CECAN Webinar: Embracing complexity - Using systems thinking to improve responses to child criminal exploitation

Lessons from and for system thinking in public service delivery

Tuesday 9th July 2024, 13:00 – 14:00 BST

Presenter: Jo Reilly, Visiting Scholar, Centre for the Future of Intelligence, University of Cambridge

Welcome to our **CECAN Webinar.**

All participants are muted. Only the Presenter & CECAN Host can speak. The webinar will start at **13:00 BST.**

Jo will speak for around 40 minutes and will answer questions at the end.

Please submit your questions at any point during the webinar via the Q&A box in the Zoom webinar control panel.
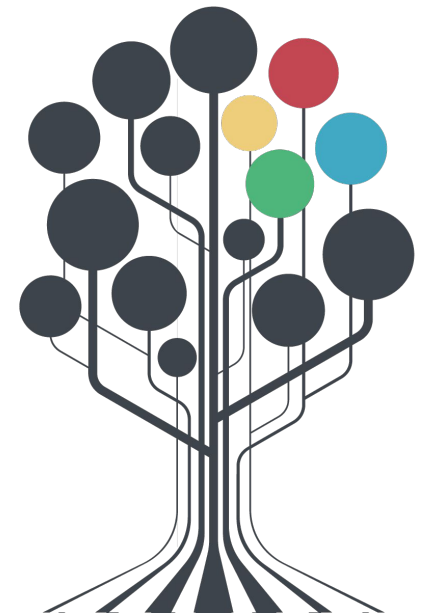
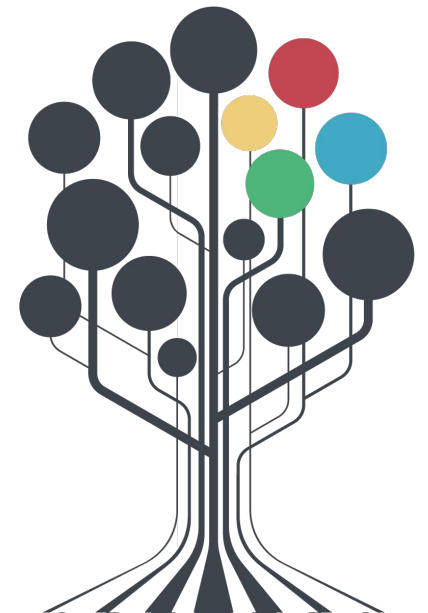Today's webinar will be recorded and made available on the CECAN website.

Child criminal exploitation (CCE) refers to the selection, recruitment and control of a child in order for the child to commit crimes for and on the behalf of another.

The exploitation of the child is dependent upon an imbalance of power in favour of the perpetrator who controls the child in order that they commit crimes "by proxy."

Children who are being exploited often experience multiple different types of exploitation. These can include production and conveyance of drugs, forced labour, forced stealing or begging, holding of weapons or money, sexual exploitation.

Children will not always recognise that they are being exploited.

Sometimes it is more appropriate to talk about Risk in the Community rather than exploitation. Not all crime that children are involved in / harmed by will be related to exploitation.

Systems thinking can help us understand the problems we are trying to solve and design solutions which are more likely to address the core issue rather than a symptom.

When we think about systems we are trying to understand how **structures relate to behaviours**.

A system is a set of things interconnected in such a way that they produce their own pattern of behaviour over time.

The behaviour of a system cannot be understood just by knowing its constituent parts. You need to understand the **interconnections** – the relationships which hold the parts together in a way that achieves something.

