

**Routes into sexual exploitation: personal
perspectives about going missing, agency and
victimhood**

'At the time I just thought it was normal'

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Executive Summary

'If you start your problems don't stop...it just ends up being a way of life.'

Background to the study

There is a rapidly growing awareness and concern in government, in safeguarding agencies and amongst the wider public about the extent and risks of child sexual exploitation across the country. Many of the young people involved have childhood histories of adversity and there is an evolving understanding of the additional vulnerability of those who have experience of the care system and/or of going missing from care or home. The sense individuals make of these experiences has an impact on how they perceive themselves, their sense of victimhood or agency, the directions their pathways take and receptiveness to safeguarding services.

Young people at risk of, or involved in, sexual exploitation, particularly those who have a history of care and of going missing are often rendered powerless, voiceless and increasingly disempowered from assuming any agency over the decision-making processes affecting their lives, whilst older, young people often do not 'fit in' to the services provided.

Evidence from existing good practice indicates that the most effective way forward is early intervention and the provision of relationship-based practice which develops a 'secure base' from which these young people can begin to develop qualities of resilience, view themselves positively and believe alternatives are possible.

The aims of the study:

- To gain an understanding of the experiences and perspectives of young people who became involved in sexual exploitation, particularly those who have gone missing from care or home and are involved in substance misuse, in order to inform multi-agency practice.
- To explore whether it is possible to identify risk and protective factors in terms of young people's perceptions of agency and victimhood which may inform Local Safeguarding Children Boards (LSCBs) about more effective multi-agency safeguarding practices and multi-professional training for working with this vulnerable group which has meaning to the young people involved.

Funding and Ethical approval

The study was funded by the 2012 Annual Research Award from the British Association for the Study and Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect (BASPCAN) and was undertaken in 2013/14. Ethical approval was granted by the University of East Anglia, School of Social Work Research Ethics Committee, and the Local Authority Research Governance Panels of three Local Authorities who agreed to be involved.

Study Design

This is a qualitative study which took a psycho-social perspective to examining the perspectives and pathways of young people and adults involved in sexual exploitation, particularly those with care histories, those who have gone missing from care or home and those involved in substance misuse. A developmental approach was taken to considering experiences in the participant's narratives of their lives therefore a

qualitative grounded theory approach was used to ensure that analysis was derived inductively from the data (Glaser and Strauss 1967). Data were generated using in-depth, semi-structured interviews which charted a chronological route through participants' childhood, and for some, adult experiences.

Sample

Fifteen interviews were undertaken with one male and fourteen female participants with ages ranging from sixteen to fifty-seven. Some therefore, are retrospective accounts, giving an interesting perspective on whether, and/or how, attitudes and services have changed. Twelve participants were white/British, two mixed heritage/British and one Asian/British. Age of first experience of sexual exploitation ranged from thirteen to twenty-three.

Seven participants are still involved in selling sex, eight have ceased involvement, but of these, three spoke of being tempted/forced in order to survive, to return to selling sex. Of the fifteen participants nine continue to be substance users. Two participants became involved in exploitation via the internet.

Methodological issues and limitations

Although the local authorities approached were engaged and committed to the research, it proved more difficult at front line level to access young people willing to participate. The result was that several participants were older than had been anticipated, but this has proved to be an enriching part of the analysis in terms of identifying differences and similarities over time.

Key Findings

- A complex pattern emerged from the analysis in which various 'push' and/or 'pull' factors (Hayes and Trafford 1997), interconnected and overlapped with incidents of going missing. The meaning participants gave to these experiences in terms of their agency or victimhood, appeared to precipitate them along different pathways. For some this entrenched them further in situations of exploitation, but for others it enabled them to see alternatives as possible for them.
- A further defining characteristic of this complex pattern is that going missing, depending on when, and how frequently, it takes place can be both a 'push and a pull' factor, a cause and an effect of sexual exploitation.
- What is important in determining outcomes is the participants' sense of victimhood and consequent vulnerability, or their sense of agency and demonstration of resilience at different points in their lives. If, and when, on their pathways participants received appropriate support was also an important protection factor.

Four broad themes developed from analysis of the data. Although not mutually exclusive, they reflect how the meaning given to experiences of abuse, rejection, loss, rebellion and issues of identity confusion determined pathway outcomes.

1. The impact of 'push/pull' factors on pathways taken
2. The impact of perceptions of agency/resilience and victimhood/vulnerability on pathways taken
3. The impact of going missing on pathways taken
4. Participants' perceptions of how services can help

1. The impact of 'push/pull' factors on pathways taken

The background histories of eleven of the participants were of abuse, neglect and loss which pushed them on to negative pathways which involved them in sexual exploitation. All eleven went missing from home or care at some point on their pathways. The other four participants recalled some happy early childhood memories but also had memories of parents or step-parents who were often over-strict controlling or distant. For several participants experiences of the care system were no more positive in that there was often a lack of boundaries, affection or approval.

Participants spoke of feeling different and isolated from family and friends. This often led to feelings of identity confusion, self-hate, self-harm, fatalism, 'falling through the net' and a confused sense of boundaries which culminated in an expectation of being let down. Negative 'push' factors coupled with a strong sense of victimhood and inevitability, or fatalism pushed them onwards towards more risk taking whilst for others, a sense of rebellion also pulled them onwards towards taking bigger risks.

Alcohol and drug use has played a significant part in creating downward pathways for the majority of those interviewed both as a way of being coerced into involvement in sexual exploitation, or as a way of blocking out the experience. For all the participants a need to seek affection and approval was both a 'push' and a 'pull' factor. For some, a lack of affection and approval in early childhood pushed them towards seeking it, often in inappropriate places, resulting in becoming groomed to be sexually exploited, often without realising or recognising that that was what was happening.

Additionally, for some participants who had been 'pushed' to seek affection and approval in this risky way the 'pull' of the feeling of being wanted was a difficult one to give up. In order to find affection and approval, or to escape abuse and neglect, all the participants recalled episodes of going missing from home, from care or from exploitative situations. For many this was a frequent occurrence in their lives.

2. The impact of going missing on pathways taken

Going missing took place in two main directions, some participants described going missing from home or from care which often resulted in an increased risk of becoming sexually exploited. Others, having become sexually exploited, went missing to escape it, many experienced both. Routes taken seemed determined not only by 'push/pull' factors but by participants' perceptions of their victimhood or agency in dealing with what they encountered on their pathway.

- ***Going missing leading to sexual exploitation***

For some participants life at home or in care was so difficult that they felt going missing was their only option, often increasing their risk of involvement in sexual exploitation.

Substance use was described by several participants as leading downward to becoming sexually exploited often following going missing. For some, particularly those using substances, this pathway continued onwards to more entrenched involvement.

- ***Sexual exploitation leading to going missing***

Other participants not only described episodes of going missing which led to sexual exploitation but also recalled going missing as a means of escaping sexual exploitation or '*getting out of*' the exploitation briefly or permanently.

For some participants going missing led to sexual exploitation and sexual exploitation led to going missing and this appeared to be compounded by feelings of victimhood. For many of these participants the vicious cycle kept going round.

But others who had a greater sense of their own agency, either through the way they made sense of their experiences or through support, were able to see alternatives as possible and cease involvement.

3. The impact of perceptions of agency and victimhood on pathways taken

How individuals made sense of their experiences of risk and protection impacted on whether they perceive themselves as victims and out of control or as being able to exercise agency in their lives. For those who felt able to exercise agency and make choices about their lives there was a clearer sense of them feeling in control. This perception may vary at different stages of life which suggests the need for early intervention and ongoing support to nurture a sense of self-worth and agency.

- ***Perceptions of victimhood***

For many participants the weight of accumulated risk factors in childhood often compounded by going missing to seek approval, affection or, what they hoped was, safety, led to a downward spiral into further risky situations often including being sexually exploited. This in turn, led to feelings of fatalism and low self-esteem and increased perceptions of victimhood.

- ***Perceptions of agency***

Other participants, whilst expressing a sense of victimhood in terms of the inevitability of their early experiences, had begun, with support, to develop a greater degree of self-worth and a beginning belief in their own ability to influence the direction they want to take in their lives.

4. Participants' perceptions of how services can help

All participants saw the need for support services. A need expressed almost universally was that of having '*someone to be there*'. What varied were participants' perceptions of what, when and how '*someone being there*' was most helpful or would have been most helpful as they looked back.

Many participants, but particularly those who had spoken of their recognition of having run away to seek affection and approval, spoke of the need for someone to be there as a replacement ‘family or ‘carer’ they felt they had never had. This, they felt, should be an ongoing long-term relationship-based ‘*being there*’ like that found in loving functioning families.

Some participants perceived the whole organisation as being important in supporting them. For others it was specific workers who had provided support for other issues as well as for sexual exploitation which made the difference.

Another theme emerging from the participants’ narratives was of the need to be listened to and not judged. Other participants wanted to be involved in peer education and support. This approach also ensures that the expertise of young people who have been involved in being sexually exploited is valued, listened to and heard.

