part in the research then sign this form to confirm that you approve the following:

Statement	**Please tick**
I have read and understood the information sheet	
I have been able to ask any questions that I have, and I understand that I am free to contact Hannah with any questions that I have about the research in the future.	
I consent to the audio recording of interviews	
I consent to the detailed notetaking of interviews	
I consent to the research team using my anonymous comments in research reports, academic publications, and conference presentations.	

I would like to be kept informed about this research, and consent to the research team making contact with me in the future.	

Participant's name:_____

Participant's signature:_____

Researcher's signature:_____

Date: _____

Please write two options for pseudonyms that you would like me to use when I write about you in this research. This is to make sure that what you say stays anonymous:

Option one:_____

Option two:_____

Appendix 5: Interview Guide for Young People

Points to re-emphasise from the information sheet:

- *Taking part in this research is confidential and anonymous (so nothing that you say will be shared outside the research unless there's a serious risk to someone's safety, and if that happened, I would talk about it with you first).*
- *I would like our conversation to be about me listening to what you think it's important for me to understand. I do have some pre-written questions, but you don't have to answer any you don't want to and please feel free to take our conversation in whatever direction you think is most important in relation to county lines and criminal exploitation. You can stop the interview at any time, and you can ask me any questions you like.*

Introductory questions

- Do you have any questions that you'd like to ask about me and what I do, and about the research?
- Can you tell me a little bit about yourself?
- What interested you in taking part in the research?

Section one: Experiences of involvement drug dealing.

To start with, I'd like to ask you a few questions about your own experiences, and what brought you to the youth offending service/YOS CCE team

- If you feel comfortable, can you tell me a bit about how you came to be involved with the YOS/YOS CCE team?
    - Was part of the reason drug-related? (If yes, how would you describe this? E.g. selling drugs, running drugs, dealing, minding etc.)[153]
    - How did it all start?
    - What happened to bring you into contact with the YOS?
- How do you feel about why this happened?
- I've heard that there can be both positive and negative sides to being involved in selling drugs, can you tell me more about this?
- Have there been times where you've felt like you've had more/less choice or control over what was happening? Can you tell me about these?

[153] Use the young person's choice of language to guide interview questions from this point onwards. Throughout the rest of the interview guide the phrase 'selling drugs' is used as a placeholder only.

- What kinds of things make it easier/more difficult to move on from involvement in selling drugs?
- Do you think there are things that adults don't understand about young people's experiences with selling drugs? Can you describe those things to me?

Section two: Views on 'exploitation' and 'victimhood'

I'd like to move on to ask you a bit about the term 'victim of exploitation'. I've heard lots of practitioners using this word when they talk about young people, and I'd like to know what you think about it.

- What does the word exploitation mean to you?
- Has anyone ever said to you that you were a victim of exploitation?
    - How did you feel about being described as a victim of exploitation? / How would you feel if someone described you as a victim of exploitation?
- Would you say that the term 'exploitation' applies to your situation? Why/Why not?
    - Is there a different way that you'd describe what's happening/happened?
    - (If you wouldn't use the word exploitation to describe your situation) Could you describe a situation that you would say is an example of exploitation?
    - Would you say that someone can choose to be involved in selling drugs, but also be described as a victim of exploitation? Why/Why not?
- Are there specific things that you think increase the risk of exploitation happening?
- Are there specific things that you think reduce the risk of exploitation happening?

Section three: Experiences with the Youth Offending Service and relationships with practitioners.

In the last section of the interview, I would like to ask you some questions about your experiences of working with the practitioners at the youth offending service.

- Can you tell me what your relationship is like with your YOS worker/YOS CCE team worker?
    - Would you describe it as a good relationship? A bad relationship? Why?
- Have you had to:
    - Have contact with the police? How did you find this?
    - Have an NRM referral? How did you find this?
    - Move to a new place for your safety? How did you find this?

