Crime Prevention and Community Safety (2024) 26:266–284
https://doi.org/10.1057/s41300-024-00216-5

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

'It's a group-on-one': social disconnection as a tool of and defence against child criminal exploitation in the Republic of Ireland

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Accepted: 29 July 2024 / Published online: 13 August 2024

Abstract

Despite increasing evidence on the exploitation of young people into criminal activity, their perspectives on and experiences of exploitative processes are not well understood. Despite progress in Great Britain with regard to *'County Lines'* exploitation, and in the Republic of Ireland regarding youth criminality and grooming, the subjective accounts of how young people understand the phenomenon of child criminal exploitation (CCE) remain under-evaluated. This exploratory study captures the perspectives of Irish youth on CCE and draws on the theory of social capital to explore the social structures that enable CCE and the (limited) choices available to the young people.

Keywords CCE · Child criminal exploitation · Crime prevention · Violence · Youth crime

Introduction

Children being encouraged, enticed, or groomed into illegal activity is nothing new (Children's Society 2019; Deuchar et al. 2021), but the concept of child criminal exploitation (CCE) is a recent development, most notably gaining increasing prominence in the socio-legal sphere (e.g. Mastropolo 2014; Windle et al. 2020; Marshall 2022). In the context of England, Wales, and Scotland, this prominence has

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been traced to the mid-2010s with the rise of the phenomenon of *'County Lines'*. County Lines is 'a new and rapidly evolving illicit drug supply model which sees urban drug gangs cross police borders to courier heroin and crack cocaine to rural or coastal town' (Robinson et al. 2019, p. 695). In this business model, the gangs often exploit children and vulnerable adults to transport and distribute drugs (Maxwell et al. 2019; Dixon and Maclean 2023; Koch et al. 2023). In Northern Ireland (NI), the phenomenon became a policy priority after the Commissioner for Children and Young People there highlighted the role of CCE in the Spring 2021 riots (Walsh 2023b).

Meanwhile, in the Republic of Ireland (ROI), CCE has been documented in case studies of urban criminal activity (Hourigan 2011; Bowden 2019). In addition, the Greentown project detailed offending network connections of young people embedded and actively engaged in criminal behaviour. The project demonstrated that young people who are persistent and serious offenders tend to be recruited, trained, and embedded into local adult criminal networks, often through exploitative means (Redmond 2015; Naughton et al. 2023), and that approximately 1000 young people are affected nationally at any point in time (Naughton and Redmond 2017). As a result of the findings of Irish studies such as the Greentown Project (Dáil Éireann 2023b), the Criminal Justice (Engagement of Children in Criminal Activity) Act 2024 was recently signed into law. This act makes it a criminal offence for an adult to attempt to convince a person under the age of 18 to engage in criminal activity whether by force, deception or manipulation (Dáil Éireann 2024).

Child criminal exploitation, *'Possibility Spaces'*, and social capital

Previous studies on CCE have found that young people are coerced into a range of criminal activities from low-level anti-social behaviour to serious violence and the sale of illicit drugs (Murphy et al. 2017; Maxwell et al. 2019; Walsh 2023b). These exist on a spectrum of harm, with some young people involved in a more agile way, and others more acutely involved over time. The criminal exploitation of children and young people appears to be an effective approach for organisations and networks that are engaged in criminal activity to maximise profits control (Moyle 2019; Barlow et al. 2021; Deuchar et al. 2021). At the same time, criminal networks mitigate the risk against themselves, as younger people are more likely than known criminals to evade detection; more likely to face less severe and shorter-term sanctions; and can, in effect, camouflage criminal network leaders (Maxwell et al. 2019; Robinson et al. 2019; Barlow et al. 2021).

Understanding who is most at risk is a logical quest; however, Barlow et al. (2021) argue that there are no fixed variables to predict *which* young people will be recruited. Supporting Redmond's (2015) finding that context is not an inert backdrop, they find that CCE is a complex, emergent process that unfolds in *'possibility spaces'* (Barlow et al. 2021) where the needs of a perpetrator intersect with the characteristics of a child, as well as environmental conditions. The concept of social capital therefore presents a framework through which to analyse the aims of social

actors involved in CCE and the social structures that shape action within these *'possibility spaces'*.

