Intersections between exploitation and cognitive impairment:

An exploratory study in Nottingham, UK

A Research Report for the
Global Cities Free of Slavery project

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This project was undertaken by the Rights Lab (University of Nottingham). The Rights Lab is home to the world's largest group of modern slavery researchers. Through its five research programmes, impact team, and INSPIRE project, the Rights Lab is underpinning antislavery with an advanced research agenda, collaborating with civil society, business, and government, and elevating survivor-informed research as a key part of knowledge production to help end slavery.

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Executive Summary

Recognition of the exploitation of adults within the United Kingdom (UK) continues to grow, with June 2021 seeing the National Referral Mechanism (NRM) receive the second highest number of referrals since its inception in 2009 (Home Office, 2021a).

It has long been suspected that people with mental health impairments and learning disabilities have an increased risk of experiencing exploitation. However, although a number of notable modern slavery cases have involved adults with learning disabilities, no statistics are currently collated on the issue within the UK (excepting Home Office data on forced marriage) and the scale of the problem is unquantified.

This project aimed to explore the intersection between exploitation and mental health problems, learning disabilities, and other forms of cognitive impairment in Nottingham, adopting the wider definitions of exploitation used by Nottingham's multi-agency Slavery and Exploitation Risk Assessment Conference (SERAC). The SERAC process was established by Nottingham City Council and partners in 2019 to recognise and seek to disrupt a wide range of different types of exploitation, not all of which would meet the prosecution threshold for 'modern slavery'. Additional forms of exploitation include for example 'cuckooing', financial exploitation, and 'mate crime'. We were keen to capture these diverse forms of exploitation within the project because such activities often manifest in terms of anti-social behaviour and low-level criminality which can impact heavily upon communities and blight the health and well-being of vulnerable individuals, as well as demanding high levels of police and public service attention. Understanding and addressing these lower-level forms of exploitation therefore potentially delivers a high level of benefit both to individuals and communities.

The research methodology included:

- A literature review looking at the local, national and international literature around the experiences of victims of exploitation with different types of cognitive impairment.
- Consultation with an expert advisory board including academics with experience on learning disabilities, forced marriage, mental health issues and the Ann Craft Trust[1].
- 16 semi-structured interviews with frontline professionals working in Nottingham including those in local authorities, the voluntary sector and the National Health Service (NHS).
- Statistical analysis of exploitation referrals across the County provided by the SERAC within Nottingham City Council; including demographic information (gender, age, location of exploitation), vulnerabilities, type of exploitation identified, and type of violence identified.

[1] The Ann Craft Trust is a national non-governmental organisation which aims to minimise the risk of abuse of disabled children and adults at risk. The Safeguarding Network is comprised of frontline professionals with expertise in health and research.

Quantitative data covers the period April 2020 to March 2021. Qualitative data collection took place between July and August 2021.

Key findings

Our research demonstrates that cuckooing is the most common form of exploitation across Nottingham, affecting 35% of all referrals into the SERAC. Friends and neighbours were often implicated in taking advantage of vulnerability. Perpetrators of cuckooing are sometimes characteristically similar to their victims in terms of experiencing vulnerabilities.

Cognitive impairments were a recorded vulnerability in 30% of the referrals into the SERAC. This related to cases in which victims had been diagnosed with either a learning disability, mental health problem or memory impairment, or autism / ADHD.

In a further 26% of cases, professionals suspected a cognitive impairment due to symptoms and observations of mental health issues. Therefore the actual number of referrals which include cognitive impairments could be higher.

As well as cognitive impairments, loneliness and isolation were raised by our participants as the most prevalent vulnerabilities, and unemployment was suggested by the quantitative data as the most common vulnerability in referrals of exploitation.

Cognitive impairments frequently intersect with additional factors influencing vulnerability such as risk of homelessness and substance misuse. 58% of those with diagnosed mental health problems also experienced substance vulnerabilities. The three referrals where intellectual disabilities were recorded also had substance vulnerabilities and unemployment as recorded vulnerabilities. The five referrals where a learning disability was present also experienced other vulnerabilities, i.e. a diagnosed mental health problem or experiencing homelessness.

Evidence suggests that people with mild cognitive impairments often remain unidentified because of their perceived level of competence. Some of these individuals also do not meet the criteria for social care intervention and therefore do not receive support that would assist in preventing or addressing exploitation.

Professionals suggested that fear of further abuse, not being believed and the potential of having their housing taken away restricted victims willingness to cooperate and seek support from agencies. Additionally, many victims with cognitive impairments do not realise that they are being exploited and through grooming processes, have come to believe that their perpetrators are their friends.

Many respondents commented that Nottingham’s multi-agency SERAC approach was critical to success in identifying and supporting victims of exploitation with cognitive impairments. Participants also emphasised the importance of building strong long-term relationships with clients to assist with identifying exploitation and creating trust for interventions.

Introduction

Modern Slavery and exploitation in the UK

During the past seven years the UK government has invested considerable political capital, and public funding, into developing a high-profile policy and enforcement response to the problem of modern slavery and human trafficking. Former Prime Minister Theresa May described the issue as 'one of the greatest human rights challenges of our time' (May 2016). The 2015 Modern Slavery Act for England and Wales aimed to be world-leading; clarifying and extending existing legislation that criminalised human trafficking, slavery, servitude, forced and compulsory labour; and requiring increased transparency in business supply chains. Increasing recognition and referral of potential victims of exploitation has meant that numbers in the National Referral Mechanism (the 'NRM', a national support system for victims of exploitation) rose rapidly from 2337 in 2014 to 10613 in 2020 (Home Office 2021c). Estimations of national prevalence of severe forms of exploitation covered by the 2015 Act have also increased, from 10-13,000 suspected victims (Bales, Hesketh and Silverman 2015) to numbers ranging between 100 000 and 136 000 (Centre for Social Justice 2020; Walk Free Foundation 2018).

As the national policy response has developed, there has also been increasing recognition of the importance of local public services and voluntary sector actors in identifying and responding to exploitation, as well as creating a context which facilitates prevention of exploitation on a sustainable basis. This has resulted in a patchwork of partnership-based activity in which police and law enforcement bodies collaborate with other local actors, including local government, housing, health, NGOs and faith actors, to build awareness and knowledge of exploitation, train those in contact with high-risk communities, and collaborate in responding to identified cases (Northall, Brewster and Gardner 2020).

As these networks have grown and matured, a more nuanced account has also started to emerge about the diverse forms of exploitation that are identified on a local basis in the UK, as well as the (sometimes complex) multi-agency interventions which are developed in response. Some of these manifestations of exploitation are recognised and investigated by police as cases of modern slavery, but many fall into a legal hinterland, including for instance offences such as 'cuckooing,' (the exploitation of someone's home, often for drugs distribution and supply or other illegal activities) financial exploitation, 'mate crime' (exploitation by a friend or acquaintance) and sexual exploitation that is not clearly identifiable as forced labour and/or trafficking. Although such offences may sometimes be labelled as 'lower level' exploitation, they frequently affect highly vulnerable people, and can cause considerable harm to physical and emotional well-being, as well as being associated with anti-social behaviour and criminality that can impact the wider community. In addition, there is not yet clear evidence as to whether such offences may escalate, or create a context in which extreme forms of exploitation can more easily occur. For this reason, local law enforcement and statutory agencies need to devise approaches to recognising and responding to this broader cross-section of exploitation occurring at community level.

A 'social determinants' based approach to understanding exploitation in context

Gardner et al. conceptualise community resilience against exploitation as the adaptive capacity for a community to prevent, identify and respond to cases, and promote a context conducive to sustaining freedom. Research suggests that the factors underpinning this resilience can be structural or regulatory, but also exist at locality level in the form of local institutions, culture and social norms (Gardner, Northall and Brewster 2020). These 'social determinants' of resilience interact with familial and personal factors to create a context that can promote or inhibit different forms of exploitation. They are not fixed but continuously changing in response to the local context and external pressures, which may engender both positive and negative systemic effects (see figure 1).

Figure 1: Social determinants of community resilience against exploitation.

Source, Gardner, Northall and Brewster (2020)

There are a number of advantages to reviewing resilience against exploitation on a local or 'place' basis. Firstly, this approach enables the identification of factors – representing both assets and vulnerabilities - that can promote or inhibit conditions that may lead to exploitation. Not all of these factors are local – some will be structural or apply on a national basis - but a place-based lens enables us to review and understand how different issues combine and intersect. Second, a local perspective on determinants of exploitation facilitates a better understanding of local gaps in knowledge and service provision, and helps to identify which communities face potentially higher levels of risk.

The collection of local data on diverse factors underpinning exploitation in Nottingham, UK, undertaken by Nottingham City Council (NCC's) Slavery and Exploitation team, led to recognition that different forms of cognitive impairment (including mental health-related disability, learning disability, cognitive issues such as dementia, and intellectual conditions such as autism and ADHD) were frequently present amongst cases referred to their SERAC process (Slavery and Exploitation Risk Assessment Conference). This information led in turn to the design and delivery of this research study, which reviews the characteristics of cases of exploitation identified via the SERAC data in Nottingham and the intersections with cognitive impairment.

Background: the context of Nottingham

Nottingham is located in the East Midlands region of England, approximately 130 miles north of London. The municipal administrative area of the City of Nottingham has a population of around 330,000, but the wider urban area including the City and contiguous districts includes 686,000 people, putting Nottingham among the 10 largest city-conurbations in England. The city underwent a rapid expansion in the 19th century associated with the growth of the textile industry, but the modern economy depends to a greater extent on public sector employment as well as educational, finance, creative and biotech sectors. However, recent years have been challenging with the city suffering from relatively high rates of unemployment, particularly during the 2008/9 recession, and being disproportionately impacted by public spending cuts and welfare reforms from 2010 onwards (Beatty and Fothergill 2013). Recently it has been labelled the UK's "poorest city" due to having the lowest gross disposable household income of any local authority area, £13381 per head, compared to £62408 in west London (ONS 2019). Poverty, low wages, health inequalities and educational disadvantage are persistently concentrated in the city which is the 11th most deprived district in England (out of 317) (Nottingham Insight 2022).

Nottingham has a well-established multi-agency approach to addressing exploitation. Both the police and council have dedicated teams specialising in cases of exploitation and the Slavery and Exploitation Risk Assessment Conference or SERAC, chaired by the City Council, provides a regular meeting to review referrals concerning potential cases. There is also a county-wide modern slavery partnership involving a wide range of statutory, educational, voluntary and faith partners which meets every two months, and promotes both information-sharing and awareness-raising initiatives. The partnership undertook a review in 2020 to create a profile of modern slavery and related exploitation across the County (Brewster 2021). Analysis of police crime data relating to modern slavery in Nottingham indicated that labour exploitation was the most commonly identified form of exploitation (35% of occurrences) followed by criminal exploitation (31%) and sexual exploitation (20%). The profile also identified that there was a need for greater engagement with communities that showed lower levels of referrals in relation to perceived risks, including young people, homeless people and people with learning disabilities.

Why focus on cognitive impairments?

There is growing acknowledgement of the significance of learning disabilities, mental health problems and memory and cognitive impairments in conjunction with cases of exploitation both in the UK and internationally. People with disabilities are more likely to experience violence, including sexual and domestic abuse; exploitation by family members; discrimination; and exclusion from access to welfare and humanitarian assistance. Women, older individuals, children, and LGBTI persons who have a disability are doubly exposed to such risks (UNHCR 2021: 3).

In addition, learning impairment and mental ill-health has been noted in a range of studies concerning exploitation and human trafficking (see for instance Stanley et al. (2016) and Polaris (2018)). These studies show cognitive impairment often preceding victimisation, as well as resulting from violence and trauma in relation to the crime.

However, despite the significance of this issue, dedicated research on potential links between forms of cognitive impairment and exploitation are rare, and the topic has in general been excluded from policy initiatives, guidance and research centred on contemporary forms of exploitation. Data from the Nottingham SERAC therefore provided a unique resource to explore this issue on a local basis, in the hope that results might benefit not just local agencies but also shed light on the potential connections between cognitive impairment and exploitation more widely.

Definitions

In developing this report we have examined literature and data relating to a broad range of learning, developmental and intellectual disabilities, mental health disabilities, and memory or cognition problems. Collectively we use the term 'cognitive impairments' to describe these conditions, whilst recognising that they also have individual and specific characteristics. We adopted this approach because these conditions can share symptoms and characteristics, such as problems with social interaction, cognition and making judgements, which create similar vulnerabilities for the individuals involved. We also understand that from a practice perspective, it is sometimes difficult to have full knowledge of the type of impairment individuals are experiencing, and that more than one condition may be present. Using this broader perspective also assisted in gathering a range of relevant information in a relatively under-researched field.