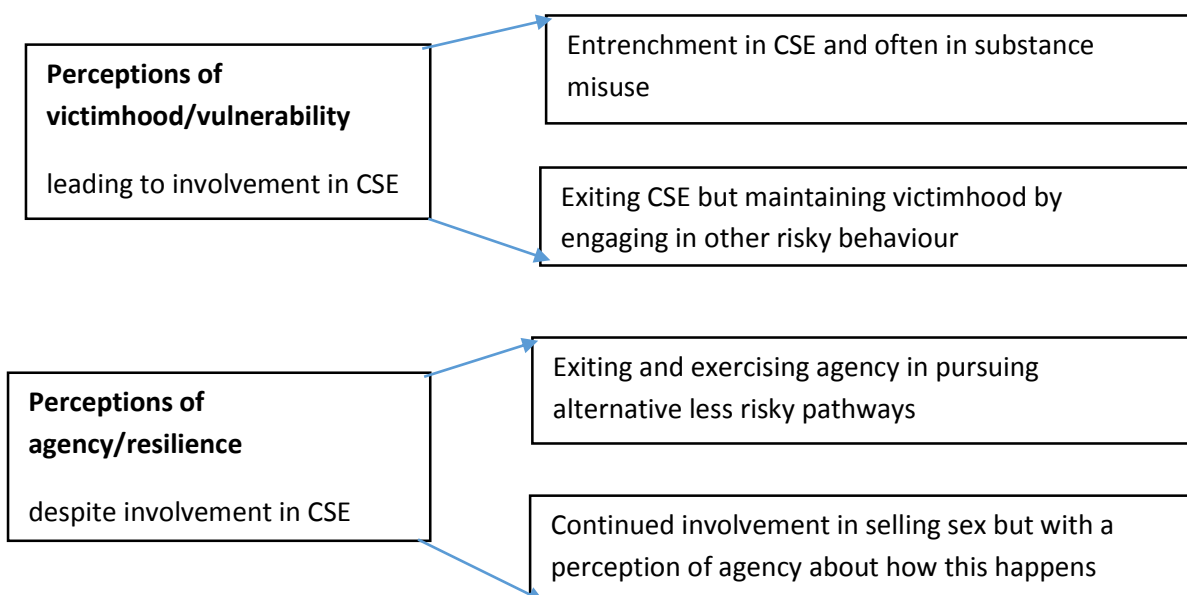
Victimhood/vulnerability and agency /resilience

Participants’ narratives fell into two broad subdividing groups in terms of their perceptions of their sense of their own victimhood or agency/ vulnerability or resilience:

In the first group participants’ perceptions of victimhood led either to further entrenchment in selling sex and often to substance abuse. Or, they led to exiting but were accompanied by ongoing feelings of victimhood whatever the alternate route taken. This often involved swapping risky sexual exploitation, with equally risky substance misuse, other unsuitable relationships and/or other criminal activity.

In the second group perceptions of agency led to exiting and to seeing legitimate alternative pathways as possible. Or, they led to continued involvement in selling sex as an adult but feeling a greater sense of choice or agency in the ways that that took place.

Perceptions of victimhood/vulnerability and agency /resilience



The groups are not necessarily mutually exclusive, they are often interlinked and cyclical but the groupings aid clarity in considering pathway direction. Participants, at different stages in their lives, may move 'groups' depending on levels of support or their own developing sense of agency enabling them to perceive alternatives as possible. Alternatively, lack of support and a continued sense of victimhood often prevents them from doing so.

Sadly, in this study several of the participants' pathways took a downward direction. Seven of the fifteen remain involved in selling sex. All seven said that they were, or had been, controlled by coercive pimps, the need to fund a drug habit or both. For them going missing often became a revolving door from one risky situation to the next. Only three of those who remain involved felt able to exercise some agency in choosing when they sell sex.

The remaining eight participants are no longer involved in sexual exploitation or selling sex as adults. Of those, four went on to become involved in other risky pursuits such as drug dealing, stealing or living with, often violent, drug dealers. All four had children who became the catalyst to stopping or decreasing substance use, but all remain involved in risky relationships which leaves them potentially vulnerable.

The other four participants who have ceased involvement have, with support, seen the possibility of alternative pursuits and themselves as having a right to pursue them. They felt that the support that they had received, mainly from specialist voluntary agencies, had made a difference to how they perceived themselves. Their sense of agency came in different forms and at different stages on their pathways

Conclusion

The aim of this study has been to gain an understanding of the perspectives of young people who have had experience of going missing from home or care and who have become involved in sexual exploitation and, for some, in substance misuse, in order for their expertise in their own experiences to inform service provision.

The sample includes adult participants who gave retrospective accounts of their experiences of going missing and of being sexually exploited. No significant differences were found in the reasons given by the adult participants' for going missing, the pathways they took, or the support needs they identified.

What is key to positive outcomes is the meaning given to significant experiences, risk and protective factors. For those who ascribe and internalise negative meanings to these factors a sense of victimhood and fatalistic inevitability about negative outcomes often becomes a self-fulfilling prophesy. Conversely, for those who see, or with support, are enabled to see, these factors as challenges to be overcome and learnt from and themselves as deserving better, the outcomes appear more positive.

What is clear from the narratives of the participants in this study is the central importance of the availability of a wide range of awareness raising and support services ranging from school based early awareness raising about the risks, to long-term relationship based therapeutic support for those at risk of, or involved in, sexual exploitation, their families, safeguarding professionals and the wider community.

Recommendations

- The significance of going missing as an indicator of the risk of sexual exploitation should be recognised by safeguarding agencies as a priority and acted upon in a co-ordinated way. There is a need for clearer communication and understanding of the issues by professionals, by young people, parents and the wider community. There is much to be learnt from some of the excellent practice that is already being undertaken in some local authorities.
- There is a need, as several participants' experiences indicate, for 'joined up thinking' and planning between agencies. Co-located multi-agency teams and clear information sharing practices appear to be the way forward in identifying and supporting those at risk of sexual exploitation. It is also an effective means of gathering and, where appropriate, sharing information about perpetrators.
- As several participants suggested, the voices and perceptions of young people with experience of sexual exploitation must be a central part of multi-agency professional training and peer education programmes. Local Authority LSCBs must ensure that awareness raising is undertaken through schools. Here again, examples of good practice should be built upon. Awareness raising and support should also be available for parents and the wider community to recognise the warning signs and understand what to do to ensure early intervention by the appropriate safeguarding agencies.
- What is currently largely missing from service provision are the long-term relationship based therapeutic services. Timely, non-judgemental, relationship based, long term support was consistently identified by participants in this study as vital to them. This 'secure base' provision which, for most of this vulnerable group, has been missing in their lives is important in reducing vulnerability by aiming to develop resilience and promote agency for young and adult people who are at risk of, involved in, or experiencing the consequences of sexual exploitation and selling sex.

The Report

How did it make me feel the first time?

'It doesn't make me feel.' ('Chloe')

Background

There has recently been a rapidly growing awareness and concern in government, in safeguarding agencies and amongst the wider public about the extent and risks of child sexual exploitation across country. Many of the young people involved have childhood histories of adversity and there is a growing understanding of the additional vulnerability of those who have experience of the care system and/or of going missing from care or home (Dodsworth 2012, Pearce 2011, Coy 2008, Jago and Pearce 2010, Department of Education 2012, 2014, APPG Inquiry 2012, Coffey 2014). The sense individuals make of these experiences has an impact on how they perceive themselves, their sense of their own victimhood or agency, the direction their pathways take and their receptiveness to support services.

There is a clear relationship between going missing and child sexual exploitation (Sharp 2012, Smeaton 2013, OCC 2013, DoE 2014). The situation is a complex one, and whilst it is not suggested that the majority of young runaways experience child sexual exploitation (Smeaton 2013:7), it is thought that around 90% of children and young people who have been subject to sexual grooming will go missing at some stage (DCSF 2009). Of the eleven warning signs identified by The Office of the Children's Commissioners for England's interim report (Berelowitz et al 2012) '*missing from home or care*' is noted as representing '*particular concern*' (Sharp 2012:6).

It is important to note (Sharp 2012, Smeaton 2013, Rees and Lee 2005), that the terms 'running away' and going missing, although often used interchangeably, do not mean the same thing. The term 'going missing' Smeaton (2013) notes, has been defined by The Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) as '*anyone whose whereabouts cannot be established and where the circumstances are out of character or the context suggests that the person may be subject of crime or risk of harm to themselves or another person.*' (ACPO 2013:5) 'Running away' has, as Sharp (2012) notes, been most commonly defined as '*children and young people who have either run away or been forced to leave home and have stayed away overnight on at least one occasion.*'

Many young people who run away are not reported to the police and, as Smeaton (2013) points out, many young people who are reported missing, such as those who are kidnapped, get lost etc. do not fit the definition of running away. Although the argument may appear semantic given the potential for one of these groups to become the other, depending on how far they travel, drift or are pushed along the 'missing continuum' (see Payne 1995, Biehal et al 2003), clarity is important in gaining an understanding of the issues for those involved. It is also vital to recognise the

vulnerability of these young people wherever they are on the continuum and wherever they see themselves.