A system is unlikely to change its behaviours while its interconnections and purposes remain the same. **Changing an element in the system will only alter its behaviours if that change in element also changes the interconnections and / or the purpose.**

When systems seem to be stuck in problematic patterns of behaviour and multiple policy fixes fail, this often indicates that its **sub-systems have contradictory goals.**
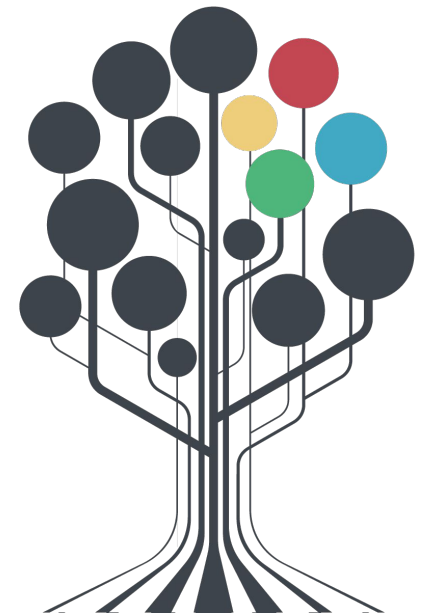
Tackling exploitation requires a multi-faceted approach

1. **Vulnerability:** what makes some children and adults particularly vulnerable to exploitation? What can be done to reduce their vulnerability? How can we support them to safety and recovery?

2. **Criminal Business Markets and Models:** how do we understand the criminal ecosystems which incentivise and reward the exploitation of children and vulnerable people?

3. **Spaces:** which environments are conducive to exploitation? How do we reduce access to vulnerable children and remove / reduce some of the enablers of exploitation?

Too often policy and operational responses to exploitation focus only on point 1. Effective responses to exploitation need to address all 3 points.
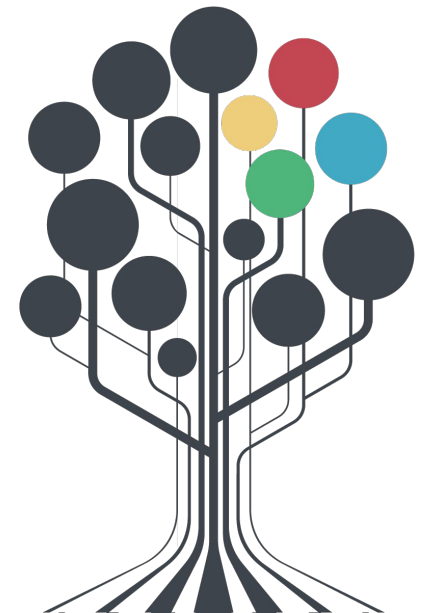
# Children are vulnerable to exploitation for a variety of reasons.

A child's vulnerability to exploitation changes over time and can be context specific.

When considering someone's vulnerability attention needs to be given to;

- Risk factors - e.g. poverty, adverse childhood experiences
- Protective factors - e.g. trusted relationships, positive validation
- Environment - e.g. exposure to Organised Crime Groups
- The individual child's own coping mechanisms and resilience

Every child needs safe adults who know them, can recognise early changes in their behaviour, and knows where and how to flag concerns.

Adults who children trust (and who they are therefore more likely to confide in) are often not the people we might identify as key agents in systems as we design them.
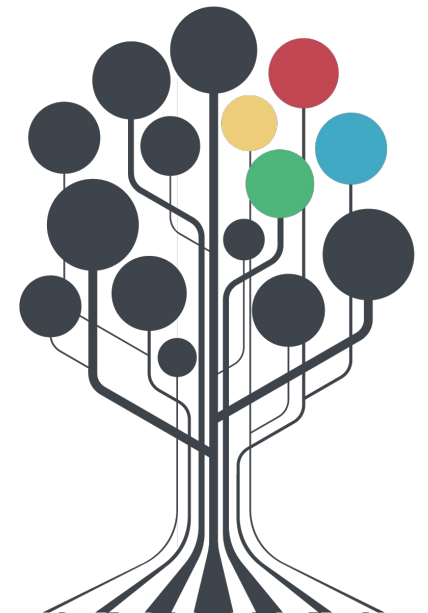
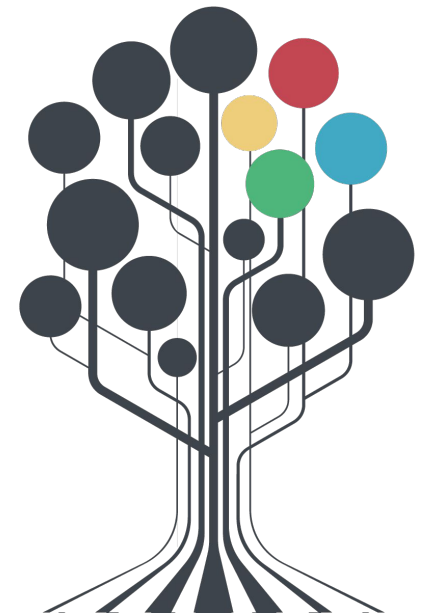# Understanding exploitation requires us to understand coercive control