Methodology

This research took an exploratory approach in exploring the connection between mental health problems, learning disabilities, other forms of cognitive impairments and exploitation. The project was funded for four months between June and September 2021 with the following research questions:

- What published evidence is available on the connections between cognitive impairments and different forms of exploitation?
- What does the SERAC evidence tell us about the prevalence of mental health and learning disabilities amongst those who are identified as potential victims of exploitation in Nottingham?
- What stakeholders are key to dealing with these issues in Nottingham?
- What challenges do public and voluntary services in Nottingham face in identifying and responding to cases of exploitation for people with mental health and learning disabilities?
- What legal and national / local policy issues impact on this area?
- How could we improve the evidence base on this topic?

The project commenced with establishment of an expert advisory board including academics and NGO practitioners with expertise in mental health and learning disabilities. A literature review drew upon a wide range of academic and grey literature to examine what is currently understood about the intersection of cognitive impairments and exploitation, and this background information was used to underpin the subsequent research design (including interview schedules) and analysis.

In terms of primary data collection, the project adopted two methods. Quantitative analysis was carried out to examine data captured by the NCC SERAC team over a 12 month period, from April 2020 to March 2021. In addition, 16 interviews were conducted with frontline professionals in Nottingham. The sample included professionals working within Nottingham's Health Care Trust (N=5), various housing organisations (N=3), The Ann Craft Trust (N=2), Nottinghamshire Police (N=1), and NGOs who identified working with a cohort of victims with mental health problems and learning disabilities (N=5).

Interviews were semi-structured, with flexibility to allow the researchers to explore emerging insights raised by participants. Regular meetings with the an expert advisory board informed the structure of the interview schedule, and all interviews followed this schedule, with slight variances in the phrasing of questions, depending on the participant's professional role. Interviews lasted between 30 and 55 minutes and were recorded using Microsoft Teams videoconferencing software for transcription by the researchers. All interviews were thematically coded (Creswell, 2013) giving the researchers flexibility to "identify, analyse, and report patterns (themes) within data" (Braun and Clarke, 2006: 6) without being tied to any "pre-existing theoretical framework[s]" (ibid, 9). All coding and analysis were completed by two researchers. Braun and Clarke's six-step guide to thematic

analysis was adopted, enabling the researchers to familiarise themselves with the data by way of transcription, reading and re-reading transcripts, and making notes about general ideas and patterns.

Thematic analysis of the data identified five themes from across our sample of practitioners. These included:

1. The extent of exploitation across Nottingham
2. Vulnerability/susceptibility to exploitation
3. Intervention and safeguarding victims of exploitation
4. Barriers to victims seeking support
5. Examples of good practice

The research was granted ethical approval by the School of Sociology & Social Policy Research Ethics Committee within the University of Nottingham.

Limitations

Our research shines a local spotlight on the exploitation of those with cognitive impairments. However it does have some limitations.

Some sectors were overrepresented in the data. For example, the vast majority of interview participants were working in health settings or housing organisations. Further insights from enforcement, social care and policy perspectives may have provided additional insights.

Time restrictions limited the number of interviews and the extent of the desk-based research that could be conducted. The literature review was not all-encompassing but rather an overview of the academic research nationally and internationally. The desk based search yielded more literature around mate crime and learning disabilities than mental health and cuckooing.

In terms of the quantitative data provided by the SERAC, we encountered some ambiguity in the data fields and consistency of recording, and have made recommendations to clarify these issues moving forward.

Finally, due to time constraints and ethical requirements, we were unable to capture the views of those people whom the research was focussed on. The findings are therefore drawn from practitioners' experiences of working with victims with cognitive impairments and based upon their interpretations of the conversations and interactions that they have had. We recognise the importance of including the voices of victims with cognitive impairments for the shaping of practice and policy within this area and would encourage any future research on the topic to ensure that this demographic are carefully involved.

Literature Review

This review draws upon 35 UK and international articles and reports to examine what is currently understood about the intersection of cognitive impairments and exploitation.

The primary forms of exploitation identified in the literature by people experiencing cognitive impairments were trafficking, sexual exploitation, 'mate crime', cuckooing, and financial exploitation. Surprisingly, given that it is the UK's most prevalent form of exploitation, it has proved difficult to locate sources concerning labour exploitation. This is despite a number of high profile cases, for example the Darrell Simester case where an individual with learning difficulties was exploited for 13 years (BBC 2014) and the 'Rooney' case where multiple individuals with learning disabilities were targeted to provide forced labour, in some cases for 18 years (Vernalls 2017). Labour exploitation involving people with cognitive impairment currently represents a significant gap in existing literature.

Trafficking

There are examples in both international and UK based literature of the significance of cognitive impairments in victims of human trafficking. For example, in the 2020 Trafficking in Persons Report, exploitation of people with cognitive impairment was specifically noted in relation to cases of human trafficking in China, Japan, Estonia, Latvia, Mexico and Slovakia. (Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons 2020) A report by the US NGO, Polaris, found that between January 2015 and December 2017, the National Human Trafficking Hotline documented 2,116 potential victims that had a pre-existing health concern or disability immediately prior to their trafficking situation. This included a possible physical disability, mental health diagnosis, substance use concern, or intellectual/developmental disability (Polaris Project 2018). In the UK, Stanley et al. (2016) undertook a health survey and qualitative interviews with 29 young people aged 16–21 trafficked into the UK from other countries. When asked about learning disabilities or difficulties reading in their own language, a third (N=8) of the young women reported a disability or reading difficulties. The study also noted a 'considerable' overlap between prior vulnerability and mental disorder, and the authors recommended further research into this issue.

Sexual exploitation

People with any type of disability are four times more likely to be victims of violent or sexual crimes with women with psychosocial disabilities at a higher risk than non-disabled women (Muccigrosso, 1991; Perrault, 2009). However recent studies appear to focus more on sexual exploitation amongst children than adults (see for instance Wissink et al. (2015) Franklin and Smeaton (2017) and Reid (2018)). In the case of adults, understanding whether an individual has consented to sexual contact may be challenging. Intellectual disability heightens vulnerability to victimisation due to individuals' inability to decipher what is happening during sexual abuse, assault, or exploitation (Wissink et al., 2015). Similarly, individuals may be unfamiliar with the legality of certain behaviours, may not realize their right to say 'no', or may not be able to disclose details of sexual assault, or exploitation (Reid

2018). For this reason, it is common for those affected to not recognise themselves as victims of exploitation. In the case of cognitive impairment relating to mental ill-health, progressive illness or substance abuse, capacity to consent may also fluctuate.

'Mate crime'

The Association For Real Change (ARC) define mate crime as 'when people with learning disabilities are befriended by someone who uses the relationship to exploit or abuse the person' (ARC 2013: 4) a process which Doherty (2017; 2020) terms 'exploitative familiarity'. The range of crime under the umbrella of "mate crimes" is extensive, and includes financial, physical, emotional, sexual, and criminal exploitation. In a study of mate crime, Doherty (2017) found that most victims and perpetrators were male, and that the majority of crimes were financial in nature, although past cases have included examples of minor offences escalating to include modern slavery and murder. Mate crimes are typically perpetrated against disabled people living alone in deprived and poor areas. Befriending in cases of exploitative familiarity often appears mutual, and occurs over a period of time. Wilson et al.'s (1996) study found that respondents with learning disabilities found it more difficult to make judgments that involved friends rather than strangers.
Doherty (2020) contends that institutional responses to mate crime have been ineffective, and there remains no official data on their prevalence, supporting the literature's contention that crimes of this nature remain hidden, unreported, and unprosecuted.

Cuckooing

Cuckooing is a form of crime often associated with drugs distribution ('county lines') where victims' homes and property are used as a base for criminality. As with mate crimes, cuckooing necessitates a period of befriending in order to create a false sense of intimacy. Spicer et al. (2020) identified the prevalence of "local cuckooing" in areas close to where dealers reside. While victims of cuckooing frequently include those with class A drug dependencies, victims often include people with cognitive impairments whose conditions inhibit them from understanding the grooming and exploitative relationship. Perpetrators may engage in sexual activity or offer emotional 'openness' towards their victims. Often, those with cognitive impairments may not be able to decipher between coercion and genuine friendship. This builds an illusion of a trusting relationship which is, in fact, predicated on taking advantage of the victim's physical or mental disability. Victims can also be coerced into facilitating drug supply (Robinson et al., 2019), with their engagement in the criminal network used to deter them from reporting their exploitation to the police.

Financial Exploitation

Within the literature, financial exploitation is closely related to mate crime and disability-related harassment, often accompanying other types of abuse or exploitation. Financial exploitation has also been recognised as being particularly relevant to older people, often involving exploitation of their funds and resources, most often by family members but also by other friends, acquaintances and care-givers (Davidson, Rossall and Hart, 2015). In an inquiry into disability-related harassment (Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2011), disabled people reported theft, fraud and other financial exploitation such as being

‘encouraged’ to spend their money on people who befriend them. Association for Real Change (2013) introduced the term ‘Tuesday friends’:

> *Tuesday, the day his benefits arrived, saw a particular group of people turn up at his flat, ‘help’ him to the cashpoint and then on to the pub where they ‘help’ him spend his money* (p. 51).

Criminal exploitation

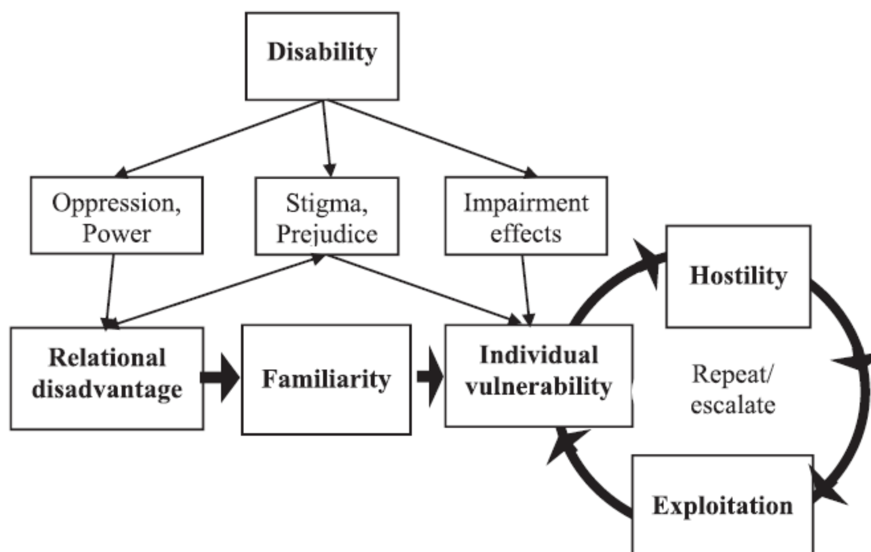
Criminal exploitation is now the most frequently recorded form of exploitation among children in the UK. Often associated with county lines drugs supply, and mainly (but not exclusively) involving British boys and young men, county lines commonly involves children or young adults with mental health or behavioural issues, many of whom come from a disadvantaged family background’ (UNODC, 2020 p.58). County lines also blurs boundaries between victims and perpetrators, as many of those involved are gang-affiliated young people who may suffer from mental health issues in the form of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) depression, anxiety and PTSD, and learning disabilities such as autism spectrum disorder (ASD) (National Crime Agency, 2019; Baidawi et al. 2020). The 2015 Modern Slavery Act includes a statutory defence against criminal exploitation, with physical or mental illness or disability among the relevant characteristics that may be used to demonstrate that a person raising the section 45 defence was compelled to act unlawfully (Home Office, 2021b: 184).

Impacts of cognitive impairment on exploitation risk

Both children and adults with learning disabilities are disproportionally more likely to experience exploitation than the general population (Scottish Commission for Learning Disability 2019: 3-4). Disability Justice USA suggest that people with developmental disabilities may be four to ten times more likely to be abused than their peers without disabilities’ (Disability Justice USA 2021). However there are debates concerning the extent to which a cognitive impairment by itself constitutes ‘vulnerability’. Disability rights perspectives suggest that it is also important to consider socio-political and structural drivers for hostility and violence against disabled people (Waxman, 1991).

Doherty (2020) suggests a process model for his concept of ‘exploitative familiarity’ which encapsulates the effects of structural oppression and power imbalances, stigma and prejudice and the effects of the impairment itself. The following sections will briefly address these issues with reference to the literature.

Figure 2, Doherty's Model of Exploitative Familiarity. Source Doherty (2020)



Oppression and Power

Several sources comment on the marginalisation of people with disabilities, particularly in the case of individuals who have 'mild' or 'moderate' learning disabilities, physical or sensory impairments, who do not reach the attention of services because they would not meet the eligibility criteria of critical or substantial need (Thomas, 2011). Multiple studies also comment that victims of exploitation may not be believed by authorities or their account may not be seen as credible (Office for Victims of Crime 2021; Reid 2016; Mencap 2001).