Young people at risk of, or involved in, sexual exploitation, particularly those who have a history of care and of going missing or of running away, are often rendered powerless, voiceless and increasingly disempowered from assuming any agency over the decision-making processes affecting their lives, whilst older, young people often do not 'fit in' to the services provided. Although working with these, often resistant, young people is challenging it is essential, given their vulnerabilities, that they are not made invisible to multi-agency safeguarding and support services (Pearce 2009, 2011, Warrington 2010, Jago 2010, Coffey 2014)

Recent independent reports on sexual exploitation in different parts of the country also indicate the clear link between going missing and the risk of involvement in sexual exploitation (Jay 2014, Coffey 2014). '*One in five children and young people who go missing from home or care is at risk of serious harm, including child sexual exploitation.*' (Coffey 2014:45). It is arguable therefore, that there is a need to know more about the circumstances of going missing and involvement in sexual exploitation from the perspectives of the young people and adults involved. How do they make sense of their experiences? How do their perceptions of risk and protective factors influence their sense of whether they are victims of their circumstances or have agency in the choices they make. How do their perceptions influence outcomes for them and how can this inform practice for the better?

Evidence from existing good practice indicates that the most effective way forward is early intervention and the provision of relationship-based practice which develops a secure base (Bowlby 1988) from which these young people can begin to develop qualities of resilience, view themselves positively and believe alternatives are possible.

Project aims and objectives:

Aims:

- To gain an understanding of the experiences and perspectives of young people who became involved in sexual exploitation, particularly those who have gone missing from care or home and are involved in substance misuse, in order to inform multi-agency practice.
- To explore whether it is possible to determine risk and protective factors in terms of young people's perceptions of agency and victimhood which may inform Local Safeguarding Children Boards (LSCBs) about more effective multi-agency, child protection/safeguarding practice and multi-professional training for working with young people at risk of involvement.

Objectives:

- To add, from the perspectives of the young people involved, to what is known about routes into involvement, perceptions of agency and choice and pathways

taken once involved in order to raise awareness of what has been until recently a largely hidden issue.

- To increase the development of effective service interventions which have meaning to the young people involved.
- To acknowledge children and young people's expertise in their own lives as a central focus of the research.
- To raise awareness, in disseminating the findings, of the importance of listening to and including children/young people in developing policy and practice.

The study was funded through the 2012 Annual Research Award from the British Association for the Study and Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect (BASPCAN) and was undertaken in 2013/14

Project Team

The partnership between Dr Jane Dodsworth (principal researcher) and Ms Debbie Chedghey, MBE (partner) began when Jane Dodsworth, then an Area Child Protection Committee Inter-Agency Development Officer, started a multi-agency child exploitation reference group in which Debbie Chedghey was a member. At the time this practice included being the manager of The Matrix Project, a team of professionals offering a drop in and outreach service to male and female sex workers and those involved in substance misuse across Norfolk. Both members of the study team co-teach social workers and student social workers about sexual exploitation focusing on recognising early warning signs and multi-agency safeguarding interventions and have worked together on other research on sexual exploitation (Dodsworth 2011, 2012). In this project the practitioner facilitated some sample access and provided debriefing support for some participants.

Methodology and Methods

This is a qualitative study which took a psycho-social perspective to examining the perspectives and pathways of young people and adults involved in sexual exploitation, particularly those with care histories, those who have gone missing from care or home and those involved in substance misuse.

A key objective has been to undertake research 'with', not 'on', participants that acknowledges their expertise in their own lives. The aim was that the findings add to multi-disciplinary guidance and training on what works in safeguarding young people involved in sexual exploitation from their own perspectives.

Research questions:

- Are there identifiable risk and protective factors in the pathways of young people who go missing from care/home and become involved in sexual exploitation?
- How does going missing from care/home impact on a sense of victimhood or agency in involvement in sexual exploitation?

- What can be learnt from the expertise of those directly involved about what type of service provision works or could work?

The study took a developmental approach to considering experiences in the participant's narratives of their lives so a qualitative grounded theory approach was used to ensure that analysis was derived inductively from the data (Glaser and Strauss 1967). Data was coded and analysed using grounded theory and risk and protective factors including participants' perceptions of agency or victimhood were explored.

Ethical approval

Ethical approval was granted by the University of East Anglia, School of Social Work Research Ethics Committee, and the Local Authority Research Governance Panels of three Local Authorities who had agreed to be involved.

As an aim of the research was to gain access to, and interview young people and adults, who were potentially, given life experiences, from a very vulnerable or 'at risk' population it was crucial to ensure that careful consideration was given to their well-being.

The intention was to interview approximately twenty participants aged 16+ who were sought via gatekeepers from specific specialist outreach projects and to arrange that they would be supported by outreach project staff if necessary.

The plan with young people aged 16-18 who consented to be participants was to follow the same procedure laid out for the adult participants in terms of additional support as advice would be sought from the gatekeeper agencies re: their competence to consent prior to gaining the individual participant's consent.

Following advice from the gatekeepers the 16-18 year olds would then be deemed competent enough to make their own decisions about consent. It was also planned that LSCB safeguarding procedures would be followed should a child protection issue arise.

We acknowledge the importance of obtaining informed consent from all participants. To this end the principal investigator liaised with project managers/team leaders/social workers in the first instance and ensured that people were aware of the nature of the research question areas so that an informed decision about participation could be reached prior to a young person being approached.

As a qualified and experienced social worker the principal investigator was also in a position to make an assessment about any young person who, at interview, appeared too vulnerable to proceed, and would, if that was the case, stop the interview and, if necessary, alert the appropriate safeguarding agency.

Interviews were arranged in a setting where support workers /social workers were in the building, wherever possible, to provide ready access to support for the interviewee.

Informed consent was obtained verbally and by a signed consent form after the nature of the project and interview had been outlined.

Good practice indicates the need to ensure that participants in research interviews are always aware that they can cease at any time. In this study, given the potentially distressing and painful nature of some of the experiences the participants would be asked to recall, which may have led to distress during or after the interview, additional emphasis was placed upon ensuring that participants were aware of their right to stop the interview. To minimize this possibility it was made clear prior to the start of the interview and in the information letters, and consent form that participants could stop at any time and did not have to answer any questions about which they felt uncomfortable.

Debriefing began by the use of the final question which asked participants for their advice to professionals. The aim was to readdress power balance issues and end on an upbeat note. Each participant was also debriefed at the end of the interview by checking with them about any questions or issues they had and reminding them of the availability of the project workers should they need further debriefing.

Participants' names and all material used has been anonymised and any identifying information removed or changed. All data has been kept securely and confidentially. This was also made clear to participants prior to interview and on the consent form. Participants were also offered their transcript to check and comment on if they so wished. Participants were offered a £15 voucher as a thank you for their time and interest.

The risk to the researcher was minimal but opportunity was made for liaison between the partners for debriefing and support. Additionally the transcriber was informed of the nature of the content of the interviews and invited to de-brief with the researcher should the need arise.

Access to the sample and recruitment

Participants were sought via the partner specialist project, Local Authority specialist teams, In Care Councils and voluntary sector specialist agencies who agreed to participate. Participants were recruited via letters and leaflets distributed by the projects and then by snowball sampling (Atkinson and Flint 2001).

Prospective interviewees were informed of the nature of the study, the confidentiality of the information given and anonymity of participants via the information letter and invited to contact the researcher by phone, email or drop box to arrange an interview.

Fifteen interviews were undertaken with one male and fourteen female participants. Twelve participants were white/British, two mixed heritage/British and one Asian/British. Age at interview ranged from sixteen to fifty-seven, so some are retrospective accounts, giving an interesting perspective on whether, and/or how, attitudes and services have changed. Age of first experience of sexual exploitation

ranged from thirteen to twenty-three. The twenty-three year old was involved at age fourteen/fifteen with others experiencing sexual exploitation, but recalls preferring to shoplift to fund her drug habit at that stage.

Seven participants are still involved in selling sex, eight have ceased involvement, but of these, three spoke of being tempted/ forced in order to survive, to return to selling sex. Of the fifteen participants nine are substance users. Two participants became involved in exploitation via the internet.

Table 1: Participants (all names are anonymised)

'Name'	Gender	Ethnicity	Age	History of abuse	Care history	Age first went missing	Age involved in CSE	Substance user
'Ali'	female	white/ British	17	yes	kinship care	10/11	13	no
'Zee'	female	white/ British	31	yes	care from 14	14	15	no
'Jess'	female	white/ British	39	yes	no	17	*17	yes
'Jillie'	female	white /British	19	yes	kinship care	14	14	no
'Chloe'	female	white/ British	18	yes	care from 8	8	-18	yes
'Geff'	male	white /British	32	yes	no sibs in care	14	-18	yes
'Angie'	female	white/ British	17	yes	kinship care	16	13	no
'Fizz'	female	white/ British	26	yes	care from 8	5	15	no
'Jan'	female	white/ British	24	yes	kinship care	13	15	no
'Lisa'	female	mixed heritage /British	20	yes	care 13 -18.	13	18/19	yes
'Clara'	female	mixed heritage /British	30	yes	no	14	23 (+14/15)	yes
'Sally'	female	white/ British	33	no	no	14	17	yes
'Sam'	female	white/ British	18	yes	some kinship care	13	16	yes
'Rachel'	female	white/ British	57	yes	care at 5 then kinship care	13	14	yes
'Kashva'	female	Asian /British	16	no	some kinship care	14	14	yes

Data generation

Data was generated by the use of in-depth, semi-structured interviews which charted a chronological route through participants' childhoods. For some discussions also considered adult experiences, focusing on the development of the self in the context of relationships with others. All interviews ended with questions about their future plans and hopes and their advice for others. Pilot interviews aided question formulation and probe and follow-up questions were used to ensure that individual stories emerge.