Social capital refers to social resources that inhere in relationships and promote individual and collective aims (Coleman 1990). Coleman's (1990) theory of social capital cuts a path through the individual conceptualised as an over-socialised actor driven only by norms and expectations and as a purely rational actor, dictated by self-interest. Social capital resources include appropriable social structures (e.g. schools and community groups); norms (e.g. community-first ethos); obligations (e.g. favours and social debt); potential for information; and trust.

Social disorganisation (Coleman 1990), or the deterioration of relationships and social structures (Walsh 2023a), precipitates the loss of social capital in a community, exacerbating contextual harms that can create space for criminal exploitation. Lack of trust and social connection are also identified as risks to increased community crime in theories of social control, which look at communities' ability to signal and enforce appropriate behaviour (Groff 2015), and the related theory of social efficacy, which explores communities' ability to solve problems, particularly related to crime (Wilcox et al. 2017). The theory of social capital can frame the analysis of the mechanisms that underwrite and determine the direction of informal social control and social efficacy.

Despite the burgeoning interest in CCE, there remain relatively few studies that explore the issue from the perspective of the young people who are likely to be most affected by it (for notable exceptions, see McLean et al. 2019; Harding 2020; Marshall 2022; Koch 2023; Walsh 2023b), and there are none to date in ROI. Work to date on CCE has instead focused on issues such as factors that contribute to the young person's victimization (Naughton et al. 2023); harms that facilitate and result from CCE (Walsh 2023b); the interests of the perpetrators (Barlow et al. 2021); and potential interventions (Baidawi et al. 2020).

This study replicates work by Walsh (2023a) in which he explored CCE with young people from areas marked by high rates of organised crime activity. Further, it builds on a growing body of knowledge regarding CCE in ROI (Hourigan 2011; Redmond 2015; Bowden 2019; Naughton et al. 2023). This study expands the ROI knowledge base and explores the processes of CCE from the perspective of young people who are exposed to them. This study does not aim analyse drug markets or criminal groups in Ireland, nor does it seek to examine the experiences of young people who have been subject to CCE. The aim of this study is to explore how young people make sense of child criminal exploitation in ROI and to understand how they navigate communities and social environments where drug dealing and dangerous (including criminal) groups are prominent.

Methods

An exploratory, qualitative design was undertaken in line with Walsh (2023b). Locations, which were either rural towns or areas within a city, were identified based on recorded crime statistics (controlled drug offences in particular) and Youth Diversion referral data. While the authors accept that these are not a full-proof proxy

for clusters of organised crime, these data are a useful indicator for issues that are highly correlated with organised crime. To increase the probability that the locations identified were affected by organised criminality, they were then cross-referenced with media reporting on An Garda Síochána's *'Operation Thor'*, which targets criminal gangs and repeat offenders.

A purposive sample of young people were recruited from existing youth provision. As the only inclusion criteria were that they lived in the areas identified and were able to consent to interview, all young people who agreed to interview were included. Locations were screened at community-level. Following an initial email that also included an information sheet detailing the nature of the study, author one had a conversation with youth leaders from each identified location to: 1. confirm the presence of organised criminal activity and child criminal exploitation in the area and 2. participants' capacity to consent and to discuss experiences of CCE without over-disclosure. Where there were concerns for the safety of a young person (e.g. in cases where they were intimately connected to an organised criminal group), then they were permitted to interview privately ($n=2$). Recruitment of the young people was led by the youth worker. As mentioned above, inclusion (age 18 and under, capacity to consent) and exclusion criteria (non-English speaking, over the age of 18) were developed a priori. These young people are exposed to the practices of CCE by virtue of where they live, but have not necessarily experienced CCE themselves. Ethical approval was provided by the University of Limerick Faculty of Art, Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee.

Consent was gained in a multi-step process. First, youth workers were asked whether participants were able to participate and give informed consent. Next, youth workers were furnished with age-appropriate information sheets for parents and participants, consent forms for parents, assent forms for participants under 18 years old, and consent forms for participants aged 18. These forms were completed and provided to the researcher on the day of the focus group. All forms were checked before commencing the focus group. Finally, at the start of each focus group, participants were given a verbal explanation of the aims, risks, and benefits of the study, as well as a reminder that the session would be audio recorded. They were also reminded that participation is optional, that they did not have to answer any questions they did not want to and were free to leave at any time, and that they could withdraw their input in part or in full up to two weeks following the focus group. They were then asked whether they consented to participate.