The Equalities and Human Rights Commission also comment on the tendency to treat crimes against people with disabilities as less serious in nature:

> *Calling a crime a crime is an important part of getting it right. For example, we have come across agencies using the term 'abuse' rather than 'physical assault' or 'rape', and 'financial exploitation' in place of 'theft' when referring to disabled people's experiences. The impact of this, whether or not intentional, is at its best unhelpful and misleading and at its worse prevents appropriate legal redress* (2011:135).

In addition, the literature noted that institutional structures and practices may sometimes exclude people with impairments. For example, in the Netherlands when foreign national trafficking victims are unwilling or unable to participate in prosecution proceedings, due to trauma or a medical or mental disability, they are eligible to apply for a one-year temporary humanitarian residence permit. However, according to the interviewees from victim support organisations, applications for residence permits on humanitarian grounds are usually denied and trafficked persons henceforth rarely make use of this option (ILO, 2021:56).

Stigma and prejudice

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) noted that persons with intellectual and psychosocial disabilities often face particularly high levels of stigma, resulting in heightened risk of exploitation and abuse, due to isolation, lack of access to services and community perceptions (UNHCR, 2019:13). The NGO World Vision comments that:

> *People with disabilities are often perceived as worth less to their community and potentially more to traffickers, especially in the begging industry or in brothels. Their lack of participation or perceived value to the family, or even in some cultures a sense of shame or embarrassment to have a disability in the family, means that families may even seek out traffickers to relieve themselves of responsibility* (World Vision, 2009).

In addition, the challenges people with cognitive impairments may experience in understanding and relating to others can further increase their isolation. In an international study of 20 victims and 20 non-victims of crime, all with learning disabilities, it was found that vulnerability to exploitation was associated with poor interpersonal competence (Wilson et al., 1996: 13). Social isolation and the wish for companionship – particularly when combined with difficulty in judging the nature of a relationship - increases vulnerability to abuse. This risk would be heightened for people with lower support needs who have limited or irregular contact with statutory services (Fyson and Kitson, 2010: 316).

Individual vulnerabilities

The US office for victims of crime provides a list of the ways in which victims with physical, cognitive or emotional disabilities become vulnerable to exploitation. This includes reliance on others including care-givers; submission to caregivers in unequal power relationships; social isolation; speech or language difficulties; lack of understanding of abusive situations and not being believed by authorities. The office also highlights that even when they are believed, and their cases are prosecuted, their abusers may be given shorter sentences than abusers of able-bodied people (Office for Victims of Crime 2021). These factors are similar to those identified by Reid (2016) in relation to trafficking of girls with intellectual disabilities. They also show strong overlap with vulnerabilities previously identified in relation to abuse of those with learning disabilities (Mencap, 2001).

International Commitments and State responsibilities

States are committed to protect people with disabilities under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the 2006 UN Convention on the rights of people with disabilities, but less provision exists specifically in relation to preventing exploitation, particularly in relation to policy implementation at a domestic level.

Article 22 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that:

Everyone, as a member of society, has the right to social security and is entitled to realization, through national effort and international cooperation and in accordance with the organization and resources of each State, of the economic, social and cultural rights indispensable for his dignity and the free development of his personality.

Furthermore, article 25 reinforces the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, *disability*, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control (UN 1948).

The UN convention on the rights of persons with disabilities covers ‘those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others’ (art. 1). The following provisions are of particular relevance to the issue of trafficking and disability:

- Obligation to guarantee that persons with disabilities enjoy their inherent right to life on an equal basis with others (art. 10);
- Obligation to ensure the equal rights and advancement of women and girls with disabilities (art. 6);
- Obligation to protect children with disabilities (art. 7);
- Obligation to ensure that laws and administrative measures guarantee freedom from exploitation, violence and abuse. In the event of abuse, States parties shall promote the recovery, rehabilitation and reintegration of the victim and investigate the abuse (art. 16); and
- Obligation to protect the physical and mental integrity of persons with disabilities (art. 17) (UNHCHR 2010: 71-2)

Furthermore, UNHCR has emphasised the need to improve monitoring, emphasising that data collection continues to suffer from biases and discrimination. UNHCR recommend that data collection processes are strengthened to guarantee more inclusive levels of planning, implementation, and monitoring (UNHCR, 2019).

At a domestic level, 2021 Statutory Guidance for the UK Modern Slavery Act highlights that people with drug and alcohol dependency issues, people with underlying health factors such as learning difficulties, disability, communication difficulties, chronic developmental or mental health disorders may be ‘particularly susceptible’ to modern slavery (Home Office 2021b: 102) Yet surprisingly, although learning disabilities are recorded by the Home Office in relation to forced marriage, it is not yet routine to report the presence of any form of cognitive impairment in relation to cases of exploitation, including modern slavery and human trafficking, although some monitoring is carried out in relation to statistical returns on Safeguarding Adults Inquiries.

Equally there is no systematic programme of training and few tailored resources in the UK either for organisations working with people with learning disabilities, who are likely to come into contact with potential or actual victims of trafficking, or for those organisations focussed on people with experience of trafficking and exploitation who need to be prepared

to meet the needs of individuals with learning disabilities (Scottish Commission for Learning Disability, 2019: 4). Given the overlap between cognitive impairments and exploitation, this seems to represent an important gap in provision.

Findings

1. The extent of exploitation across Nottingham

Analysis of the quantitative data provided by Nottingham's SERAC is highlighted within the graphs in the following section. These graphs relate to the location of referrals into the SERAC, the age of those referred, the type of exploitation experienced by age group, the type of exploitation experienced across gender, the reported vulnerabilities of those referred, violence experienced within each referral, and the specific vulnerabilities of cuckooing (the most common type of exploitation across Nottinghamshire). A total of 147 referrals were analysed for the purposes of this research. Of those, 46% were male and 46% were female. Seven per cent of referrals related to the property/house that was referred, where no known gender was identified. One per cent of referrals (two cases) were identified as 'Multiple' or 'M/F'.

Location of referrals

The majority of referrals of exploitation into Nottingham's SERAC featured in the NG7 postcode (New Basford, Forest Fields, Hyson Green, Radford and Lenton), NG3 (Carlton, Sneinton, St Ann's and Mapperley) and NG5 (Sherwood, Arnold, Bestwood, Carrington, Top Valley and Rise Park). The heat map (below) excludes one referral from NG14 (Calverton, Lowdham, Burton Joyce and Gunthorpe) and one from S80 (Worksop).

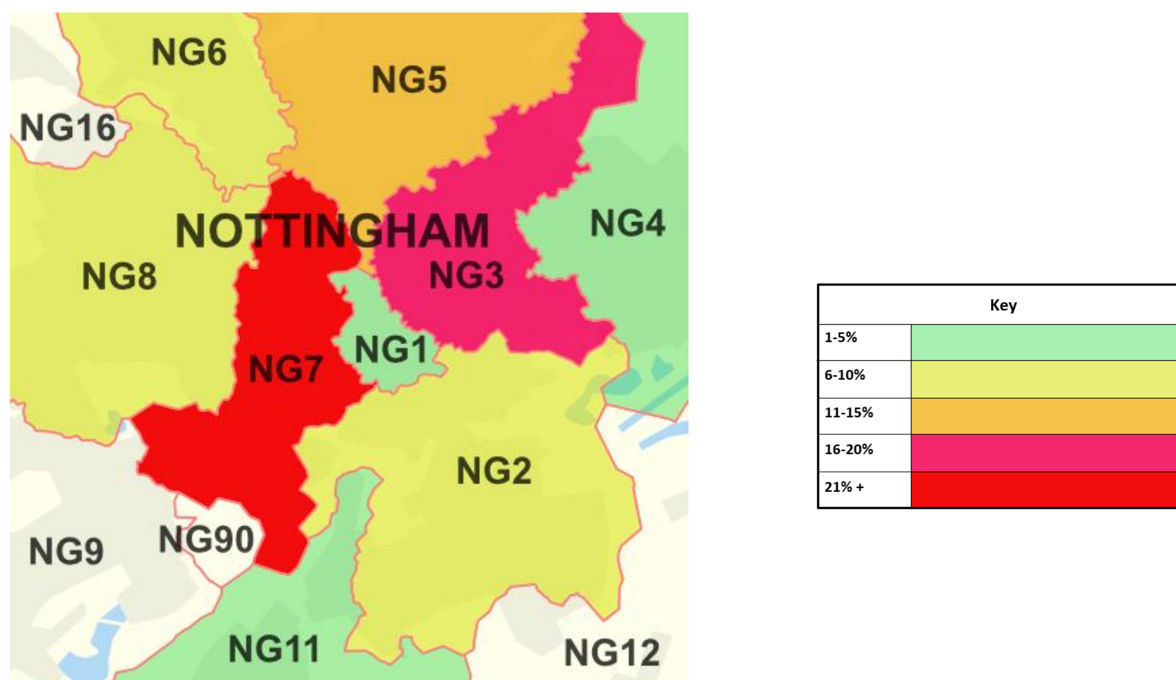


Figure 3. % Referrals to the Nottingham SERAC by postcode area (Map from OpenData, 2012).

Type of exploitation

SERAC data suggested that cuckooing was the most commonly referred type of exploitation across the city, representing over one third of the sample. This was followed by 27% of cases relating to sexual exploitation and 24% financial exploitation. 18% of cases were classified as 'modern slavery'.

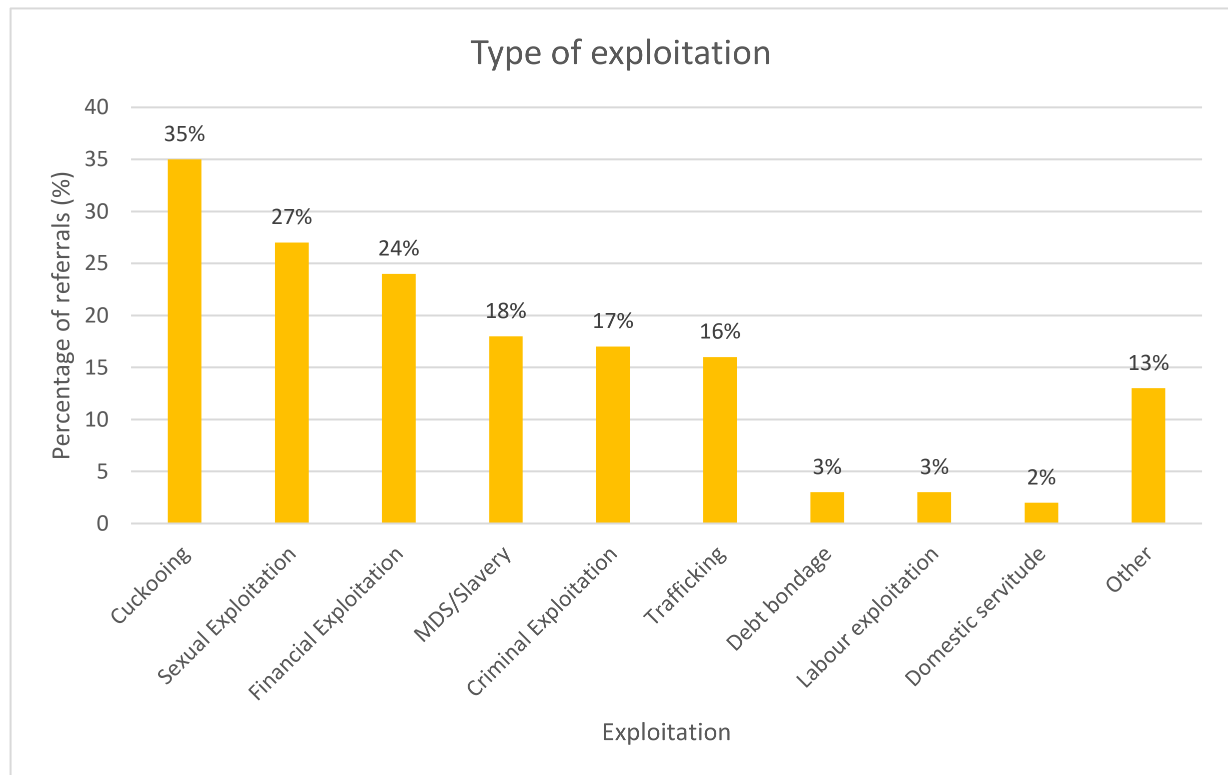


Figure 4. Demonstrates the type of exploitation reported for each of the referrals (N=147) into the SERAC. 'Other' includes cases where at least one other type of exploitation was reported, such as false imprisonment, or 'exploitation' not specified.

Similarly, our sample of professionals also identified cuckooing as the most common type of exploitation. This was coupled with discussions around criminal exploitation (mainly county lines), debt bondage and financial exploitation. Cuckooing has been paid significant attention nationally in recent years, possibly as a result of being associated with 'county lines' drug supply, which was made a national priority for Government in 2020. Professionals have received training around cuckooing and criminal exploitation and are likely to be alert to the signs and indicators.