Data analysis

All interviews were recorded on a digital voice recorder with the permission of participants and transcribed for coding. Transcriptions were open coded as they were completed and then axial coded to develop themes iteratively from the data. Once all participants had been interviewed coding continued until saturation point was reached and clear themes emerged from the data.

Triangulation and verification of the data was achieved by posing questions relating to the emerging themes and looking for evidence in the data to support or refute the questions posed. Additionally, analytical memos, and a reflective diary of initial impressions and observations were compared and cross checked with the emerging data to ensure reflexivity and the triangulation and verification of the analysis and emergent themes.

Methodological issues and limitations

A difficulty which had not been fully anticipated was gaining access to participants. Local Authorities were engaged and committed to the research at one level but it proved more difficult at front line level to access young people willing to participate. This was sometimes because court proceedings were commencing and the agencies involved with the young people concerned felt that it would not be appropriate for them to be involved until the hearings were over. Sometimes it was because young people living often chaotic lives understandably forgot or changed their minds.

However, the main stumbling block appeared to be that of professionals' gatekeeping in, what they felt to be, the best interests of their service–users. This was overcome, in part, by spending time in some of the key specialist projects and approaching projects outside the initial brief to gain trust from gatekeepers and potential participants. It has resulted in several participants being older than was anticipated, but this has proved to be an enriching part of the analysis in terms of identifying differences and similarities over time.

The accounts are necessarily subjective and retrospective. Shaw and Butler note (1998) that there have been criticisms of retrospective accounts relying on memory which might be vague, imprecise or filtered but there are also advantages. Melrose et al (1999) for example, argue that in terms of ethical considerations, the emotional distance from trauma for the interviewee may aid clarity and ease of recall. Additionally,

it is the meaning given by participants to subjective experiences and subjective truths that this study aimed to address.

Key Findings

A complex pattern emerged from the analysis in which a combination of 'push' and/or 'pull' factors, interconnected with incidents of going missing resulting in the participants' pathways leading to sexual exploitation. Hayes and Trafford (1997) first used this term to outline the ways in which young people become involved in child sexual exploitation. 'Push' factors are those, including family breakdown, domestic abuse, sexual, physical and emotional abuse and neglect, family substance misuse and other negative factors which may push a child or young person away from home and towards the risk of sexual exploitation.

'Pull' factors include being given 'affection', gifts, alcohol and/or drugs, by someone, often older, the excitement of risk taking, the excitement of having money, a perverse sense of having some 'control' in their lives and some independence and other similar factors which pull the young person away from home or care into the risk of sexual exploitation.

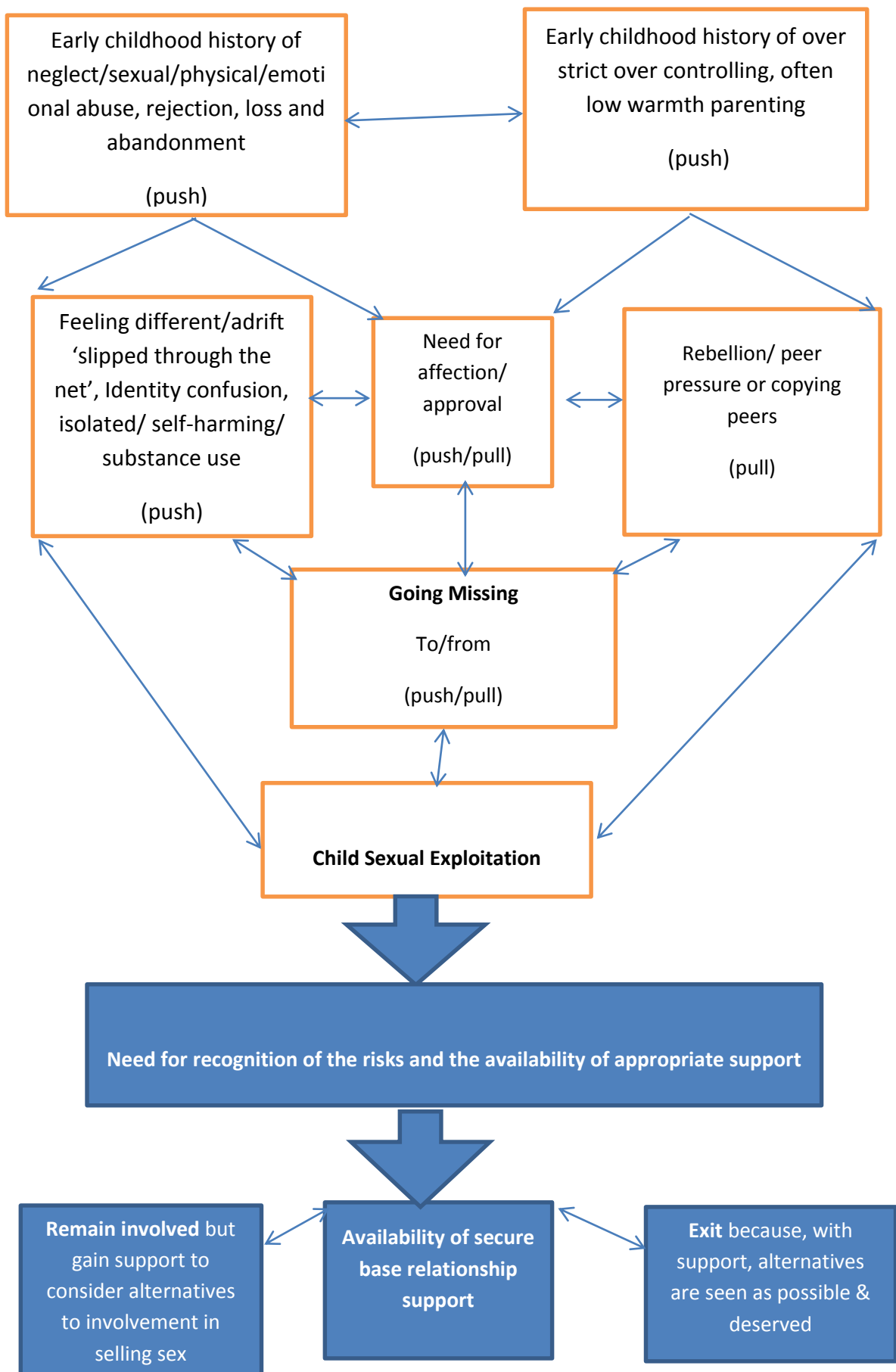
A further defining characteristic of this complex pattern is that going missing, depending on when, and how frequently, it takes place can be both a push and a pull factor, a cause and an effect of sexual exploitation. For example, in this study, Zee was 'pushed' by familial abuse into '*running away*' to care and then by peer pressure into continually going missing from care to return home. At fifteen she was both 'pushed' and 'pulled' into sexual exploitation by peer pressure and a need to survive and fund her drug use but also by the 'pull' of being, '*like a business woman, running my own business*'. Her perception was that she had some agency, in that she felt that she was making choices about her 'business' but then a sense of victimhood in terms of being in an increasingly risky situation and the personal cost to her

'I don't think I was aware of what I was giving away to people'.

Eventually her recognition of the balance swinging too far towards victimhood following a violent knife attack and a long prison sentence 'pushed' her into ceasing involvement. She has, with support, begun to develop a stronger sense of self-worth. This growing sense of agency in the pathway she chooses to take has so far, enabled her to stay away from further involvement.

Table 2 illustrates the complexity of the push/pull pathways experienced by the participants in this study and highlights the need for widespread recognition of the risks and the availability of appropriate support.

Table 2: Participants' pathways



The findings indicate that participants' perception of how much they were victims, or how much they were able to exercise agency, at various stages in their lives and the type and amount of support they felt they had or had not received appeared to precipitate them along different pathways. For some this entrenched them further in situations of exploitation, but for others enabled them to see alternatives as possible for them.

Table 3 illustrates the individual background histories and pathways of participants and indicates the complexity of the push/pull and going missing continuums in which there is often a vicious cycle of going missing leading to sexual exploitation and sexual exploitation leading to going missing operating.