    - Reduce the numbers of hours you spend at school/leave school completely? How did you find this?
- Do you feel able to talk to the practitioners at the YOS/YOS CCE team about what's going on with your involvement in selling drugs?
    - What makes it easier to talk to practitioners?
    - What makes it more difficult to talk to practitioners?
- How do you feel like the YOS sees you?
    - Why do you think they see you in that way?
    - Do you think the YOS sees you as a criminal, as a victim, or as something in between?
        - Why do you think they see you in this way?
    - Do you think that there are parts of your identity that mean that you are seen differently? (For example, your ethnicity, nationality, gender).
- Have there been times where you have not done something that the YOS has asked you to do? (For example, to stay living in a certain place, or to go to an appointment?)
    - Why didn't you feel that you could do this?
    - Do you think what happened changed the way that the YOS saw you?
- What are the most important things for you in terms of how the YOS treats you?
- What are the most important things for you in terms of the support that the YOS can offer you?

Concluding questions

- Is there anything that I didn't ask about that you think we should talk about?
- How do you feel about our conversation today?
- Do you have any questions for me?

Appendix 6: Interview Guide for Practitioners

Introductory questions

1. Can you tell me a bit about who you are and the work that you do?
2. How long have you been in your role?
3. How would you describe child criminal exploitation? What does it mean to you?
    a. How would you define exploitation?
4. How would you describe county lines? What does that term mean to you?
5. How would you say the issues of child criminal exploitation and county lines are affecting young people in the local area at the moment?
    a. What are they being asked to do?
    b. Where are they being asked to go?
6. Has it always been like this, or has anything changed? (If it has changed, why?)

Section one: Experiences of working with young people

7. Can you tell me about some of the young people that you're currently working with/have previously worked with, who are/have been involved in county lines drug dealing?
8. Can you tell me about some of the young people that you're currently working with/have previously worked with, who are/have been affected by child criminal exploitation?
9. What are some of the challenges that you experience in trying to keep young people safe when they are at risk from child criminal exploitation?
    a. Do young people tend to recognise the risk to themselves?
10. What are some of the approaches that you've found useful in working with these young people?
11. In what ways do youth justice interventions support young people affected by CCE?
12. Do you think that placements in secure environments are useful in supporting young people affected by CCE?

Section two: Understanding vulnerability to CCE

13. How might a young person's situation at home increase their vulnerability to CCE?

14. Are young people placed in children's homes, or in foster placements, at greater risk of being affected by CCE, than those living with family? Why?
    a. What about independent (unregistered) accommodation for young people over 16?
15. How might young people's home life (including life in local authority care) impact their ability to move away from situations where they are affected by CCE?
16. Do you think young people's experiences at school can play a role in increasing their vulnerability to CCE?
    a. What is the impact of school exclusion, and placement in a pupil referral unit, on young people's vulnerability to CCE?
17. Are there particular public areas or spaces locally where you find there's a concern that young people could be at risk of CCE? What are these?
18. Are there ways in which we can protect/safeguard young people in these spaces?
19. What is the impact of social media use on young people's vulnerability to CCE?
20. How might young people's use of social media impact their ability to move away from situations where they are affected by CCE?

Section three: Mobility and movement

21. What challenges are created when young people are moving around the country as part of their exploitation?
    a. How easy is it to work across the boundaries of different local authorities/force areas?
22. Can relocation be helpful for young people who are affected by CCE? Why/Why not?
    a. Is this something that you've ever had to do as part of your work? What were the circumstances? What was the impact?

Section four: Young people as victims and as offenders

23. Do you see young people involved in county lines as victims, as offenders or as some combination of both? Why?
24. Are there places where young people involved in county lines are treated more like victims or more like offenders? Where? Why do you think this is?
25. Are there other factors that make it likely that young people will be seen more as victims, or more as offenders? For example, age, gender, ethnicity.

Closing Questions

26. Are there any questions that I should have asked, that I didn't ask, or any other topics that we should discuss?

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