While it is not an offence to cuckoo a property, professionals raised concerns about the types of illicit activities that were taking place once somebody's home had been taken over. For the majority of cases it was noted that antisocial behaviour, drug use and drug supply drew professionals attention to the cuckooing in the first instance. That is, numerous unidentified individuals frequenting somebody's property, an increase in cars and bicycles parked outside of the property and reports of criminal damage and disturbances:

They were her friends, and they were in the property, and they were giving her drugs, and everything was fine, then it became, she was in debt with them. They were charging her double what they would charge other people for example or other dealers would charge for the amount that she was getting and then longer term it became quite physically abusive, they had sort of taken over the bedroom so that she was sleeping on the sofa. Like I say we started seeing her out street sex working again which we hadn't for a while. (NGO Support Worker 1)

In cases in which women had their homes taken over, professionals suggested that women with drug dependencies and/or involved in sex work were more at risk of cuckooing due to the interactions they had and vulnerabilities which left them open to exploitation (discussed in more depth below).

Within sort of the drug using, sex working community they are more likely to have a home, and within that there's usually a drug dealer that befriends them. (NGO Support Worker 1)

Surprisingly, sexual exploitation was not a key theme within the interviews, although it did arise in conversations with police. This possibly relates to the gendered nature of exploitation that was being reported to the SERAC, as cuckooing tended to affect men more than women (see gender and exploitation, p.22 below).

Financial exploitation, consistent with referrals into the SERAC, was identified by professionals during interview as a key issue across Nottinghamshire. Indeed, it was reported to be hidden and often difficult to identify, usually only coming to the fore through parents of victims raising concerns and through professionals conversations with victims where a trusting relationship had been developed. One nurse reported:

Another source of exploitation for people with a learning disability, where they perhaps don't understand money as much, but the people who are sort of preying on them have wised up to the fact that "oh, but they could go and buy a voucher from Morrison's or Amazon that's £10 and send it to me" (Learning Disability Nurse 1).

Additionally, one participant who worked for a third sector organisation discussed spiritual exploitation (Ann Craft Trust, 2020), which had not been drawn to our attention by the quantitative data or – initially - the desk-based literature review:

If you're person of faith, and we found that a lot, for the people that come to us are people of faith, and from the Muslim community, a lot of the women will think they need to go to a spiritual sort of leader to heal. But then we're finding that, you know, we're finding that that spiritual leader is then saying to them: "well, I can heal you, but you have to marry me if I heal you" and "oh, we can get married for 2-3 weeks and then I can divorce you" (NGO Support Worker 2).

This may speak to the hidden nature of exploitation and the way in which it intersects with faith and cultures. Participants highlighted some of the difficulties facing victims in seeking support about their exploitation. For example, it was noted that in some religions there

remains a stigma around mental health issues, with those experiencing disorders like depression being identified by others as 'mad'. Rather than seeking medical support, victims would instead seek help from those within their community behind closed doors, leaving themselves vulnerable to exploitation from alleged 'healers'.

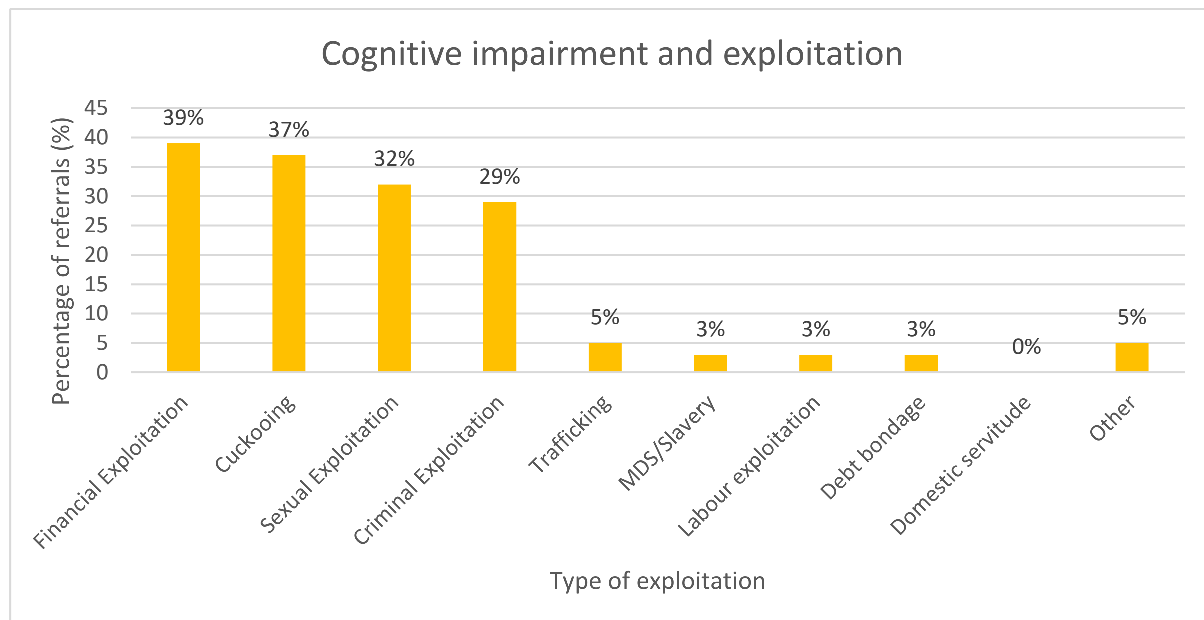


Figure 5. Demonstrates the types of exploitation experienced by those with cognitive impairments. This date is based upon 38 referrals. 3% here relates to one referral, 5% reflects 2 referrals.

Referrals with a cognitive impairment (those recorded in the data as having intellectual disabilities, learning disabilities, diagnosed mental health vulnerabilities, or a cognitive impairment) commonly experienced financial exploitation (39%), followed by cuckooing (37%) and sexual exploitation (32%). Over a quarter of referrals with cognitive impairment noted also experienced criminal exploitation (29%). Less common were trafficking, slavery, labour exploitation, debt bondage, and domestic servitude.

Age

The age range of those referred into the SERAC was 17 to 77 with a median age of 37. Of all referrals into the SERAC, those between the ages of 21 and 40 were most frequently represented across the sample, followed by those aged 41-60.

Cuckooing appeared to be more commonly experienced by older people. For example, only 9% of those in the 0-20 age group were noted as experiencing cuckooing, in comparison to 80% of 61-80 year olds. In contrast, sexual exploitation was much more common for younger age groups. Criminal exploitation also appeared to be more prevalent amongst younger referrals.

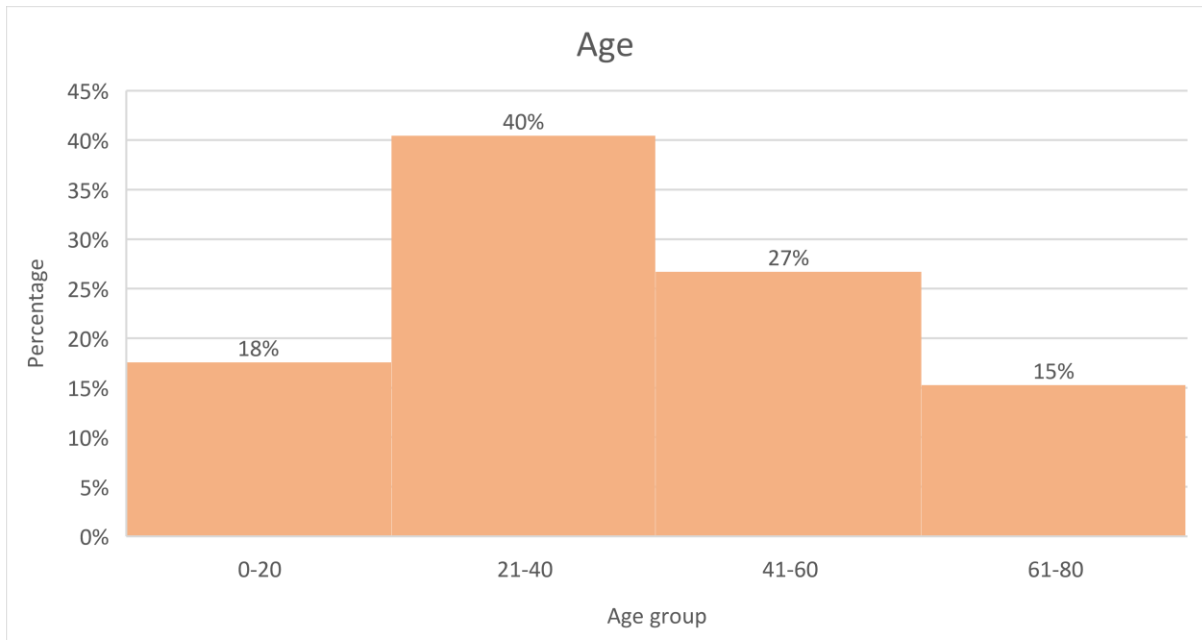


Figure 6. Breakdown of age ranges of referrals into the SERAC. The analysis was based on 131 individual referrals where age was identified.

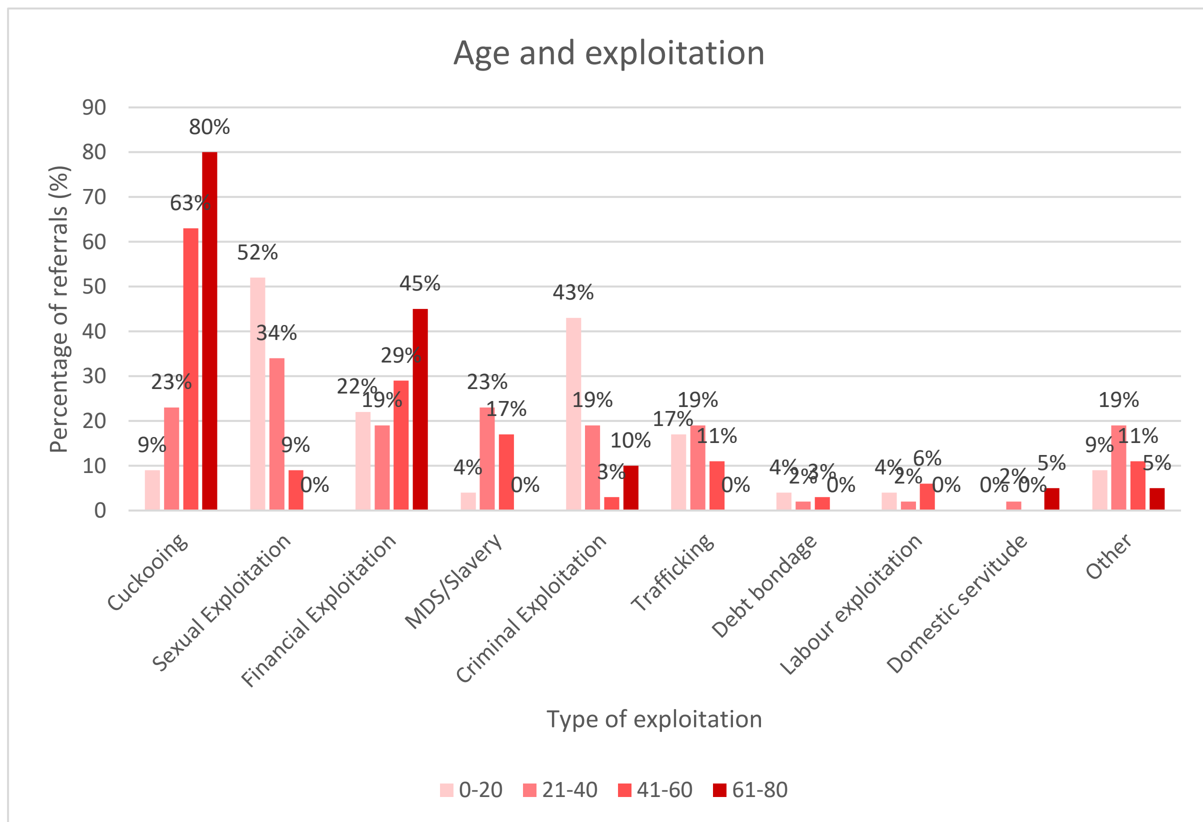


Figure 7. The relationship between age and type of exploitation experienced. The analysis comprised of 23 referrals where the victim was aged 0-20, 53 referrals where the victim

was aged 21-40, 35 referrals where the victim was aged 41-60, and 20 referrals where the victim was aged 61-80.

Gender

Analysing the type of exploitation experienced by gender revealed several distinct disparities. 50% of men referred to the SERAC had experienced cuckooing, compared to just over one quarter of women. In comparison, sexual exploitation was much more common for women. Additionally, more than twice the percentage of men experienced financial exploitation than women (34% of men compared to 16% of women).