Table 3: 'Push/Pull' Pathways

Name	Gender	Age now	Age at involvement	Early history	Going missing → CSE And CSE → going missing pathways	Still involved Y/N
Ali	F	17	13	Inconsistent parenting, teenage rebellion, going missing, coercion by internet	Push→ going missing ↔ care→ push'→ going missing →CSE →pull→ exit→ push→ continued involvement	N
Zee	F	31	14	Abuse, rebellion, care, going missing, drug use	Pull→ care→ going missing →pull↔ push→ CSE → push'→ prison→ exit	N
Jillie	F	19	14	Familial sexual abuse, split family, strict step-parent, going missing	Push→ going missing → sexual abuse → going missing →CSE → pull→ exit	N
Jess	F	39	15	Bereavement, strict/cold step parent, going missing, drug use	Push→ going missing push→CSE exploitation→ push↔ pull →exit	Y
Chloe	F	18	18	Neglect, care, going missing, coercion	Push→care→going missing →push →CSE →push' continued involvement	Y
Geff	M	32	15	Neglect, going missing, drug use	Push→ going missing → pull→ CSE →pull/push→ continued involvement	Y
Angie	F	17	13	Familial domestic abuse, split family, inconsistent caring, coercion online	Push→ going missing →push→ CSE →pull →exit?	N
Fizz	F	26	14	Abuse, care, going missing, drug use	Push→ going missing → care →push/pull → going missing→CSE →pull →exit?	N
Jan	F	24	14/15	Familial abuse, going missing, drug use	Push→ going missing →push/pull → sexual exploitation→ pull exit	N

Lisa	F	20	16	Mother depressed. L in care at 13, & sibs. Going missing from care to home, drug use, CSE	push→ going missing →push/pull→ sexual exploitation→ push →continued involvement	Y
Clara	F	30	23 * 14/15	Dom.abuse,neglect going missing to escape it, rebelling, substance misuse,	push→ going missing →push/pull →substance use→ push→ CSE→ pull→ continued involved	Y
Sally	F	33	17	Happy but strict early childhood, going missing, drug use leading to coercion into CSE	Push→ going missing coercion/drugs→ CSE →child removed→ prison→ continued involvement→ stopped drugs→ pull exit.	N
Sam	F	18	16	Extreme physical, sexual & emot abuse, going missing, kicked out at 14, coercion into CSE	push→ running away→ push →coercion into sexual exploitation→ violent coercion into continued involvement	Y
Rachel	F	57	14	Early physical & emot. abuse & neglect, going missing	Push/pull→ running away→ CSE/coercion→ continued involvement	Y
Kashva	F	16	14	Strict religious split family, going missing, substance use	push→ going missing→ push/pull →CSE→ pull →exit	N

Constantly reoccurring themes which emerged from analysis of the participants' narratives included:

- Abuse/rejection/neglect/ loss/low warmth, high criticism parenting
- Adrift/'slipped through the net'
- Seeking affection and approval
- Rebellion
- Feeling different
- Blurred/inappropriate/replaced boundaries
- Isolation, self- hate/self- harm/fatalism
- Identity confusion/mirroring
- Consistency/inconsistency and expectations of being let down
- Going missing leading to sexual exploitation
- Sexual exploitation leading to going missing
- Cyclical push/pull patterns often downwards
- The need for someone to 'be there'

The initial themes are grouped under four wider umbrella headings reflecting the ways in which these factors determined pathway outcomes.

1. The impact of 'push/pull' factors on pathways taken
2. The impact of perceptions of agency/resilience and victimhood/vulnerability on pathways taken
3. The impact of going missing on pathways taken
4. Participants' perceptions of how services can help.

However, the wider themes are not mutually exclusive, indeed the findings indicate that they are often interlinked and cyclical, in most cases in a negative, downward direction. It is the impact of perceptions of agency and victimhood that is the key determinant of whether pathways taken became more positive in outcome.

The four themes are explored below taking into account the pathway routes illustrated in Table 2. Anonymised direct quotes are used to ensure that the participants voices are a central part of the analysis of the findings.

1. The impact of 'push/pull' factors on pathways taken

Early histories of abuse, neglect and loss and abandonment

The background histories of most of the participants are of sexual, physical and emotional abuse, neglect and loss, which their narratives indicate, 'pushed' them on to downward pathways ending in sexual exploitation. Of the fifteen participants, eleven spoke of unhappy, abusive experiences in early childhood. All eleven went missing from home or care at some point on their pathways, some frequently.

'We were locked in our rooms and neglected but we didn't see anything wrong with it. I just accepted it really, that's the way it is. You never fully heal.' Jillie

'I had to grow up pretty quickly. I was scared most of the time' Clara

'I was just abandoned' Lisa

'I was scared of my parents and always sad. I wish I'd never been born into that family' Rachel

Early histories of strict over controlling, often low warmth parenting, isolation and identity confusion.

The other four participants recalled some happy early childhood memories but also had memories of parents or step-parents who were often strict, over controlling or distant;

'I needed to be taken away from that situation, at some points I wished I was in care. I just needed to be away from it (home) even for a week. It was like a ticking time bomb.' Ali

'After my Mum died & Dad married my step-mum I felt really pushed out and I hated it and we wasn't allowed to do anything.' Jess

Several interviewees spoke of feeling different and isolated from family and often from

friends. This often appeared to lead to feelings of identity confusion, of self-hate, self-harm and fatalism. There was a sense, in their narratives, of being cast adrift, of 'slipping' or 'falling through the net' and a blurred or confused sense of boundaries which led to an expectation of being let down. Chloe, who self-harms extensively said,

'I just think what is meant to be is meant to be. It all happens for a reason.'

Sam recalled,

'To get all the demons out of my head I tried to hang myself a few times & that is why I try and cut myself....to get it out.'

Jan said,

'Discipline, anything that somebody told me to do I just didn't do. I just rebelled against it really...I was just an angry young girl basically, I rebelled against any boundaries anyone set.....but my Dad didn't really mind drugs so long as I did them with him for the first time.'

Negative experience of the care system and a lack of boundaries

For several participants experiences of the care system were no more positive.

'I messed myself up going in there (children's home) There was too much freedom. No punishments for being bad, no rewards for being good.' Zee

'The Police & Social Services say I just slipped through the net the whole time I was in care....I just hated myself, I didn't look in mirrors.' Chloe

'When you are in foster care and reach 16-18, if you don't abide by the rules they just tell you that if you aren't going to listen you have to go your own way & they won't help you from there& then you are the one who has fell down that black hole.' Lisa

For these participants it is clear that there were a number of negative push factors coupled with a strong sense of victimhood and inevitability, or fatalism, that pushed them onwards towards more risk taking.

Rebellion, substance misuse, isolation, self-harm

For others, a sense of rebellion is recalled pulling them onwards towards taking bigger risks. Clara, for example, remembers beginning to stay out longer and to do things,

'like shoplifting and stuff and smoking with my friends... I think it was just to get a bit of attention from my parents... they were quite strict when they weren't shouting at each other'

Ali recalled,

'I got into a dodgy crowd. Not dodgy as in drugs, just dodgy as in weird people. I got into a phase of pretending to be dumber than I was... I lied a lot to fit in & get away from what was real.'

Jeff described both his parents as abusive alcoholics. Although he did not go into care himself, his older sister was in care before he was born and he recalled that following abuse from their father his second sister *'put herself in care'*. Jeff's father died of cancer when he was twelve, his grandmother died a couple of years later and his brother, a heroin user, died soon afterwards of a drug overdose. He recalled that, in addition to these losses, his mother,

'never seemed to be at home when we were kids, so obviously I rebelled.'

Jeff, in his early teens, began rebelling and going missing from home. He started taking crack cocaine and heroin with a friend who was a sex worker and rapidly becoming involved in selling sex with her until her death from a heroin overdose. Jeff described the number of deaths he had experienced as having *'done my head in a bit'* and continues to struggle with substance addiction and selling sex.

Alcohol and drug use has played a significant part in creating downward pathways for the majority of those interviewed. Of the fifteen participants, nine have used, or continue to use, substances. For some, substances were used to coerce/deceive them into involvement in sexual exploitation. Some participants described using substances as a way of blocking out what they were doing. For others the need to fund their, or a partner's habit, 'pushed' them into involvement.

Kashva, was 14 when she began going missing from home and was taken by an older female 'friend' to 'parties' in a rented room in another city, which older men attended. She remembers being given excessive amounts of alcohol and recalled that when she was drunk she was easily influenced into anything and found herself having sex with the men.

'Eventually I was just lying on the floor and didn't know what was going on.'

Zee said of her early teenage years,

'I just took so much drugs it was untrue. I just blotted it out in the end...I didn't really value sex as an intimate thing. I just thought it was something you made money from.'

Jess recalled that selling sex did not seem *'the answer'* to her initially but *'when I got more into drugs it did.'* Now an adult, Jess gave up drug use during her pregnancies but said that when her children were taken into care she,

'ended up getting back into it which made it easier to work....I just haven't got as many reasons now to give it up.'

Seeking approval and affection

The cyclical negative 'push/pull' pathways downwards are evident in the narratives of all the substance using participants. As is clear in Jess's narrative, substance use often appeared, to substitute for lost relationships and to numb the feelings of being let down.