Data collection

Four focus groups were held across the Republic in urban and rural town locations. Twenty-four young people consented to participate (fourteen male and ten female). In one location, two young people requested individual interviews. To protect their anonymity, their quotes are labelled in the same fashion as the focus group responses.

The study followed the same protocol as Walsh (2023b). Focus groups of thirty to sixty minutes were facilitated by the first author on youth service premises. Youth

workers remained onsite. The interview schedule had three sections: *About you* (What are you up to? What do you and your friends like to do?)*; about your community* (What is it like to live here? Are there gangs in the area?)*; and about CCE* (Do you know what it is? Does it happen around here?). After the first two focus groups, the protocol was enhanced with an activity prompt (Morgan et al. 2002). This depersonalised the issue of CCE, allowing participants to discuss without being wary of personal disclosures.

Data analysis

Conversations were recorded and transcribed verbatim by an external, professional transcriber. Data were then analysed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) (Braun and Clarke 2006; 2019). Authors one and two independently reviewed two transcripts and identified preliminary codes. They reviewed and refined these preliminary themes together to develop a shared understanding of the data and analysis as it reflects both on the case of ROI and the original study. Once in agreement, author one searched for, reviewed, defined, and named final themes. The core concept (Braun and Clarke 2019) across interviews was *disconnection*. In total, four themes were identified. These included: young people's disconnection from mainstream social capital; disconnection as the foundation of local social capital systems; disconnection as vulnerability to CCE; and young people's managed disconnection as a constrained choice.

Findings

Young people's disconnection from mainstream social capital

The local social order described by participants is marked by disorder and a lack of connection, with boredom and random violence looming large in their depictions of their communities. In general, they described their communities as '*boring*' or '*a kip*',[1] and they spoke of having little to do outside of their youth groups. Only seven of the twenty-four participants reported participating in another organised activity, such as sports or dance. The most common pastime was walking around, despite the danger they described. Meanwhile, state institutions that should offer structure and protection presented as another source of threat, leaving no meaningful recourse to authority when things go wrong.

For these young people, violence just happens, sometimes for no better reason than people being in the same place at the same time.

> Researcher: And then the dangerous groups what makes them dangerous?
> Participant: Just a load of them in a group about twenty of them…
> Participant: Intimidating like.

[1] 'Kip' is Irish slang for a place that is dirty, in disrepair, or otherwise not looked after.

Participant: Yeah, harassing people. …
Participant: [They] just start for nothing.

Focus group 1

Participant: So we can't travel much being from our neighbourhoods because we get a beatin'.

Focus group 2

The lack of safe places and things to do is particularly problematic for those young people whose home environment is unsafe.

Researcher: Okay, where would you feel safe around here?
Participant: In me gaff.
Participant: Nowhere.
Participant: Nowhere. Not even in me gaff.

Focus group 4

Consistent with previous studies (Swaner 2022; Walsh 2023b), police (or, in ROI, guards[2]) represented the state within these communities. All four groups demonstrated community-level cultural frames of 'legal cynicism', or the belief that police are illegitimate, non-responsive, and inadequate, which in turn negatively impacts on community efficacy (Wilcox et al. 2017). Three groups spoke of being searched or arrested seemingly at random or with disproportionate violence.

Participant: Me personally, I think the guards nowadays are horrible, the guards nowadays. Like if you dress a certain way you are getting, they're literally, you get searched for no reason. Like my younger brother was walking down the street one day and he was wearing his girlfriend's like Canada Goose jacket and got searched for no reason because of what he was wearing.

Focus group 4

Participant: There's guards come into people's houses right at half 6 in the morning and they get kids up out of the bed, wake the parents and all, for what? It's actually ridiculous.
Participant: (*Laughing*)
Participant: It's the scariest thing ever, getting woken up at half 6 in the morning.

Focus group 2

All four groups perceived a lack of protection from the guards (see also Policing Authority (2022)).