The data provided by the SERAC marries up with our interview data and the literature base and suggests that experiences of exploitation differ between genders. Indeed, where sexual exploitation was discussed by our participants, this was in relation to women, with no reports of sexual exploitation perpetrated on men. Further, cuckooing was something that disproportionately affected men. While there were many cases of cuckooing where the victim was female, it was generally asserted by professionals that females were most at risk of sexual exploitation, often through trafficking. Financial exploitation was also a form of exploitation that disproportionately affected men.

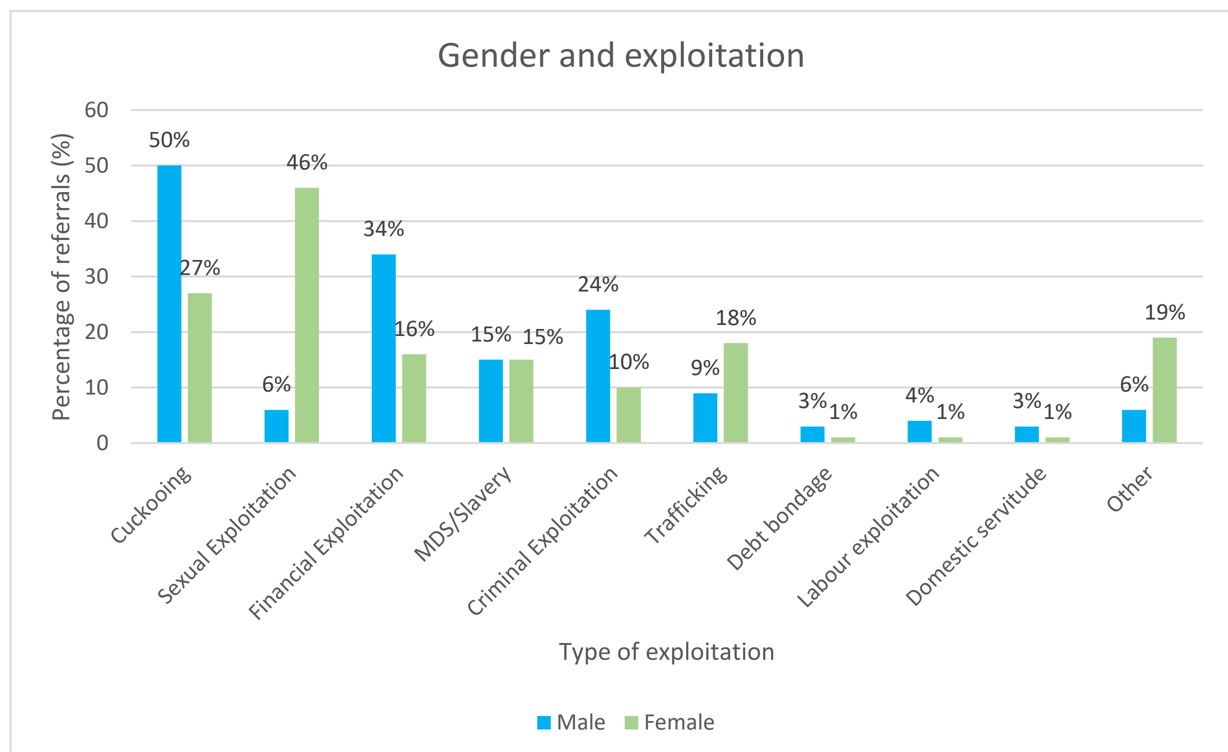


Figure 8. Shows the type of exploitation experienced across genders. This is based upon 68 cases where the victim was male and 67 cases where the victim was female.

One housing professional commented that women and men experienced differing circumstances that put them at risk of exploitation. For example, it was suggested that women were more likely to be exploited in the workplace due to having childcare

responsibilities, i.e. needing to collect children from school. Because of this, women were offered lower pay by employers who took advantage of their situation and difficulty in finding other convenient work (Housing professional 1). Financial exploitation was outlined by professionals working in housing support roles as being, in many cases, perpetrated by women who took advantage of the male victims desire for a sexual and/or loving relationship.

2. Vulnerability/susceptibility to exploitation

Understandings of exploitation

In order to understand what professionals knew about exploitation, they were asked to outline their perceptions of exploitation and grooming. Across the sample, respondents were in agreement that exploitation rested upon taking advantage of a vulnerability by an individual(s) who held power over their victim. In most cases of exploitation, professionals discussed elements of deception and control whereby victims were deceived and tricked by perpetrators into thinking that they were their friends and had their best interests at heart. These levels of deception restricted victims from being able to make informed decisions and understanding the consequences of their actions, often exacerbated further by the existence of cognitive impairments. Grooming tactics were identified as often very subtle and hidden, making it difficult for professionals to identify where exploitation was taking place.

Vulnerability

Vulnerability was a key theme across the sample. Interestingly, and in line with findings in the literature, professionals critiqued understandings of vulnerability and what constitutes a vulnerability. Indeed, it was reported that vulnerability was fluid and varied on a case by case basis, but ultimately it was a combination of circumstances that resulted in specific vulnerabilities coming to the fore. Some local authority professionals were keen to highlight that the fluidity of vulnerability and personal circumstances meant that anybody could find themselves victimised through exploitation.

Respondents suggested that what constituted vulnerability was personal to the individual and depended upon their ability to navigate that vulnerability. For example, as will become clear throughout this section, while having a learning disability is indeed a vulnerability, it may not be the learning disability which makes somebody susceptible to exploitation. For example in multiple cases interviewees pointed to loneliness and social isolation as the root of the exploitation, where victims would seek relationships leaving them open to exploitation, and their learning disability hindered their ability to acknowledge the harm within that relationship.

Interestingly, analysis of the SERAC data revealed that unemployment was the most common vulnerability amongst those referred for potential cases of exploitation. This was followed by homelessness - or risk of homelessness - and substance dependence, present in more than half of the referrals. Cognitive impairments were a recorded vulnerability in 30%

of the referrals into the SERAC. This related to cases in which victims had been diagnosed with either a learning disability or a mental health issues. In a further 26% of cases in professionals suspected a cognitive impairment due to symptoms and observations of mental health issues, but this judgement was subjective rather than being based on a diagnosis. Therefore the actual number of referrals which include cognitive impairments could be higher due to issues with securing a medical diagnosis, victims seeking medical intervention and recording of data.

The majority of respondents had multiple vulnerabilities, with most having either two or three recorded (see figure 8.) This indicates that vulnerabilities are commonly shared and intersect with one another.

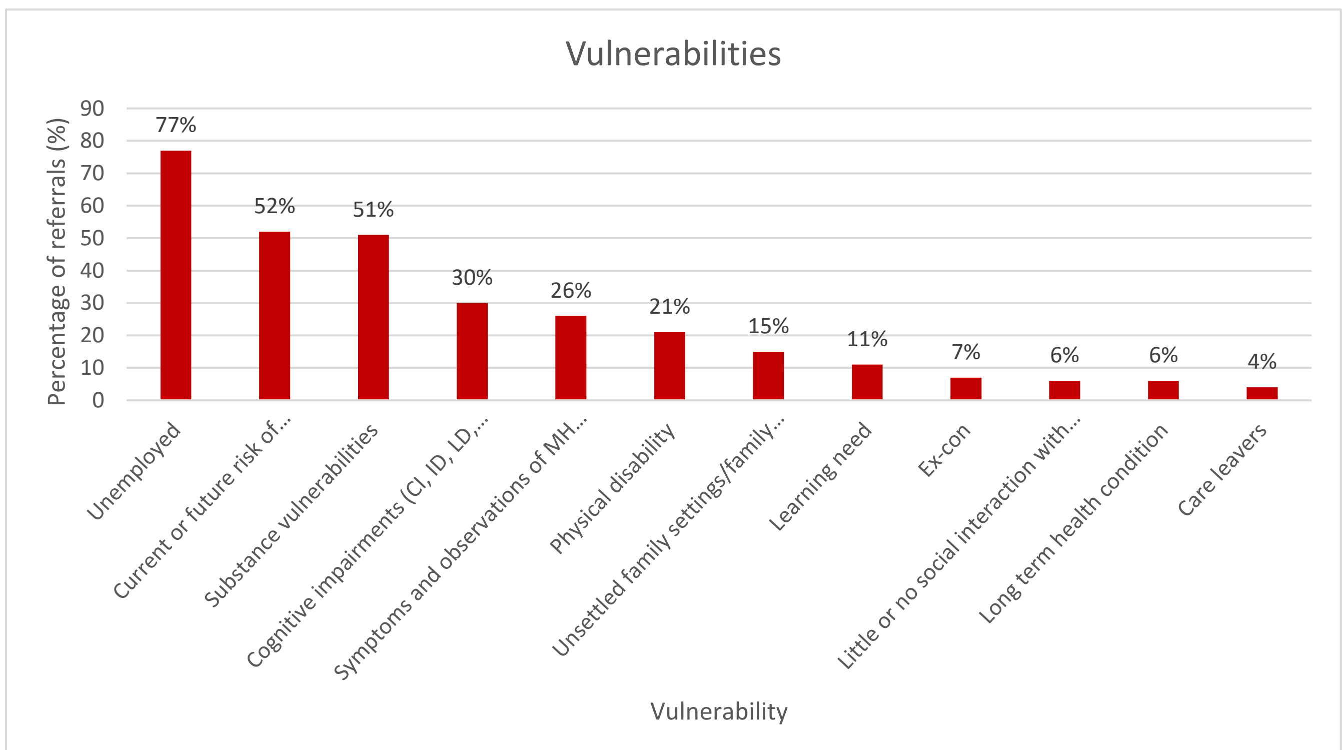


Figure 9. Highlights the reported vulnerabilities of victims of exploitation referred into the SERAC. The data is based upon 125 referrals. Percentages have been calculated out of those with at least one vulnerability noted.

Number of vulnerabilities	Frequency	Valid %
1	11	9
2	32	26
3	40	32
4	22	18
5	13	10
6	5	4
7	2	2
Unknown/N/A	22	-

Figure 10. Demonstrates the number of vulnerabilities recorded for each referral into the SERAC. Where the vulnerability was ‘unknown/NA’, this is taken to mean that there is not enough information, rather than no vulnerabilities.

(Number of total referrals with each vulnerability indicated in parenthesis)	Intellectual disabilities (3)	Physical disabilities (26)	Learning disabilities (5)	Substance vulnerabilities (64)	Diagnosed mental health vulnerabilities (33)	Symptoms/observations of mental health vulnerabilities (32)	Learning need (14)	Unemployed (96)	Little/no social interaction with peers (7)	Current/future homelessness risk (65)	Unsettled family settings/family adversities	Dementia, Deemed by Social Care to lack	Care leavers (5)	Long term health condition (7)	Ex-con (9)
Intellectual disabilities (3)	-	1	0	3	1	1	1	3	0	2	0	0	0	0	1
Physical disabilities (26)		-	0	10	4	8	4	**20**	2	5	3	2	0	3	2
Learning disabilities (5)			-	1	5	0	0	5	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Substance vulnerabilities (64)				-	19	19	7	**55**	2	**34**	11	4	3	1	7
Diagnosed mental health vulnerabilities (33)					-	0	4	**27**	1	17	3	4	2	1	2
Symptoms/observations of mental health vulnerabilities (32)						-	0	**23**	4	13	7	0	0	3	3
Learning need (14)							-	11	0	8	3	2	2	0	0
Unemployed (96)								-	3	**52**	14	3	3	4	7
Little/no social interaction with peers (7)									-	3	6	0	1	2	2
Current/future homelessness risk (65)										-	13	1	5	3	6
Unsettled family settings/family adversities (19)											-	0	4	3	3
Dementia, Deemed by Social Care to lack capacity (7)												-	0	1	1
Care leavers (5)													-	1	0
Long term health condition (7)														-	1
Ex-con (9)															-

Figure 11. Demonstrates how vulnerabilities intersect with one another for each of the referrals into the SERAC.

Taking a closer look at shared vulnerabilities, it is clear that unemployment is a dominant theme amongst the majority of referrals. For example, 86% of those with substance vulnerabilities were also unemployed, as well as 74% of those with family adversities. Risk of homelessness is also commonly shared with other vulnerabilities, for example 53% of referrals with substance vulnerabilities were also noted as having a current or future risk of homelessness, as well as 52% of those with diagnosed mental health vulnerabilities. 58% of those with diagnosed mental health vulnerabilities were also reported as having substance vulnerabilities. Whilst there were only three referrals involving intellectual disabilities, all three also involved substance vulnerabilities and unemployment. Similarly, all five referrals with learning disabilities also shared vulnerabilities, i.e. having diagnosed mental health vulnerabilities and experiencing unemployment. Additionally, all of the five care leaver referrals were noted as being at current or future risk of homelessness.