For all the participants a need to seek affection and approval was both a 'push' and a 'pull' factor. For some, a lack of affection and approval in early childhood pushed them towards seeking it, often in inappropriate places, resulting in becoming groomed to be sexually exploited, often without realising or recognising that that is what was happening. Lack of recognition that what they are experiencing is exploitation and abuse by many young people being exploited is an additional difficulty for professionals in working to safeguard them. Ali, for example was convinced that,

'They didn't groom me... I found them. I practically did everything I could to find them.'

'I got my gratification from someone wanting me. Then he found out my age & said it turned him on... I thought "Ok, he likes me"... I just saw that bit.'

Chloe, whose mother described her to a boyfriend as '*the little cunt I told you about*' explained that she had,

'always wanted a boyfriend to love me and so I would sleep with them so they do...but the next day they are gone so that doesn't work.'

Additionally, for some participants who had been 'pushed' to seek affection and approval in this risky way the 'pull' of the feeling of being wanted was a difficult one to give up. Jillie, for example, recalled

'I felt safer with the men than at home or school. They said it would hurt but they loved me which is what I always wanted.'

Fizz, who said that she would '*go sleeping around with anyone I could get attention from*' noted with some insight, that,

'obviously most of us girls are quite damaged & the thing a girl most needs is a mother figure & the pimp kind of almost takes that role on in the beginning as well as being a boyfriend.'

She went on to say that she thought that being abused as a child meant,

'I've got an incredible need to be wanted by someone, but I have never had time on my own to learn to love myself'

In order to find affection and approval, or to escape abuse and neglect, all the participants recalled episodes of going missing from home or from care. For several of them this was a frequent occurrence in their lives. How they made sense of these experiences influenced how they felt about themselves and often determined the pathways they took.

2. The impact of perceptions of agency/resilience and victimhood/vulnerability on pathways taken

Vulnerability to, or resilience in managing, risk is influenced by the *accumulation* of risk factors in early childhood and the personal, familial and wider

ecological/environmental resources that are available, or lacking, for individuals along their life pathways (Sroufe 1997, Rutter 1985). How individuals make sense of these experiences of risk and protection appears to impact on whether they perceive themselves as victims or as being able to exercise agency in their lives. This perception may vary at different stages of life which suggests the need for early intervention and ongoing support.

Perceptions of agency

Some participants, whilst expressing a sense of victimhood in terms of the inevitability of their early experiences, had begun, with support, to develop a greater degree of self-worth and a beginning belief in their own agency about the direction they want to take in their lives. Zee for example, recalled of the violence she encountered,

'I got used to it, it was just like an everyday occurrence...it was just like part of my job. ...They don't respect you, they think because they are paying you money they can abuse you anyway.'

But she also recalled that, with the support of a social worker who went '*above and beyond*' her remit, she began to realise that '*drugs were going to kill me – I started to value myself even though I needed the money for drugs.*'

Although being seriously injured by a 'punter' in a knife attack and receiving a long prison sentence for robbery were the final catalysts, Zee had already begun to gain a sense of her right to deserve better.

Kashva's narrative also indicates a sense of victimhood in her description of being coerced and deceived into going missing from home by an older girl resulting in her being sexually exploited, although at the time she did not recognise it as abuse. She recalled being suicidal at one point when her family would no longer speak to her. Several safeguarding agencies became involved at this point and after intensive intervention and ongoing support from a specialist voluntary agency Kashva has begun to describe herself as '*wising up*' and '*deserving better*'. She feels she has, with support, reached a turning point in seeing herself as exercising agency and having choices to go to college and aim for a career in nursing.

Perceptions of victimhood

For many participants the weight of accumulated risk factors in childhood led them to a sense of fatalism about their pathways. A sense of victimhood often compounded the sense they began to develop of the inevitability of their downward spiral into further risky situations often including being sexually exploited.

For some participants this resulted in the negative spiral downwards described earlier. Eighteen year old Sam for example, who ran away from a childhood of neglect and emotional abuse, returned home only to be '*kicked out*' at fourteen by her mother. She was pushed by these circumstances into coercion into sexual exploitation, violence, drug addiction and the loss of her baby to the care system. Her sense of powerlessness is perhaps relieved by self-harming and substance abuse. She spoke of cutting herself '*to get the demons out of my head.*'

Her violent forty-nine year old partner/pimp forced her to go back on the streets three days after the birth of their child. She said that she would like to resist him but

constantly repeats in fatalistic tones that he has '*got inside her head*'. Despite intensive support from a specialist project Sam repeatedly returns to her pimp.

At thirteen Lisa followed several of her siblings into care but repeatedly '*ran away*' to return home. In one residential placement she became involved in drug taking and selling sex with other residents. Despite saying she hates what she is doing she remains involved to fund her heroin habit.

She has tried to stop but feels that 'boredom' gets the better of her and that she doesn't really have people around to support her. Despite recalling that she once wanted to be a midwife, she appears, like Sam, to be resigned to being the victim of the vicious downward spiral of selling sex to fund her addiction. She thought that,

'Most people in care fall into drug life and prostitution, the majority of them. It is probably the way the family has brought them up, or they've been abused by their relatives or something.'

Jillie witnessed and experienced frequent familial sexual and physical abuse prior to '*running away*' and becoming sexually exploited. Her perception of the violence she encountered during this period was,

'Oh, that is how it should be. I've kind of grown up with it in my life already.'

A sense of fatalism pervades Jillie's narrative at this stage. Running away did not bring the escape she had hoped for and her perception is that of victimhood and a lack of choices.

Jan, despite running away to escape abuse, also appeared to be caught for a number of years in more abuse with coercive pimps and a sense of a lack of any choice in the situation. She recalled her saddest time being that of,

'standing out there on Christmas Day, snowing and freezing cold when I should have been with my family.'

3. The impact of going missing on pathways taken

This study echoes other research (Smeaton 2102, Sharp 2012) in finding that going missing took place in two main directions. Some participants described going missing from home or from care which often resulted in an increased risk of becoming sexually exploited. Others, having become sexually exploited, went missing to escape it.

For some the pathway was a cyclical or downwardly spiralling one with frequent episodes of going missing from, or back to, situations in which they were at risk. For others, sexual exploitation was a catalyst to going missing to find a safer situation. Routes taken seemed determined not only by 'push/pull' factors but by participants' perceptions of their victimhood or agency in dealing with what they encountered on their pathways.

Going missing leading to sexual exploitation: 'grades of running away'

For some participants life at home or in care was so difficult and/or abusive and/or lacking in boundaries, affection and approval, they felt going missing was their only

option. This, in many cases, increased their risk of involvement in sexual exploitation. Ali, for example, spoke of *'grades of running away'*. She described how initially she ran away from unhappiness at home for a few hours, increasing this to overnight and longer.

'Then I seriously ran away. They thought I was running away from confrontation, but I was running away from everything.'

Zee experienced a violent, chaotic early childhood from which she had often *'run away'*. However, she felt that there was also a lack of care and boundaries, in the residential unit in which she had asked to be placed during her early teens. She said,

'I was thinking I've got the life of Riley because I was running away from the children's home & they didn't really tell you off, all they done was call the police.'

'A lot of the others in the home were running off to this person called X. He was the one who introduced me to heroin properly & then prostitution.'

These episodes of going missing from care, for Zee, arguably became a very different *'grade'* of running away in that they led directly to her coercion into substance abuse and exploitation.

Sam experienced a great deal of unhappiness in her childhood, including the suicide of her brother, and her mother's lack of affection and availability. She recalled *'running away because she was never there for me'*. She was forced home by her younger sister but was then *'kicked out'* at the age of 14 by her mother.

'That was when I met my first ex-partner & that was when I started working about a month after I got with him. I started off going with men, like a threesome with men & then with women & then a month later he started sending me to work on the street.'

Several other participants describe similar pathways leading from the vulnerability of going missing to the lure of finding affection with *'boyfriends'* or other risky people or places. Fizz recalled after escaping from one risky situation that,

'The brothel was the first place that felt like home. It was one of my fondest times of growing up.'

Substance use was described by several participants as leading downward to becoming sexually exploited often following going missing. Chloe, recalled that she had lived in eleven foster homes and two children's homes from the age of eight. From the onset she frequently ran away back to her mother, to friends and to squats and became pregnant at fourteen. She started smoking cannabis at nine, drinking alcohol at ten and smoking crack cocaine at eleven. Her father introduced her to heroin at sixteen and coercion by him into sexual exploitation quickly followed.

'So I'd have to go out with this woman (introduced by her father) I'd have to give her half of my money, so my Dad would smoke half of my money.'

For some, particularly those using substances, this pathway continued onwards to more entrenched involvement.

Sexual exploitation leading to going missing: 'grades of running away'

Other participants not only described episodes of going missing which led to sexual exploitation but also recalled going missing as a means of escaping sexual exploitation or '*getting out of*' the exploitation briefly. For these participants the 'grades' of running away from exploitation ranged from brief respite during an episode of being exploited, to going missing from the town in which they had lived, leaving all friends and contacts behind in order to escape exploitation.

Jan for example, recollected that after her parents split up she was swapped between them for most of her childhood, often '*running away from one to be with the other*' until she was sexually abused by her grandfather and father. On one occasion when she ran away with a friend she recalled that,

'At the time it seemed good, it was like we are going to run away, we will get a job & we will get a house & we were like two little girls lost in the middle of nowhere & it was bloody horrible.'