Participant: The guards are scared to go into the feuds, never mind them being any help.
Participant: You go to the guards about something.
Participant: Your house will get raided the next day.

Focus Group 2

[2] 'Guard' refers to a member of the Irish national police force, which is called An Garda Síochána.

Participant: There's this one post about these boys robbing a car and they screen shotted and put it in their Tik-Tok so they're basically, it's just a video confession. I don't know why they don't get caught because everybody can see that.

Focus Group 3

For these young people, not only are the guards ineffectual, bringing concerns to them creates a vulnerability to reprisals. The second quote demonstrates how brazen advertisement of criminal activity on social media reveals and deepens legal cynicism among young people in these communities.

School is another face of the state, and many participants reported feeling unsafe there. Two participants reported violence from teachers, and another described a lack of adult support.

Researcher: Okay, and you said school is unsafe, how come?
Participant: Yeah, there's just too many in my school that are bad. Like. It's not that anything would happen. There's just a certain group that would actually do anything, but I dunno. I just wouldn't feel safe.
Researcher: And are the teachers any help.
Participant: No.
Researcher: What do they do?
Participant: Nothing, you could tell them what's going on but they wouldn't do anything about it. And then they act like, if you brought it up with them, they would say you haven't done anything about this yet. They would try to turn it on you and try to make it like you haven't told them anything, but you have.

Focus Group 3

Half (12) of the participants reported being in alternative education, regular non-attendance, or not being in school.

Many participants *did* have at least one adult they could trust in their family (extended in some cases), and all four focus groups spoke warmly of their youth clubs and leaders. When asked what would help young people avoid CCE, three of the four locations recommended more youth groups.

Disconnection as the foundation of local social capital systems

Participants did not come to agreement on the organisation of dangerous or criminal local groups, nor on their connection to larger networks. When asked about gangs, the young people described *'your crew'*, *'your boys'*, cliques, or simply groups or crowds. Only one location spoke readily of gangs. The groups they described differed in their degree of threat and whether they engage in criminal offences (Ashton and Bussu 2020).

Researcher: Are there any gangs around here?
Participant: Not really.
Participant: Just groups, certain groups.

Researcher: What kind of groups?
Participant: Dangerous groups. …
Participant: It's like some are dangerous and some are not. …
Participant: There's proper gangs up in Dublin, not here.

Focus group 1

Nevertheless, participants clearly articulated how these groups maintain local power through violence, threat, and economic influence, creating a proximate system of social capital with its own norms, expectations, constraints, and benefits.

Participants described groups of mixed ages, from around nine into adulthood, made up of mostly boys and young men (Robinson et al. 2019; Baidawi et al. 2020). In contrast to a studies that describe the deterioration of place-based constraints on youth street groups (Ilan 2012; Deuchar et al. 2021), they formed largely based on location (Ashton and Bussu 2020). In one focus group, participants described hierarchical sub-grouping, and in three the focus on family structures and family feuds was evident (Hourigan et al. 2018; Naughton et al. 2023; Windle 2023).

Researcher: So who is in the gangs?
Participant: It's like one big gang and there's like smaller versions of that then. They kind of destroy the others on the steps…
Participant: It's like cliques.

Focus group 4

Researcher: And what about those families that you were talking about what are they, they are different from gangs are they?
Participant: Yeah, it's a different thing all together. It would be just you and your family, do you get me, it wouldn't be. I mean sometimes you know right. I'm just gonna say, for instance, if your family marries into another family and then your family starts fighting with another family that family will have to back you up. But if it's just your family and not married into anybody else then it's just your family.

Focus group 2

Participants described the norms and obligations, such as the collective liability (cf. Pyrooz et al. (2014)) described above, that these groups (whether familial or not) enforced in the communities. The most pervasive norm across all four groups is a prohibition on discussing the gangs' activities. '*Snitching'* or *'ratting'* (also known as '*grassing'* (Yates 2006)) has violent consequences that vary based on context.

Researcher: What happens if you rat?
Participant: You get stabbed to death. *(Laughing)* …
Participant: Probably get a beatin'. …
Participant: Yeah, could be bad.

Focus group 1

When asked what they thought of the forthcoming Criminal Justice Act, respondents at three locations argued that the risks associated with ratting meant that victims

were unlikely to cooperate (see also Stone (2018) for a discussion on the dangers for child CCE witnesses).