In contrast to the SERAC data, our participants did not mention unemployment. Instead, they identified five prominent vulnerabilities that they came across through cases of exploitation that they had worked on. These included mental health issues, learning disabilities, drug dependence, old age and care leavers (those who are transitioning out of the care system). These five vulnerabilities were followed closely by vulnerabilities that could be identified as affecting victims on a social and environmental level. For example, isolation and loneliness, previous criminal convictions, homelessness, divorce and grief. Rather than one vulnerability, it was acknowledged that a combination of factors, i.e. individual, social and environmental vulnerabilities provided the environment for exploitation to thrive.

The aforementioned experience of social isolation and loneliness, stemming from victims lacking a support network and a sense of community was paid considerable attention by professionals during interview. Indeed, one local authority worker noted rising cases across Nottingham where loneliness was the *only* vulnerability identified within the exploitation:

> *Loneliness has been a massive vulnerability within our role over the last few years due to COVID. We've had quite a few cases where there hasn't been any substance misuse, there's been no mental health issues, no disability, it literally just has been the fact that they are so lonely and these people target loneliness.* (Local Authority Worker 1)

Experiences of loneliness made men and women susceptible to different types of exploitation. Professionals suggested that isolation and loneliness in women provided male perpetrators with enhanced opportunities for sexual exploitation because of the woman's desire for a loving relationship and the perceived protection and care that the man could provide. In contrast, loneliness and isolation in men appeared to make them more susceptible to financial exploitation whereby female perpetrators used sex as a way to financially exploit their male victims. One housing officer stated:

> *We had one [case] in the past. Sex workers were exploiting them because that individual liked their company. Sometimes it wasn't always done through sex because yes, they were there to provide a service, but they didn't always have that service, but they would then groom them in a way of like "oh I'll look after you, I'll bring you alcohol, I'll bring you fags…oh give us £20, give me your bank card and I'll go and take the money out for you".* (Housing Support Officer)

As mentioned above, old age was reported by some professionals as a vulnerability in cases of exploitation that they were dealing with. One housing officer stated:

> *We have an increase of elderly people committing antisocial behaviour, being dependent on drugs and alcohol. That wouldn't have happened probably 15-20 years ago [and] is happening now because we live longer. Things are much more available. Drugs, alcohol. We live in a different generation*. (Housing Support Officer)

Social changes combined with increases in the average life expectancy mean that individuals are living longer. This, according to professionals, has brought with it increased cases of social isolation and loneliness and needs that are often not met by services. For example, if an older person had no cognitive impairments and was physically able, but became vulnerable due to their age and lack of support network, they were unlikely to come to the attention of authorities and had more chance of slipping through the net.

Those leaving the care system were identified by professionals as often being disproportionately affected by exploitation. Having received state support, upon reaching 18 years of age that support disintegrated overnight. Care leavers then found themselves trying to manage their finances, secure employment and support themselves, often immediately after being moved to some form of independent accommodation. While we did not speak to any of this demographic during the research, professionals shared their views based upon conversations that they had with care leavers, suggesting that these individuals found themselves isolated, lonely and daunted by the prospect of caring for themselves. Their desire for a sense of belonging was their own personal vulnerability which made them more susceptible to grooming and exploitation. Perpetrators were thus easily able to identify care leavers and take advantage of their desire for a friendship group. One housing support officer told us:

> *People will purposely go out and look for these people, so when you've got care leavers just moved in ... they watch them and then I would say over time they will either find out what their habits are, if they are drug user, if they have lots of people around, and without them knowing, they're grooming them*. (Housing Support Officer).

Where those with cognitive impairments struggled to make positive and lasting relationships, social media became a channel for fulfilling their needs and seeking. During interviews, social media was highlighted as providing perpetrators with distance and anonymity to groom and exploit victims. Financial exploitation was indicated to be commonly facilitated through social media, where male and female perpetrators took advantage of the opposite sex's desire for a loving relationship. Where professionals had identified exploitation and removed the victim from the environment, the victim had moved their activity online, so that they were not at risk from members of the community. Professionals also spoke of the impact of COVID-19 and the greater ease with which perpetrators could groom and exploit because a large part of the population had increased their social media use.

Violence

The results indicated that 78% of referrals were categorised as experiencing at least one of the following: physical violence, sexual violence, deprivation/withholding of liberty, and psychological violence. Of cases where at least one type of violence or deprivation was noted (N=115), nearly three quarters of referrals were categorised as experiencing deprivation/withholding of liberty. Just over 60% experienced psychological violence. Whilst sexual violence was the least common, it still affected 28% (of those who had at least one specific violence type or deprivation noted).

In cuckooing cases it is often noted that victims are restricted from leaving their premises due to the risk of detection from law enforcement and the desire for perpetrators to keep their activities hidden. This was noted by professionals during interview, especially in relation to care leavers, older people and those with learning disabilities. Indeed, one housing officer reported that many of those with learning disabilities who initially enjoyed the presence of perpetrators due to feelings of loneliness, found it difficult to ask people to leave their premises, lacking in confidence and assertiveness. In such scenarios, it was sometimes the parents of victims who had to remove the unwanted group from their adult child's accommodation. In other cases, victims retreated to their bedrooms or left their premises altogether because they were fearful of the consequences of asking their 'friends' to leave.

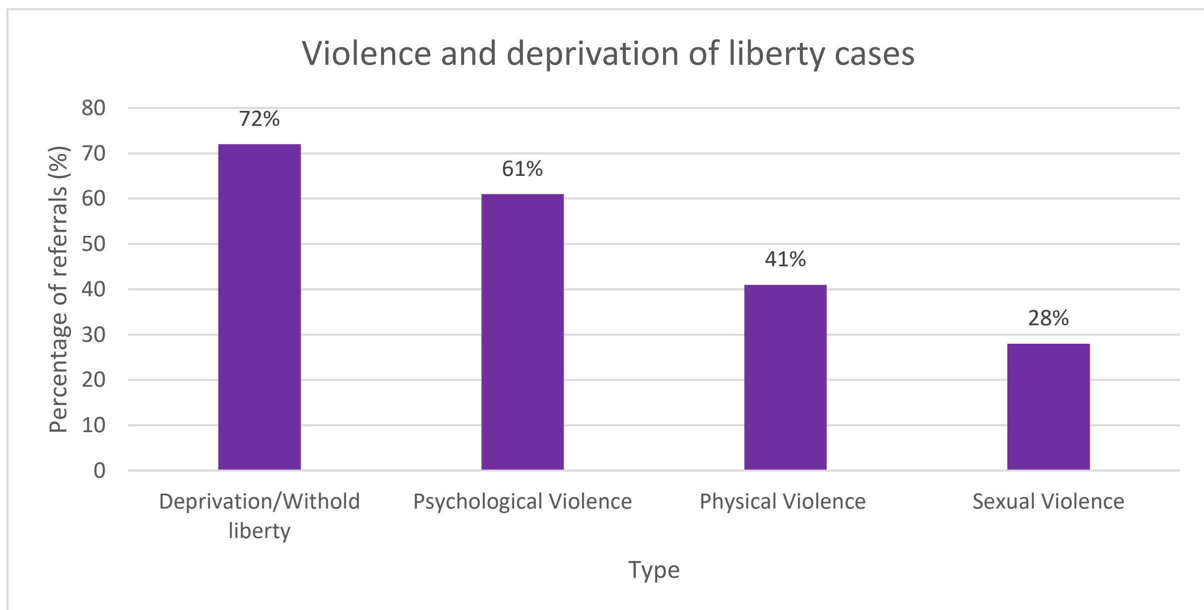


Figure 12. Highlights the number of referrals (N=115) which had identified violence or deprivation of liberty as a feature of the exploitation. Percentages are calculated from referrals which had at least one type noted rather than the whole sample.

As cuckooing was identified as the most common type of exploitation across Nottinghamshire, we undertook additional analysis to analyse the specific vulnerabilities identified within each cuckooing referral into the SERAC.

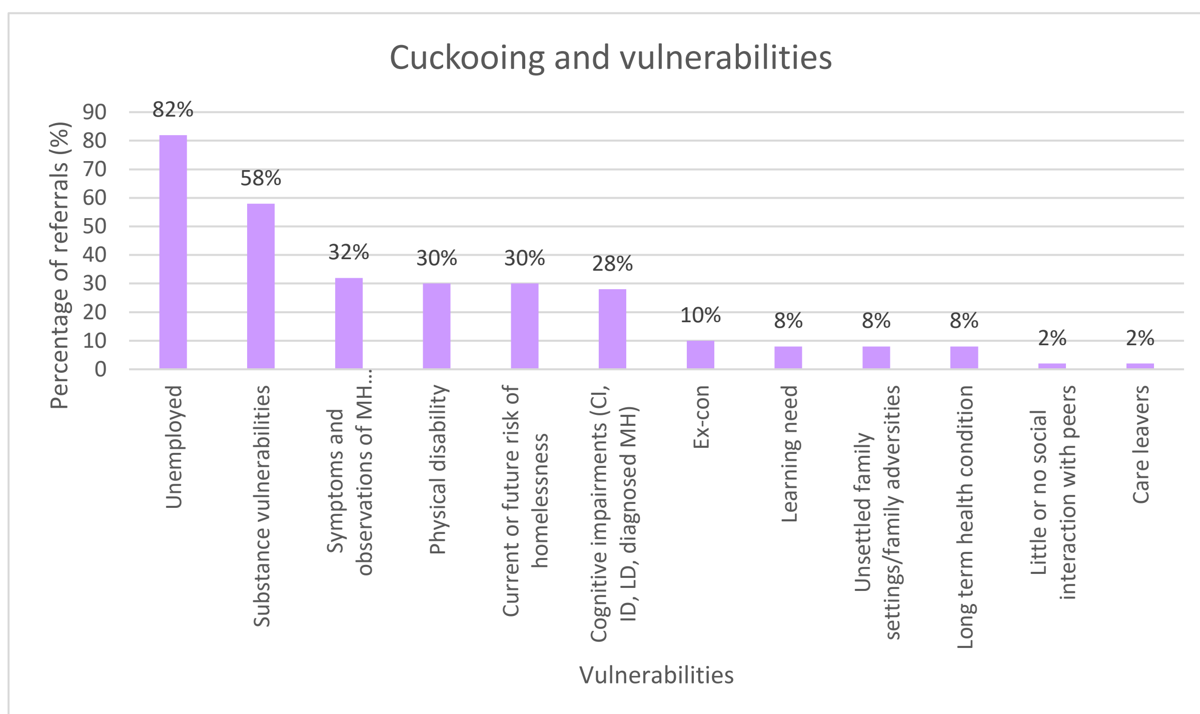


Figure 13. Highlights the vulnerabilities identified within each cuckooing referral. The analysis was based upon 50 cuckooing referrals.

Results suggested that 82% of cuckooing cases involved unemployment as a vulnerability. This was followed by 58% involving substance abuse vulnerabilities. Mental health vulnerabilities, physical disability, risk of homelessness and cognitive impairment were also present in between a quarter and a third of cases. Only 2% of referrals noted little or no social interaction with peers, which is perhaps surprising given the significance attached to loneliness and isolation in interviews, and raises questions on whether this factor is being recorded systematically.

Indicators of exploitation

When asked to outline some of the indicators of exploitation, professionals highlighted physical and psychological changes in those who they worked with. For example, psychological indicators of exploitation included victims becoming withdrawn, anxious and depressed. In some cases, victims displayed signs of aggression and confrontation with professionals who tried to intervene. Our respondents suggested possible reasons for this including feelings of shame upon realising that they had been taken advantage of and rejecting any intervention because of the fear of being left without a friendship group once again. In terms of physical changes, professionals stated that a decline in the victims appearance was often one of the greatest indicators of exploitation, i.e. deteriorating personal hygiene, changes in weight, and changes in body language and demeanour.

In cases of financial exploitation, the frequent ordering of new bank cards stood out as a sign of exploitation, with victims reported to be handing over their bank cards to perpetrators who had promised to return them and then failed to do so.

Some of the more complex and hidden signs of exploitation noted by professionals drew attention to the importance of trusting and long-lasting relationships between professionals and victims. For example, professionals suggested that an increased presence on the streets, mainly for females who participated in sex work, could indicate the presence of drug dealers, or other unfavourable activities, within the home. However this would only be recognised where support agencies had long-term relationships with individuals which enabled them to recognise these signs.

Perpetrators

Perpetrators of exploitation, were identified by professionals as members of criminal gangs, relatives, neighbours, friends and carers. Similar to the literature on mate crime, our respondents identified that friends and neighbours were often implicated in taking advantage of vulnerability, whether it was loneliness, the desire for an intimate relationship or a reliance on substances. Exploitation usually takes place in isolated environments where the activity remains hidden from the public view or intervention.