Despite domestic legislation and international conventions, children and vulnerable adults who are being exploited continue to be arrested, charged and prosecuted.

We need frontline practitioners to better understand the relational dynamics of exploitation, in particular coercive control.

Behaviour that is perceived as problematic can often be symptomatic of exploitation.

Someone does not have to be in the room with you to exert coercive control over you. Once coercive control has been established, it is not easy to break free from it.

You do not need to have experienced serious violence to live in fear of serious violence. Violence is often wielded strategically as a tool to maintain coercive control.

Understanding crime ecosystems requires us to focus on incentives

Given the significant amounts of money involved, disruption activity alone is unlikely to significantly alter the incentives to exploit children and vulnerable adults. We need to think about how we can better use legislation / regulation to fundamentally change the operating environment for crime ecosystems.

Who is being exploited where? These are complex multi-level networks. Many of those exploiting children will have experienced exploitation themselves / will still be experiencing exploitation.

The risk of arrest / prosecution / conviction for those in the upper echelons of crime ecosystems is relatively low. The risks involved are more often experienced by those in lower levels, who are often being exploited themselves.
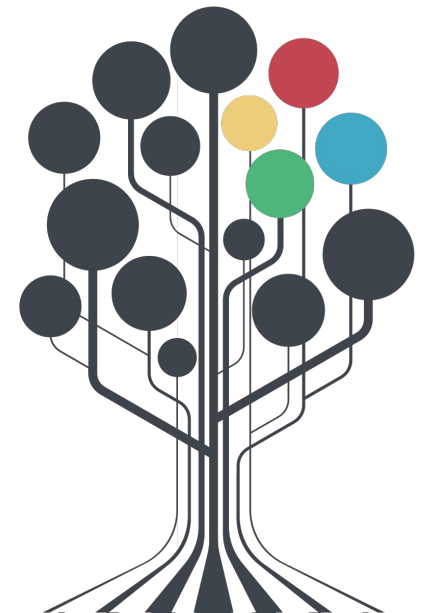
Disruption activity can displace risk rather than remove it.

If we don't map out the possible ripple effects of our interventions, monitor for these, and be willing to adapt approach as needed, we may inadvertently displace risk to more hidden, harmful places.

Unstable crime ecosystems are more violent than stable crime ecosystems; we need to plan for the consequences of our interventions.

We need to consider the incentives off all key agencies involved. For example, what kind of behaviour does the current police performance framework incentivise? How do we guard against short-term wins inadvertently blocking opportunities for long-term strategic gains?

Tackling exploitation requires community engagement and buy-in. How do we ensure that the various professional agencies involved work together with communities to safeguard children and vulnerable adults? Arguably current processes and infrastructure (e.g. MACE panels) are not delivering their intended benefits.
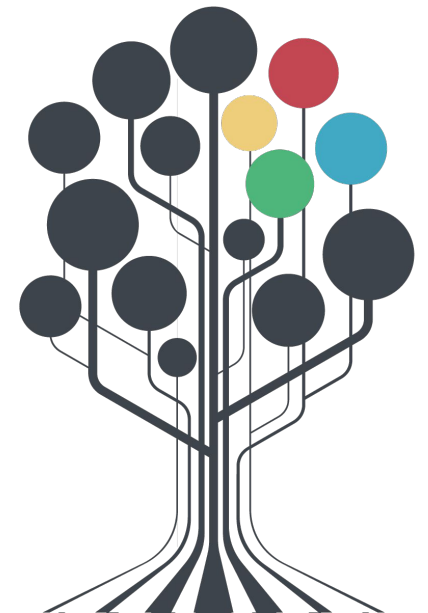
Building community resilience to exploitation would have other benefits