> Participant: I couldn't do that as well because my house got robbed just two years ago or last year, and we know who the people are but the guards wouldn't do anything. I didn't want to snitch or anything because, like, it would come back on us. Because they would come back and break the windows. Because it's happened before.
>
> *Focus group 3*

The remaining location simply said it would be difficult to prove. The enforcement of norms and obligations is facilitated by an advantage gangs possess in terms of structural social capital: they are members of a group whereas victims act as individuals.

> Participant: I think they are just scared what's going to happen if they don't listen. Because at the end of the day like, there's big groups. It's not as if they are in a one-on-one situation. It's a group-on-one. Like they feel they have to or else they get jumped.
>
> *Focus group 3*

Whether the dominant groups are organised crime gangs, feuding families, or simply a group of (mostly) boys, the young people in this study are closely attuned to the power they wield in the community and the threat of violence that reinforces practices of silence and disconnection.

Disconnection as vulnerability to CCE

The participants were hesitant to discuss CCE in their areas. Nevertheless, the profile of CCE that emerged from their descriptions aligned with research from other jurisdictions (Robinson et al. 2019; Baidawi et al., 2020; Ashton and Bussu 2022; Walsh 2023b). All four locations described how young people are exposed to criminal activity in their communities, social groups, and sometimes homes, and how, over time, this exposure institutionalises norms and expectations to participate in illegal activity (Berger and Luckmann 1966; Ashton and Bussu 2022). Participants identified social disconnection as a key vulnerability.

> Participant: Like sometimes the older people can threat the younger people and say 'Oh, I'll do this to your daughter,' or 'I'll kill you,' or 'I'll catch you on the street or something if you don't do it.' And they are probably afraid of them and don't want to say no and have no one to go to, to talk about it to people like.
>
> Focus Group 4

With the exception of one focus group, participants did not demonstrate recognition of the phrase *'Child Criminal Exploitation'*. Once presented with a description of CCE that drew on key points from the proposed law (i.e. that people (often older)

take advantage of children and young people, enticing or compelling them break the law) (Dáil Éireann 2023a), three focus groups agreed that CCE was prevalent in their areas and bound up with the drugs trade.

> Researcher: What were you saying there, what kind of things would they ask kids to do?
> Participant: Like probably go around dealing with them or something…
> Participant: They can't get in trouble because they are kids. They're probably on their last warning so they get people that are young than them….
> Participant: But if people go around dealing for them they will get rewarded for it like you know what I mean.
> Participant: They get money out of them.
>
> Focus group 1

Participants described practices that put young people on the front lines of the drug trade including the sale of drugs; recruitment of runners via social media (Robinson et al. 2019); and small 'asks' such as to carry, hide, or deliver items, including drugs, going to the shops, and keeping an eye out for the guards (police) (Bowden 2019; Walsh 2023a). One young person explained that these minor tasks were how some young people became accustomed to assenting to the requests of older and more involved members.

The young people in all four focus groups insisted that everyone has a choice as to whether or not to get involved in gang activities. Yet they allowed that certain social situations (Baidawi et al. 2020) and unmet needs (Beckett 2019) increased the risk of CCE.

Participants emphasised that constant exposure to gangs and criminal activity was one key mechanism of CCE. This context created significant risk (Maxwell et al. 2019) and was elevated further when peers were criminally involved (Ashton and Bussu 2022).

> Participant: The usual just bad crowd. That's usually how it starts.
>
> *Focus group 3*

As found in the Greentown studies (Naughton et al. 2023), kinship ties could be powerful factors.

> Participant: It's a family business. …
> Participant: When you see your ma and da doing it you want to do it. …
> Participant: You're gonna think it's cool.
> Participant: It's in the game.
> Participant: Yeah.
>
> Focus group 4

As found in other studies, the young people discussed the *'pul'* factors for criminal activities, including money (Mastropolo 2014; Policing Authority 2022; Swaner 2022); an *'adrenaline rush'* (Ashton and Bussu 2020), and status (Ashton and Bussu 2022; Mastropolo 2014; Redmond 2015). Focus groups also described young people undertaking illegal activities for safety (Pitts 2008; Swaner 2022; Walsh 2023b).