Our interviewees indicated that some perpetrators were intelligent individuals who knew how to groom, coerce and control victims, while others noted perpetrators as highly vulnerable people trying to navigate and manage their own vulnerabilities' (Housing Support Officer 2). While the literature would suggest that perpetrators of cuckooing are mainly organised criminal gangs – or drug runners - who take over the homes of vulnerable people for the purposes of facilitating in County Lines drug supply, our study revealed that perpetrators of cuckooing could be characteristically similar to their victims in terms of experiencing vulnerabilities. It was also noted that perpetrators, like their victims, may often not see the exploitation, or even intend for the relationship to be exploitative, yet their own mental health issues and drug dependencies meant that some of their survival mechanisms included harming other people. One participant reported:

> *You often get the slightly less vulnerable, exploiting the slightly more vulnerable. their intention is driven by not necessarily malicious intent, but more addictive or just wanting to block things out themselves.* (NGO Worker 3)

Professionals also highlighted the difficulty in identifying perpetrators of exploitation and securing prosecutions. Perpetrators were reported to be highly mobile and easily able to shift their activities to another location and victim if they perceived themselves to be subject to police monitoring and intervention. This could prevent enforcement agencies from collating evidence and catching perpetrators in committing a criminal offence, restricting their ability to apprehend perpetrators and end the cycle of exploitation. Cuckooing is not a criminal offence and interventions such as moving the victim to another property may have negative effects. The perpetrator is available to move onto another property and victim.

3. Intervention and safeguarding victims of exploitation

Professionals were asked to consider and discuss the measures that they could implement when they suspected cases of exploitation in those who they worked with. Conversations centred on their current safeguarding process, as well as some of the barriers which they faced supporting victims.

Current safeguarding processes

As noted above, the difficulty in apprehending perpetrators and securing prosecutions often meant that professionals could do little other than gather intelligence and manage risk when they suspected the presence of exploitation. One participant reported:

> *It's very hard for social care to sometimes step in. We have all these safeguarding meetings but unless there's horrific violence or obvious sexual abuse … it is a case of gathering enough evidence to be able to bring about some change, but it can be very hard*. (Learning Disability Nurse 1)

In such cases, professionals in local authority roles discussed increasing the number of visits that they would make to the victim, and ensuring that agencies, through the SERAC process, were making frequent trips to their properties. One of the issues with this related to funding and staffing numbers, whereby it was often not possible to increase the level of intervention that the victim was receiving. It was also highlighted that any interventions were usually victim-focussed, rather than perpetrator focussed. For example, in cases of cuckooing, police often applied Closure Orders to shut down the premises when cuckooing had been identified. The local authority could then assist in moving the victim to a different property, but this usually had a negative impact on the victim due to the upheaval, uncertainty and feelings of isolation that they are often left with upon being removed from the exploitative situation.

Respondents agreed on the importance of a multi-agency approach, whereby professionals could come together from across Nottinghamshire, all working in different capacities to support vulnerable people. Indeed, multi-agency working was highlighted by each of our participants as one of the most successful tools in identifying and responding to exploitation.

The aforementioned importance of having consistent relationships with service users and victims of exploitation meant that professionals could often identify exploitation early and put safeguarding measures in place to increase the level of intervention that victims of exploitation were exposed to. Lengthier periods of time spent with victims allowed for the development of relationships in which victims could begin to trust certain authority figures and open up about their exploitation, thus aiding services in building intelligence (Local Authority worker 2). Aside from direct intervention, some participants discussed instances in which they had tried to educate victims on inappropriate relationships, grooming and exploitation, however this was largely dependent upon having the necessary staffing levels and time to spend prolonged periods of time with victims (Learning Disability Nurse 2).

4. Barriers to safeguarding victims

Professionals were asked to consider the main barriers restricting them in intervening and safeguarding victims. Some responses included a lack of an understanding of trauma where, for example, victims presented with complex behaviours such as aggressiveness and confrontation which created barriers between victims and professionals and meant that some victims were perceived as not deserving of support.

Long waiting lists impacting upon the time it takes for interventions to be implemented sometimes resulted in victims who had once agreed to engage with services, withdrawing their consent upon receiving notice of a safeguarding plan. It was noted that for some victims, non-engagement is used as a survival mechanism. For example, in cases where victims are unable to open their own post or restricted from leaving the home, the potential consequences of discovery by the perpetrator could make seeking help too big a risk.

Concerns were raised over the reactiveness of interventions and in some cases, the exploitation not being severe enough to warrant support. Indeed, because of the difficulties in apprehending perpetrators and intervening in the absence of a criminal offence, professionals reported that it was often only after serious harm or violence had been inflicted that they were able to override the wishes of the victim and remove them from the situation.

> *It's how you manage the amount of harm a person is exposed to in the period of time it takes for changes to happen. The difficulty when it comes to things like capacity is you can't just restrict somebody's human rights without having cause to do so and that takes time to establish.* (Psychologist 1).

A significant aspect of professionals' inability to intervene was because of the victims' capacity to consent. In cases where victims did not see the exploitation and asserted that their perpetrators were their friends, and they had capacity to consent, professionals could be powerless to act. In these situations, professionals discussed gathering intelligence around the victim and perpetrator and increasing communication with, and surveillance of, the victim. One of our housing officer participants reported:

> *The Mental Capacity Act is a wonderful thing and it's done a lot of good things for a lot of people, but my experience with certainly the last two individuals I've been involved with, they had capacity, but they were making incredibly unwise decisions that were putting their health in such detriment that in one case it almost did lead to his death.* (Learning Disability Nurse 3).

Professionals who suspected the existence of mental health and learning disabilities shared their frustrations with General Practitioners (GPs) who had in the past given opinions that individuals did have capacity to consent, despite making health-harming decisions. Indeed, while it was accepted that GPs had the expertise to review capacity, there were frustrations raised by professionals who, through long-term relationships with service users, were able to identify where they had witnessed cases of deteriorating mental health but were unable to get a diagnosis that would allow them to intervene. There were some questions raised

around whether GPs were the appropriate individuals to be making mental health assessments.

Among the conversations about capacity to consent, tensions were raised between professionals wanting to safeguard victims and intervene to end the exploitation, but also acknowledging that such intervention can be harmful to victims in terms of restricting their liberty and independence. One mental health nurse cited a case in which agencies had moved a victim of exploitation to a more secure property, but in the process had taken away the victims independence and resulted in the de-skilling of that individual (Safeguarding Nurse 1).

Another barrier in supporting victims of exploitation, participants suggested, resided with a lack of understanding of how certain learning disabilities present in those who have them. Professionals noted that those with mild learning disabilities commonly remain unidentified because on the surface they can appear competent and able to understand their situation, as well as not meeting the criteria for social care support. Professionals emphasised the importance of questioning people with learning disabilities to ensure that they understand the answers that they give during assessments and meetings with services. For example, one learning disability specialist nurse informed us:

> *[One of our service users] had a mild learning disability [and was] very good at sort of sounding streetwise and sounding plausible and sounding like he would have capacity around friends and taking drugs. But actually he didn't and it became quite obvious quite quickly. [When] specialists services went in and scratched the surface of those answers that he gave, it all fell apart quite quickly that he actually was just repeating what people had said and [he had] learnt to say what people had told him to say* (Learning Disability Nurse 2).

Lastly, some participants asserted that there was a tendency for agencies to make assumptions and undermine victims' experiences, specifically those with cognitive impairments. For example:

> *People make assumptions, [for example] people with learning disabilities don't have sexual relationships, and people with a learning disability don't have access to drugs and alcohol. When they come for the annual health checks, when we talk about cervical screening for ladies, you'll often see them opted out straight away because they've never had sex, and you're like, how do you know that?* (Learning Disability Nurse 3).

Such assumptions also included professionals failing to question the red flags that they witnessed because they assumed that other professionals would be dealing with the exploitation. However some participants noted that this may also be because professionals did not know what options were available to them to safeguard victims, leaving them feeling powerless to act.

Barriers to victims seeking support

Participants were asked to discuss their views on who victims turned to when they needed support and the reasons why, in many cases, victims never sought help at all. Some of the reasons provided related to fear, feelings of shame, bravado, language barriers, and a mistrust of authority. The most common answer provided however, was that in most cases, the victim did not acknowledge the exploitation or see that they were being groomed or victimised. Returning back to the vulnerabilities mentioned previously, it was suggested by professionals that victims saw their perpetrators as their friends – largely because of their desire for social interaction – and even when the relationship was exploitative or inappropriate, it was an improvement on their previous feelings of isolation and loneliness. In cases where the victim did acknowledge the exploitation, professionals highlighted that there was a sense of hopelessness about what they could do to improve their situation. One NGO worker stated:

> *I think they do start to recognize it actually. And I think that a lot of the time it's because other members of the community are telling them. In their words they would say 'I know they're taking the piss out of me but what can I do?'* (NGO Worker 2)

When victims did acknowledge their exploitation, participants reported dealing with confrontation and aggressive behaviour because of what they believed were feelings of shame that victims were experiencing as a result of being taken advantage of. Victims also often directed blame at those responsible for safeguarding them because they had been moved away from what they deemed to be people who had provided them with a sense of belonging and friendship.

It is important to note that within criminal networks, there is a code of conduct restricting those involved in divulging information to the authorities. The stigma surrounding those who 'grass' or 'snitch' on perpetrators is unfavourable and can lead to violent retaliations. Participants also suggested that there was considerable stigma around being identified as vulnerable or a victim, as these labels carry negative connotations and are associated with weakness and failure. One local authority worker provided an example of this:

> *Nobody wants to be identified as vulnerable or identified as a victim, it's a horrible word, and it strips you of all sorts of empowerment.* (Local Authority Worker 2)

In terms of fear, it was suggested that victim sometimes failed to engage with services because they were fearful of the potential for further violence and abuse should their perpetrators find out that they had spoken to authority figures. In these situations it was easier for the victim to remain silent about their exploitation and not risk experiencing further harm. The harm that some victims experience cannot be understated. Professionals divulged cases that they had worked on where victims had been left with severe and life-changing injuries for life. For example:

> *I've worked with women who've had their ribs broken, who've had their jaws broken, who have had eye sockets damaged … strangulation and throttling. So there's a lot of*

> *very serious physical assault, threats and attempts actually of being set on fire as well.* (NGO worker 4).

There was also an acknowledgement that some victims do not report their exploitation through the fear that they will not be believed by services. This mainly related to cases where victims had criminal records and a history of substance dependence and would therefore not be identified as the 'ideal' victim (Christie, 1986) by those investigating the case. In some circumstances, perpetrators were deemed to be upstanding members of the community and, compared to their victims, were deemed to be much more credible in terms of trustworthiness and reputation (NGO Worker 3).

In cuckooing cases, victims harboured a fear over having their housing taken off them. This was made worse where drugs and antisocial behaviour were involved and where victims knew that they had been complicit in some of the activity either through force or initial willingness. Participants also raised frustrations that when victims had sought help, they had been met by professionals who had placed the onus on them to remove the perpetrators from their properties and rid themselves from the exploitation, even in cases where victims were living in fear (Housing Support Officer 2).

Many victims also held a deep mistrust of authorities due to previous negative experiences stemming from childhood. For example, those who had suffered from adverse childhood experiences were more likely to have been subjected to social care intervention that resulted in separation from their families, and such experiences, participants suggested could make victims resentful and unable to trust the organisations that were supposed to support them in times of need. Additionally, participants suggested that the majority of interventions resulted in criminal sanctions or interactions with the criminal justice system, rather than being supported through rehabilitation.

A small number of participants stated that one of the barriers facing victims with learning disabilities and mental health issues is finding services and professionals who understand their language, religion and culture. These participants provided examples in which victims of certain religious faiths had been given advice by professionals which went against the values of their religion and/or culture (NGO Support Worker 2).

5. Examples of good practice across Nottingham

Participants were asked to recall examples of good practice that they had witnessed during their work with victims of exploitation, either within their own organisation or across Nottingham. It is hoped that by documenting these examples, organisations can learn what works and implement measures into their own practice.

As previously mentioned, all participants across the sample discussed the success of multi-agency work and the partnerships that they had formed which had allowed them to better identify and respond to victims of exploitation. Through monthly multi-agency conferences, professionals were able to identify victims, discuss their vulnerabilities, gather intelligence about perpetrators and learn from evidence based approaches what had worked in other cases of exploitation and what had failed. Being able to liaise with professionals with a common goal often meant that participants felt supported and were able to openly reflect on how best to deal with complex situations that they had little experience of.