She described how she rebelled against everything and everyone and eventually, at fourteen, met an older boyfriend who introduced her to the 'party' scene and to drugs, although it was her older sister who introduced her to selling sex.

It was, to an extent, a norm for Jan who recalls always knowing what '*the block*' was as her mother, sister and mother's friends were all involved in either selling sex, substance use or both. She recalled having developed a way of '*getting the money and just running off*'. However, she recalled realising,

'How dangerous I actually made it for the other girls, because if someone (the men seeking sex) has got a grudge, because of that they are going to be a bit funny with someone else. But I was just young & that was my way of getting out of it.'

Jan soon became involved with coercive pimps and spent years with them or in prison for petty offences. Prison became a way of escaping her pimps. Eventually she left prison and met a wealthy drug dealer with whom she had children and was, she felt, at least initially, '*protected and provided for*' and felt able '*to run away*' from the pimps and sexual exploitation.

Fizz, who experienced a chaotic, distressing childhood and was sexually abused as a toddler by the relatives who were supposed to care for her, recalled that, prior to being fostered at eight,

'I obviously had no one to look after me.'

She described being 'pulled' into being sexually exploited at the age of 15, in part because of her adoptive parents' cold, disapproving attitude towards her. She recalled

extensive experiences of being coerced into exploitation.

'The older I got the more exploited I felt and the more exploited I became.'

She ran away from several abusive and violent pimps only to be drawn back in again. However, when she became pregnant again, and felt supported by her then partner, she ran away from the town she was working in.

'I left behind all contact with those people & I always felt guilty that I had done it. You know, I had that opportunity and that will power when perhaps their stories were worse than mine & they couldn't.'

Zee recalled that after repeated episodes of going missing from care and then being sexually exploited at fifteen she became involved with some men who coerced her into working in a dungeon-like flat. One of the men began to whip Zee who *'jumped out of the window two storeys up to escape'*.

'I just ran, I was so scared, I have never been so scared in my life. I thought they were going to kill me'.

After this terrifying encounter Zee sought protection from a 'boyfriend' but ended up going out to work on the streets for a number of years. It was some time until she felt sufficient strength in her own ability to make choices, following a lengthy prison sentence and an opportunity to reflect in a relatively safe environment to be able to stop selling sex for what she hopes is the last time.

For some participants going missing led to sexual exploitation and sexual exploitation led to going missing and this appeared to be compounded by feelings of victimhood. For many the vicious cycle kept going round, but others who had a greater sense of their own agency, either through the way they made sense of their experiences or through support, were able to see alternatives as possible and cease involvement.

4. Participants' perceptions of how services can help

All participants saw the need for support services. A need expressed almost universally was that of having *'someone to be there'*. What varied were participants' perceptions of what, when and how *'someone being there'* was most helpful or would have been most helpful as they looked back.

'Being there'

Many participants, but particularly those who had spoken of their recognition of having run away to seek affection and approval, spoke of the need for someone to be there as a replacement 'family or 'carer' they felt they had never had. This, they felt, should be an ongoing long-term relationship-based *'being there'* like that found in loving functioning families. Sam, for example, who was rejected by her family at the age of fourteen said,

'I love the project because they understand me, my personality, everything. They are like family to me.....a comfort blanket'

Jess said that the specialist agency with whom she was involved, *'gave you the right support when you needed it and also realised things aren't going to change overnight.'*

Clara said,

'I couldn't have coped with half of the stuff that I had to go through if it wasn't for these (specialist project), they have been a saviour to me. There should be more places like this.'

Some participants perceived the whole agency as being important in supporting them. For others it was specific workers who had provided support for other issues as well as for sexual exploitation which made the difference.

Ali recalled that,

'The project worker was everything that I could possibly need, & still is now. It doesn't have to be a CSE issue, it can be any issue & she will still do everything she can to help me.'

Zee reflected that, *'the social worker was really kind, she really gave me a childhood & sometimes I didn't deserve it'.*

Ali whose difficulties at home were exacerbated when she began contacting men via the internet felt that her family did not understand her or care about her needs. She began to go missing from home with increasing frequency. She felt that if there had been some sort of respite accommodation available, or offered, it may have provided a breathing space for everyone and an opportunity to *'step back'* and reflect.

'If there is a situation like I was in where I was running out nearly once a week & arguing maybe four or five times a week...it would be somewhere I could physically put myself for a week or two if I need away from the family'.

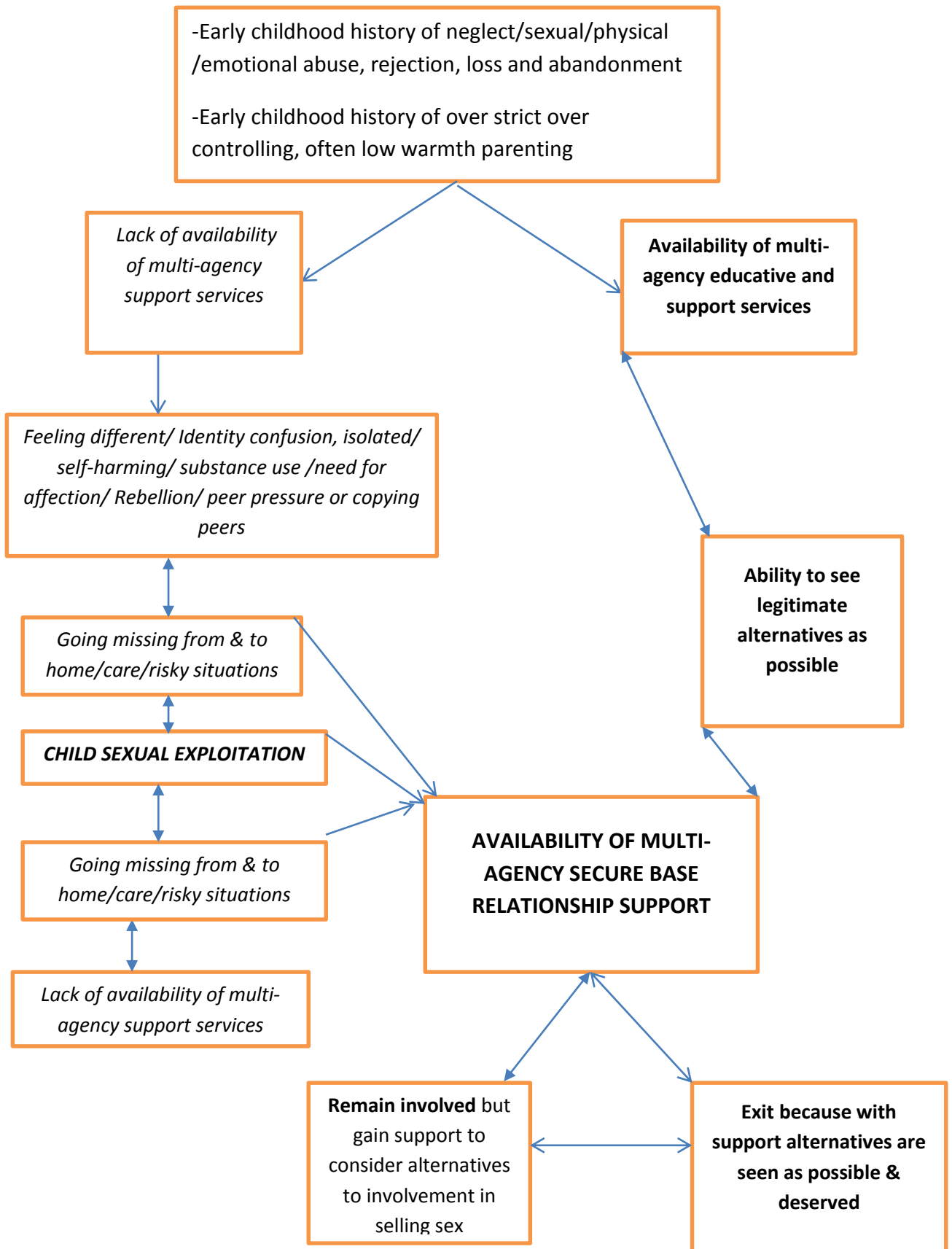
Having been given support by a specialist project Ali reflected *'now it is like I was someone looking in on it'.*

Chloe, who was just eighteen at the time of interview, had also been given support from a specialist agency and noted that *'it would've made a big difference if there'd been a project like this when I was younger'*

Sally observed that *'If I'd had somewhere like this way back- or at school, it never gets talked about at school.'* Kashva, who after being sexually exploited, eventually came to the attention of several agencies reflected, *'after it was found out, I got a lot of support...if only there could have been support before that.'*

Again, this indicates the need for early intervention a wide range of school based awareness raising programmes and clear information sharing between agencies, ideally in co-located multi-agency teams. These views accord with research indicating the need for early intervention and for programmes in schools to raise awareness of the risks of sexual exploitation (OCC 2013, Coffey 2014).