In the resulting exchanges, obligations could be met with sex, violence, or work. Child sexual exploitation (CSE), rather than being a distinct form of abuse, appeared to be inter-related with young people's understanding of CCE (Baidawi et al. 2020). Furthermore, participants described how some young people could become more vulnerable to CCE and CSE via the mechanism of drugs supply and drug-related debts (Murphy et al. 2017; Bowden 2019; Policing Authority 2022), though the participants did not name this connection themselves.

Two focus groups explained that rejecting invitations to deal drugs can be met with threats of violence. Participants believed that once a young person has set a precedent of compliance, however, small, it is then impossible to refuse, affirming the Greentown finding that obligations deepen over time (Department of Children and Youth Affairs 2016). Given that the young people do not feel like they have anywhere to turn when they are under threat, that initial refusal presents a particularly high-risk choice. The single most agreed upon vulnerability to violence and criminal activity was to be '*hanging around*' or '*larking*', particularly alone (Barlow et al. 2021; Walsh 2023b).

> Researcher: So has anybody you know been threatened or attacked by any of these gangs?
> Participant: Yeah, if you are caught on your own.
> Participant: If you are caught larking. (laughing)
>
> Focus group 1

> Researcher: Yeah, fair enough, are there certain kinds of people who are more likely to get pressured than others?
> Participant: Yeah.
> Researcher: What are they like?
> Participant: People that hang around. Like whenever the bad crowds tell them to do something, they do it, and it just makes them look vulnerable.
>
> Focus group 3

In another group, participants described young being approached by strangers and invited to sell drugs for cash or have sex for drugs, and as discussed above, all four groups described violence as a constant risk for simply being out and about.

Previous studies have highlighted the role of social media (Maxwell et al. 2019; Dando et al. 2022; Dixon and Maclean 2023; Walsh 2023b) in CCE. Participants did not raise the issue themselves, though two groups confirmed that it is used for recruitment of runners through their body placement during the moveable debate. However, neither group would be drawn on the issue for reasons that were unclear. In general, the groups were more forthcoming on issues and events that took place in public places rather than private spheres such as their homes, within their own social groups, or on their phones.

Young people's managed disconnection as a constrained choice

The young people in this study described a social world rife with contradictions when it comes to social connections. Groups dominate public spaces, making connection difficult through violence and a culture of silence. State institutions that are meant to facilitate social action, namely police and schools, are perceived to be weak and untrustworthy at best. While close relationships provide some protective support, participants identified a managed form of disconnection as the primary means of exerting agency within the constrained options available to them. This disconnection isolates them further, but also insulates them from danger. As shown above, isolation can also create vulnerability, so some young people maintain a degree of connection to the events of the street to preserve proximate social capital such as tacit knowledge, timely information, and safety.

With the exception of one focus group who described themselves as friends, participants spoke of passing time in smaller groups and feeling safest in private spaces. For all four locations, their youth club was a universally accepted safe space. Many said they prefer to keep to themselves (Miller et al. 2015).

> Participant: You just basically stick to yourself. So like you don't cause harm to yourself or cause harm to your family. Because things can get really overheated here in the summer…. *(laughing)* when there's fighting around here.
>
> Focus group 2

Keeping quiet and abiding by the prohibition against ratting is another tactic the young people employ to keep themselves out of the fray (cf. Department of Children and Youth Affairs (2016) for a discussion of '*stoicism*' in the face of criminal groups).

> Researcher: How do you not be involved?
> *(crosstalk)*
> Participant: Being a vegetable. Just don't talk.
> Participant: Yeah.
> Participant: Yeah.
>
> Focus group 4

All four locations demonstrated the omerta of the streets *within* the focus groups. One group refused to discuss CCE in their community at all. In the others, participants called each other *'Snitch'* or shouted *'Shut up!'* to signal over-disclosure. In the two most forthcoming groups, participants expressed concerns over what might happen if anyone found out about the conversation, saying that they would be *'fucked'* or *'people would be angry'*.