Participants in health settings discussed the positive impact of Speech and Language Therapists. These practitioners were identified as holding crucial roles in providing professionals with support in how to communicate effectively with victims with learning disabilities and how to better understand how learning disabilities can affect cognitive function. As well as Speech and Language Therapists, the inclusion of safeguarding nurses had provided health workers with a point of contact to liaise on certain cases and distinguish whether intervention was needed and how to approach the subject of exploitation with patients. Indeed, with the assistance of staff trained in exploitation, learning disabilities and safeguarding, participants highlighted how they had learned how to create safe spaces for service users to make disclosures. A specialist learning disability nurse explained:

> *It's about engineering time to ask important questions* (Learning Disability Nurse 1).

Such measures included finding opportunities to get patients on their own, something which was difficult when suspected perpetrators attended appointments with their victims. Health professionals were encouraged to adopt a professional curiosity and not always assume that those in attendance with patients had their best interests at heart. For example, some participants discussed cases of exploitation in which carers were the perpetrators of exploitation and, because of the position of power that they held, were rarely questioned.

Discussion and conclusion

What does the data suggest in relation to social determinants of resilience to exploitation?

Some factors highlighted in Gardner, Northall and Brewster's (2020) framework of social determinants of resilience against exploitation are visible within this study. For instance at a **structural** level the data shows that the majority of cases referred to Nottingham SERAC align closely with inner city areas associated with high levels of poverty, multiple occupancy housing, and social deprivation, indicating that these contextual factors correlate with vulnerability to exploitation.

There were some structural factors not currently represented in the framework which merit greater attention. In particular the study highlighted the importance of physical and mental disability as a factor contributing to the exploitation risk of individuals.

The data also suggested that unemployment was the most common vulnerability noted amongst SERAC referrals (possibly because it is more straightforward to identify and record than other more hidden vulnerabilities). Although our interviewees did not mention lack of employment as a risk factor during interviews, there are undoubtedly links between unemployment, social isolation, mental health issues, debt and poverty. The complex relationship between unemployment and exploitation therefore requires further attention and investigation.

At a **regulatory** level it was interesting to see that labour exploitation did not feature highly in the SERAC data that we were provided with, which mainly highlighted cuckooing, financial exploitation, and sexual exploitation (with criminal exploitation also represented more frequently among individuals with diagnosed cognitive impairments). Data from the National Referral Mechanism (NRM) indicates that criminal exploitation is the most common type of exploitation for children and young people across the UK, and labour exploitation is the most common type of exploitation for adults. During interviews our policing participant affirmed that county lines, drug cultivation and sexual exploitation were also highly prevalent in Nottinghamshire. Additionally, debt bondage only appeared in 3% of the referrals, although professionals in housing support roles discussed many of those who they had worked with as being drawn into a position of exploitation through owing a debt to somebody. According to Kenway (2021) debt bondage 'is when a person is forced to work to pay off a debt, with that debt usually being artificially inflated and extreme control over the individual' (2021: 104).

One reason for these apparent differences with national data may be that the NRM and policing pick up only the most serious cases of exploitation, and the SERAC looks more broadly at addressing exploitation that is perceived as complex or less-clearly justifying enforcement intervention. The data does, however, serve to illustrate the diverse forms of exploitation that are encountered by frontline agencies which fall outside the current legal framework offered by the 2015 Modern Slavery Act. Whilst these forms of exploitation may appear less extreme, SERAC data suggests they may still be associated with violence and

deprivation of liberty, representing significant harm to individuals experiencing multiple vulnerabilities. At present a range of multi-agency interventions and disruption activity can be used to address such abuses, but in some cases (such as cuckooing) provision of further enforcement powers could be beneficial.

Additionally, within the SERAC data a higher proportion of people with diagnosed cognitive impairments were reported as experiencing cuckooing, sexual exploitation, financial exploitation and criminal exploitation than in the wider sample, and there were lower levels of identified modern slavery and trafficking. Although the sample size for this group was relatively small (n=38) it raises a question as to whether labels such as cuckooing and financial exploitation may sometimes mask more serious elements of exploitation. This would be in line with suggestions from the literature that offences against people with cognitive impairment may sometimes be minimised.

The data from interviewees also highlighted that determinations relating to the mental capacity of individuals (relating to the 2005 Mental Capacity Act) as well as resource levels and thresholds for access to support services (such as social services and housing) can play an important role in determining whether potential victims of exploitation are offered timely support. One of the major causes of failing to identify the signs of exploitation in those with cognitive impairments – as identified in the literature and by our participants - was that those with mild or moderate cognitive impairments do not meet the eligibility criteria for social care intervention. Additionally, there may be issues around services perceiving victims to lack the necessary credibility in order for their experiences to be taken seriously. These regulatory and policy issues, which have both national and local elements, should be considered as important facets of resilience against exploitation in the UK context.

In common with the literature, and possibly prompted by the focus of our study, interviewees discussed learning disabilities more often than impairments associated with mental health problems or other issues. In the case of SERAC cuckooing cases, suspected mental health issues were as common as diagnosed impairments. The data therefore suggests that undiagnosed mental health issues may be a significant challenge, but perhaps one that is difficult to quantify or address due to challenges securing a diagnosis, particularly in cases where potential victims are not engaging with support. Again, this is an area that would benefit from further investigation.

At a **locality** level, the essential role of close multi-agency working and of supporting secure housing and related support services for potential victims of exploitation was underlined. This was partly due to the clear intersectionality of different types of vulnerability. Of the 147 referrals that we received data on, 40 experienced three vulnerabilities simultaneously, 22 referrals experienced two vulnerabilities at the same time, and 20 referrals experienced four vulnerabilities simultaneously. Unemployment was the most common vulnerability, intersecting with substance vulnerabilities and family adversity. Risk of homelessness was also commonly shared with other vulnerabilities. For example, 53% of referrals where substance vulnerabilities were recorded, were also reported as having a current or future risk of homelessness, as well as 52% of those with diagnosed mental health problems. This underlines the importance of a wide variety of frontline service professionals - including the

Department for Work and Pensions and housing organisations - being alert to potential for exploitation amongst vulnerable clients, and acting in concert with local partners to address emerging problems.

Interviews also underlined that organisations needed time and resources to build long-term trust relationships with those potentially vulnerable to exploitation, to aid in identifying the sometimes subtle indicators of exploitation. Building such relationships may be a challenge for professionals who are simultaneously struggling with short staffing and limited resources following a protracted retrenchment across the public and voluntary sectors. In addition many funded projects are time limited in their nature, and short-term funding can impact negatively on the ability to build long-term relationships with people experiencing multiple vulnerabilities. Providing support for such services therefore requires sustained local civic and political leadership.

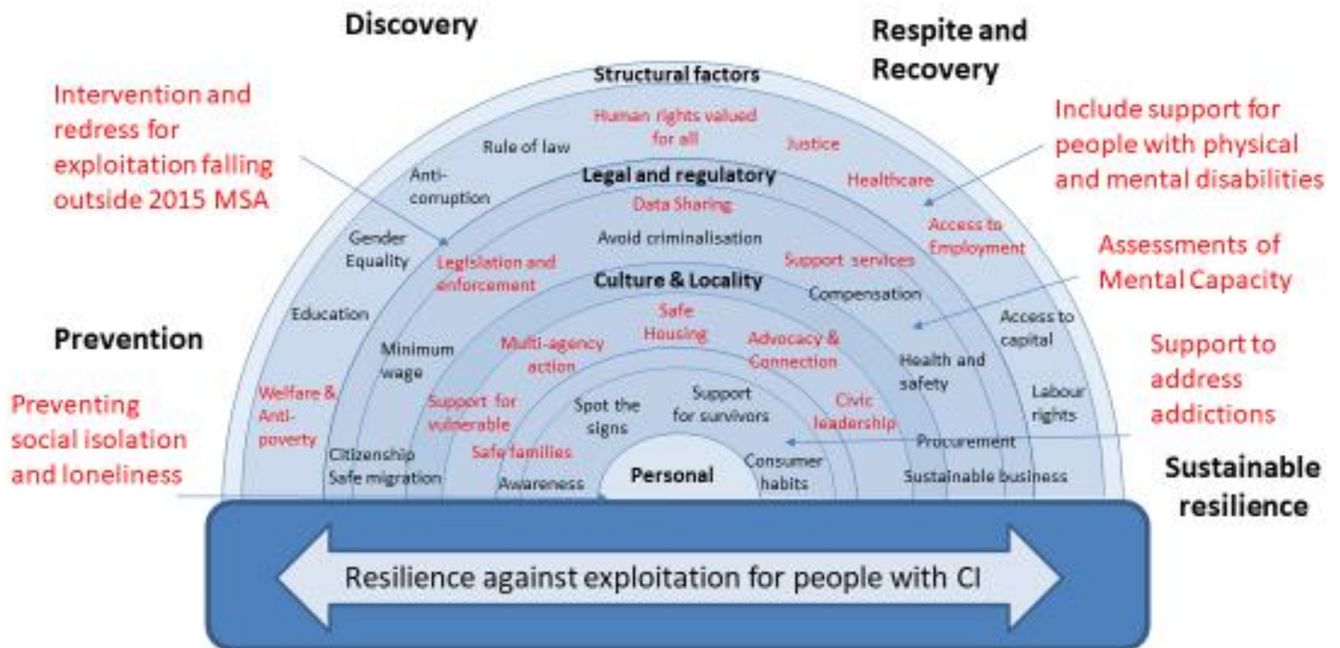
At the **personal** level, diverse factors combined in multi-layered ways to impact upon individuals' resilience against exploitation. The data indicated that age and gender were associated with greater, or lesser likelihood of experiencing certain types of exploitation. Life experiences such as being in social care, and cultural or religious stigma could impact on willingness to engage with support. Addictions and substance misuse seemed to be present in a high proportion of cases, and were probably also linked to identified cognitive impairments. According to our interviewees, the significance of these was not so much about the effects of specific factors, but the ways in which they combined to create a context of social isolation. Although the role of isolation and loneliness is well-established in learning disability and mate crime literature, there has been relatively little recognition of this vulnerability in relation to modern slavery and exploitation more generally, and this topic would also benefit from further investigation.

These factors have been added to a re-worked version of the Gardner, Northall and Brewster (2020) framework (figure 14 below) which also highlights the social determinants which have been found to be significant in this study (in red). Although SERAC data is unique to Nottingham, a wider study would be beneficial in understanding the degree to which these findings are applicable in England and the UK as a whole.

Recommendations for further research

1. Include the voices of people with lived experience in future research on cognitive impairments and exploitation.
2. Further examine the exploitation-related experiences of people with mild disabilities who do not meet the criteria for social care intervention.
3. Review the impact of the Mental Capacity Act and how professionals respond to victims of exploitation with cognitive impairments.
4. Explore characteristics of perpetrators and the vulnerabilities that they experience.
5. Consider the role that families play in providing support to victims of exploitation with cognitive impairments.
6. Future research should focus on the impact of loneliness and social isolation on susceptibility to exploitation.

Figure 14: Social determinants of resilience against exploitation with particular reference to the intersection with cognitive impairment



Annex 1: Policy and Practice Recommendations

Recommendations for the health sector

1. Safeguarding teams within the NHS need to work with learning disability specialists when reviewing relevant cases of exploitation.
2. Learning disability teams within the NHS should ensure that resources are available to employ speech and language therapists.

Recommendations for central government:

1. Long-term funding must be provided for statutory and voluntary services to resource multi-agency approaches to addressing exploitation, and to enable them to build trusting relationships with service users.
2. Policymakers should consider making cuckooing a criminal offence.
3. Victims of exploitation should not be required to provide consent for pressing charges. Prosecutors should also seek strategies that do not require victims' participation as witnesses.
4. Training on Modern Slavery and forms of exploitation should be required for those working with people at high risk of exploitation.
5. Perpetrator-focused interventions need to be developed and implemented, recognising that perpetrators often have similar vulnerabilities to victims.
6. Campaigns and resources should be developed to educate people at risk of exploitation on the signs of exploitation and grooming.
7. Increase funding for mental health services in order to reduce waiting times.

Recommendations for local government

1. Develop data recording to enhance clarity on types of exploitation and forms of cognitive impairment that are recorded.
2. Continue to explore funding opportunities and support multi-agency interventions against exploitation (such as the SERAC process).
3. Local Authority safeguarding teams should consider working with speech and language therapists in cases involving cognitive impairment.
4. Consider working with partners to develop further drop-in services for people at risk of exploitation, providing them with safe spaces when they need support.
5. Empower individuals affected to recognise exploitative situations. Enable front line staff to build trust-based relationships and use accessible language and terminology.
6. Target awareness-raising towards individuals with multiple risk factors for exploitation, as well as their friends, families, support services and advocates. Work with partners to provide preventative support.

Recommendations for third-sector organisations

1. Seek the advice and engagement of people with lived experience of exploitation to ensure that support services are appropriate and sensitive to culture.
2. Provide an online, accessible pathway for people accessing services to report concerns of exploitation.

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