Building community resilience to exploitation requires us to limit access opportunities to vulnerable children.

This would require:

- Reductions in child poverty: children who are experiencing deprivation can be easier targets for would-be exploiters
- Reductions in children not in education, employment or training
- Better support for children in care / care leavers
- More accessible safe spaces for children to spend their free time: children who are hanging around with nowhere to go are easier to access, we need to offer spaces where children want to be
- More safe adults able to spot signs grooming / exploitation: particularly those who may come into contact with exploited children - retail workers / fast food workers / taxi drivers
- Children and care-givers more aware of signs of grooming and coercive control
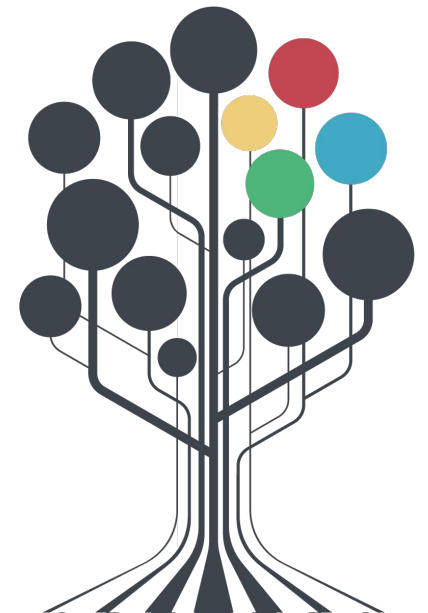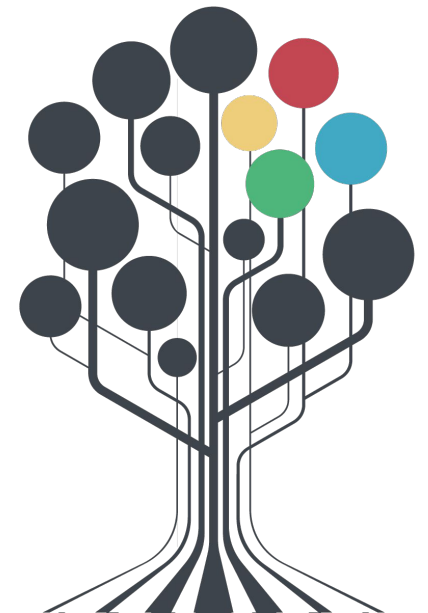
Progress is Possible!

There is sometimes concern that systems-thinking approaches can demonstrate the complexity of problems but don't offer much in terms of solutions.

Tackling child criminal exploitation is undoubtedly complex, but progress is absolutely possible.

Nothing discussed in this presentation are things we don't know how to do - the challenge lies in aligning priorities / coordinating activities / planning for the long term. These are often soft problems rather than hard or messy problems - if we are able to generate sufficient political will significant progress could be made.

Public services are in crisis, but the need to do things differently also offers opportunity. We should feel hopeful and determined, rather than overwhelmed.

Suggested Further Reading

- Circles of analysis: a systemic model of child criminal exploitation by Craig Barlow, Alicia Kidd, Simon T. Green and Bethany Darby

- Contextual Safeguarding, HMIP report by Carlene Firmin

- Against Youth Violence: A Social Harms Perspective by Luke Billingham and Keir Irwin-Rogers

- https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/systems-thinking-for-civil-servants

- Thinking in Systems by Donella Meadows