At the same time, participants needed to maintain enough of a connection to events of the street to keep themselves safe. For instance, deciphering social situations and people's roles requires tacit knowledge that can best be gleaned via social interactions (Reagans and McEvily 2003). That sort of difficult-to-articulate knowledge was in evidence in the groups' explanations of how they knew someone was involved in dealing or gangs.

Participant: Like we wouldn't really know any drug dealers but like we can tell, we can tell from a mile away.
Participant: You can tell if they are a dealer.
Researcher: How can you tell?
Participant: Just by their, I don't know, you can judge a book by its cover.
Participant: Like the way they act or smell.

Focus group 1

In addition, a young person would rely on social contacts for timely information in order to know if an event or a place was likely to be unsafe.

Participant: My town is fine, it's just some people that you'd need to be aware of, but it is a small town so if there was anything to happen you'd know about it straight away. So you would have time to like go and hide if you needed to, which you might need to. But not a lot happens in there. Just every odd couple of months probably something would happen the whole town would talk about it.

Focus group 3

Finally, maintaining light social connections with members of gangs can provide a degree of safety.

Researcher: Okay, and if you yourself were having trouble with a friend or something on the street or anything like that would you have someone to talk to about it?
Participant: Like if anything bad happened?
Researcher: Yeah.
Participant: Eh…probably the boys in the gang.
Researcher: Really?
Participant: Yeah, because my brother was also linked up with them and something actually did happen in town with me a long time ago. Basically, someone started with me in town. And like it was sorted out by them people. Because like we have connections, we know.

Focus group 4

For many of the young people in these focus groups, a degree of self-imposed isolation was the only way to stay out of the fray. At the same time, local survival required a minimum degree of proximate social capital, which can only come from managed links with the groups that dominate the streets.

Discussion and conclusion

Child criminal exploitation presents an enduring problem for communities affected by the activities of organised crime groups. It is one way that criminal gangs and networks indoctrinate new members (Naughton et al. 2023) and solidify their local dominance. In ROI, the stakes and dangers may continue to grow, as crime networks continue to progress into the transnational drug trade (Windle 2023). This

study set out to capture a profile of CCE as it is understood by young people who live in neighbourhoods where CCE happens most often, situating those understandings within their understandings of local social contexts. It adds their accounts of their everyday constraints and practices to the conversation about policy and interventions.

The findings in this study demonstrate how local groups engaged in criminal activity capitalise on a lack of mainstream social capital available to a community (Ilan 2012; Swaner 2022) in order to establish a local social order that reinforces their own dominance (Hourigan 2011; Department of Children and Youth Affairs 2016). The young people in this study regarded An Garda Síochána as both a potential threat and an ineffectual service, echoing previous findings on legal cynicism in disadvantaged communities (Wilcox et al. 2017). As well as that, many participants did not participate in mainstream education, and many felt unsafe there, both of which are factors predictive of vulnerability towards criminal behaviour (Liston 2022; Roh et al. 2022). The absence of perceived support from mainstream social structures creates space for alternative sources of social capital, which include informal sources of social control (Feenan 2002).

These proximate systems, instituted by dominant groups and networks, draw on violence, norms, and expectation to make it difficult, and sometimes dangerous, for children and young people say *'no'* to members of these groups (Barlow et al. 2021; Bowden 2019; Naughton et al. 2023). The participants in this study explained that the more disconnected and at a loose end a young person is, the more vulnerable they are to CCE (Baidawi et al. 2020). The power that dangerous groups and networks wield is found on a prohibition on snitching, which makes silence in the face of adversity the most pragmatic choice for residents young and old (Yates 2006). This culture of silence makes sharing any information a liability rather than a social good, subverting mainstream social capital mechanisms and further cutting off young people's access to support via public services as well as via social bonds.

Recent census results indicate that relative social disadvantage is spatially entrenched and that the deprivation gap is widening in ROI (Pobal 2023). This suggests that the challenges associated with competing systems of social capital within disadvantaged communities (i.e. mainstream and proximate) will continue to deepen without direct intervention from the state. Young people in these communities face a double-bind (Swaner 2022), where they are disconnected from mainstream social capital, but taking advantage of proximate social capital is both dangerous and likely to exacerbate their mainstream structural vulnerability (see also Ilan 2011; 2012). In response, participants actively managed their social disconnection, withdrawing from the street, but also from other relationships and organisations. This echoes findings from a Scottish study that found isolation to be a '*resilience strategy'* among young people in disadvantaged communities (Miller et al. 2015).

This withdrawal, while effective in preserving near-term safety, has the potential to cut off other relationships that can provide access to diverse social capital, which can be effective in pursuing social aims, such as job-seeking and career development (Granovetter 1973; 1983). Furthermore, a lack of social cohesion among those trying to avoid criminal activity only serves to deepen the relative advantage of the dangerous groups while also decreasing community efficacy (Coleman 1990; Wilcox et al. 2017).

In contrast, pro-social friend groups can act as a protective factor for young people (Roh et al. 2022) and youth services can provide structure and opportunity to participants (Jarrett et al. 2005; Miller et al. 2015). Previous research has found youth work to be a source of social capital, particularly for young people in areas of entrenched disadvantage (Jarrett et al. 2005; Miller, et al. 2015). As in those studies, youth services in this research connect young people with supportive adults, providing social capital in the form of information and assistance towards their goals, as well as exposure to new opportunities and social networks. The findings of this study support Kilkelly et al.'s (2023) conclusions that positive outlets and environment as well as access to adequate supports and services are important for helping young people avoid contact with the youth justice system.

The concept of CCE was not something that participants easily engaged with. It was evident that the idea of exploitation was not universally accepted, even if the practices were recognised. Participants were adamant that despite the power differentials they must navigate, they still retain agency in the face of pressure from their peers and other groups. This resonates with Marshall's (2022) findings that young people subject to CCE describe their decisions as taking place within constrained and structurally circumscribed contexts—neither entirely free, nor under the total pressure of exploitation. These findings raise serious concerns, given that other research on CCE has demonstrated that practitioner and policy understandings of '*victimhood*' that require young people to have been passive participants run the risk of service providers withholding necessary supports from young people not deemed '*passive enough*' (Moyle 2019; Marshall 2023).

This study has shown how proximate systems of social capital, found on silence surrounding criminal activity, create a culture of disconnection that facilitates CCE and threatens young people's opportunities for socio-economic inclusion while also undermining community efficacy. When youth offending arises out of the seedbed of social exclusion (cf. Ilan 2011), finding ways to talk to young people in positions of structural vulnerability that resonate with their own understandings of their lives is critical to empowering them without reproducing abusive power dynamics (Beckett 2019; Appiah et al. 2021). Previous work on CSE has found that this means acknowledging and supporting their agency (however, constrained) while also taking into account the harms they can experience as a result of exploitative relationships (Canning et al. 2023).

Limitations

While this study makes important inroads into young people's understandings of child criminal exploitation in ROI, it does have limitations. Both key limitations arose as a result of balancing the intention to build an understanding of CCE as experienced by young people with the social risks of over-disclosure that emerge in a group format. Firstly, due to the public nature of the focus group format, it is likely that some young people tempered their responses. In fact, this was visible in their body language during the focus groups. Rich personal narratives (such as those that emerged in the two one-on-one interviews) were not accessible in a group

format. One implication of this is to consider the methodologies that could enhance the safety of young people to engage in important and focused conversations around issues that affect their lives. That said, participants gave robust descriptions of and engaged in critical conversations with each other about their social worlds.

Secondly, it was evident during the focus groups that the participants in this study had all been exposed to CCE practices, but may not have been subject to CCE themselves. This was not explored, and when some youth intimated a personal experience, the interviewer steered away from any disclosures. In this way, knowledge of some of the mechanisms and practices of CCE were sacrificed for the sake of participant safety. Nevertheless, their understandings of their everyday lives are a clear demonstration of the social structures that facilitate CCE. Finally, this study focused on communities with organised crime activity. However, CCE is often, but not always, associated with criminal groups and networks (Baidawi et al. 2020). Opportunities for future research in ROI include interviews with young people affected directly by CCE and further investigations of the social functions of organised crime groups in communities.

Acknowledgements Thanks to Prof Sean Redmond, Dr Catherine Naughton and the Northern Ireland Cross Executive Programme on Tackling Paramilitarism and Organised Crime for their advice

Funding This project was funded by the Higher Education Authority of Ireland's North/South Research Programme.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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