Table 4: Positive and negative pathway outcomes and levels of support



Being heard

Another theme emerging from the participants' narratives was of the need to be listened to and not judged. Jillie echoed the views of most participants in saying that she would advise professionals working with young people at risk of, or involved in, sexual exploitation to,

'Just listen, just actually listen and take into account what they are saying. Just remember what they actually say to you, because at the end of the day that's all we need, for someone to listen to us....I never had that.'

Other participants wanted to be involved in peer education and support.

'I just want to speak to them young girls and tell them they are better than that...I don't want them to turn out like me.' Sam

'I think they (specialist projects/social workers) should get someone in who has been there, done that, to speak to them to tell them their stories, like a sharp shock, just shock therapy, I think if someone had come in & told me all of this that I have been through, that they went through & that could happen to me I think I would think twice about it' Zee

Peer education and support is also recognised as having merit in the recent independent inquiry into child sexual exploitation in Greater Manchester (Coffey 2014). This approach also ensures that the expertise of young people who have been involved in being sexually exploited is valued, listened to and heard.

Perceptions of victimhood/vulnerability and agency /resilience

'Missing children are at risk of sexual exploitation and children go missing because they are being sexually exploited' (Coffey 2014:35)

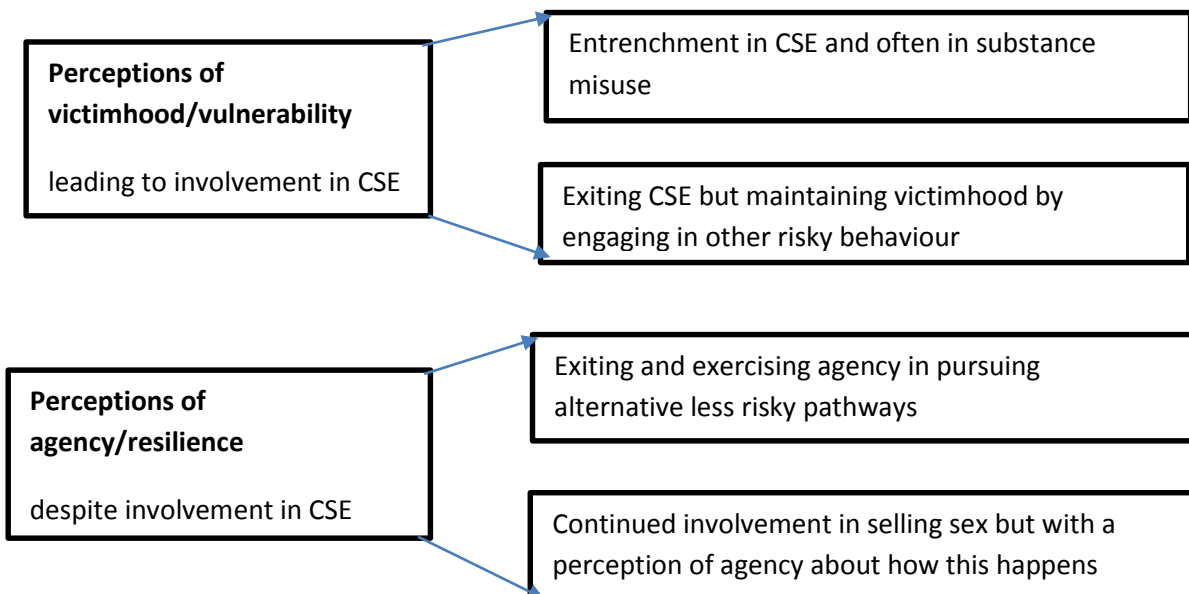
Participants' narratives fell into two broad subdividing groups in terms of their perceptions of their own sense of victimhood or agency/ vulnerability or resilience.

In the first group participants' perceptions of victimhood led either to further entrenchment in selling sex and often to substance abuse. Or they led to exiting but were accompanied by ongoing feelings of victimhood whatever the alternate route taken. This often involved swapping risky sexual exploitation, with equally risky substance misuse, other unsuitable relationships and/or other criminal activity.

The second group was one where perceptions of agency led to exiting and to seeing legitimate alternative pathways as possible. Or they led to continued involvement in selling sex as adults but feeling a greater sense of choice or agency in the ways that that took place.

It is not argued that the groups are mutually exclusive. Analysis of the participants' narratives suggests that they are often interlinked. Participants, at different stages in their lives, may move 'groups' depending on levels of support or their own developing sense of agency enabling them to perceive alternatives as possible. Alternatively lack of support and a continued sense of victimhood often prevents them from doing so.

Table 5: Perceptions of victimhood/vulnerability and agency /resilience



Unfortunately, in this sample several of the participants' pathways took a mainly negative, downward direction. Seven of the fifteen participants remain involved in selling sex. Of those, all seven said that they were, or had been, controlled by coercive pimps, the need to fund a drug habit or both. For them going missing often became a revolving door from one risky situation to the next.

Only three of those who remain involved felt that they are able to exercise some agency in choosing when they sell sex. Rachel, as an adult, felt that selling sex 'to a few regulars' was a choice that she was exercising agency over. Clara, also an adult now, spoke of 'only doing it when she really, really' feels she 'needs to' given that she is now on a methadone prescription and no longer needs to sell sex to fund her habit. She too spoke of having 'a few regulars' and said that she chose when and if she saw them. Jess, also an adult, spoke of not wanting to run the risk of being arrested and prevented from seeing her children if she worked on the streets so she has chosen to 'work off her phone' with regulars who she feels she knows, feels safer with and over whom she feels she exercises more control.

The remaining eight participants are no longer involved in sexual exploitation or selling sex as adults. Of those, four went on to become involved in other risky pursuits such as drug dealing, stealing or living with often violent drug dealers. As Jan noted,

'You try & get a normal well paid job but you can't because of your record. You're stuck in the system. You're left to earn money by breaking the law.'

All four went on to have children who became the catalyst to stopping or decreasing substance use but all remain involved in risky relationships with partners or their children's fathers which leaves them potentially vulnerable.

The other four participants who have ceased involvement have, with support, seen the possibility of alternative pursuits and themselves as having a right to pursue them. They felt that the support that they had received, mainly from specialist voluntary agencies, had made a difference to how they perceived themselves. Their sense of agency came in different forms and at different stages on their pathways. All four are currently taking qualifications and planning careers.

For two participants it was the start of a supportive relationship which made them see themselves differently. Ali for example, following harrowing experiences with older men she had met via the internet, recalled how she felt after meeting a boy the same age as her who wanted to go out with her.

'At the time I verged on thinking that I am not worth more than these weird guys. It was X who turned it around because somebody wanted me normally and not just wrongly.'

This and the long term support of a specialist project enabled her to build her sense of self-esteem and agency. Fizz, who was much further entrenched in being sexually exploited recalled that the father of her children,

'was the first person who didn't see me as a street whore and junkie'

Although the relationship eventually broke down it, and the birth of her children, became the catalyst to Fizz seeing alternatives as possible. She spoke of *'running away'* from the life and people with whom she had been living in order to succeed in making a new life.

'We moved away and I lost contact with those people and I always feel guilty that I had that opportunity and that will power when perhaps their stories were worse than mine and perhaps they couldn't.'

She is now volunteering for a specialist project, from which she has also received extensive support, and is involved in awareness raising programmes at a local college.

What is key to positive outcomes is the meaning given to significant experiences, risk and protective factors by those who find themselves at risk of, and involved in, sexual exploitation particularly those who are in the additionally vulnerable position of going missing.

For those who ascribe and internalise negative meanings to these factors a sense of victimhood and fatalistic inevitability about negative outcomes often becomes a self-fulfilling prophesy. Conversely, for those who see, or with support, are enabled to see, these factors as challenges to be overcome and learnt from, and themselves as deserving better, the outcomes can be more positive.

Conclusion

The aim of this study has been to gain an understanding of the perspectives of young people who have had experience of going missing from home or care and who have become involved in sexual exploitation and, for some, in substance misuse, in order for their expertise in their own experiences to inform service provision.

The sample also includes adult participants who gave retrospective accounts of their experiences of going missing and of being sexually exploited. What is of interest is that no significant differences were found in the recollected reasons given by the adult participants' and the young people for going missing, the pathways they took, or the support needs they identified.

Much has been learnt in recent years about the links between the 'going missing continuum' and the risk of child sexual exploitation, however apart from the added complexity of the increase in abuse via the internet this study indicates that the reasons for involvement appear not to have changed radically since Melrose noted that,

'Young people become involved in commercial sexual exploitation for a range of complex and interconnected – even overlapping – reasonsit is seldom possible to pinpoint a single 'cause'. Rather there is a complex interaction between a range of 'push' and 'pull' factors and between individual and environmental factors.' (Melrose 2004:22)

What appears to determine the routes taken is not only the impact of cumulative risk and protective factors during childhood and adolescence, in which going missing is a very clear risk factor, but the sense made of those risk or protective factors and experiences by young people at risk of, or involved in, sexual exploitation.

For some participants a variety of 'push' or 'pull' risk factors including going missing precipitated them into sexual exploitation. For others sexual exploitation resulted in them going missing, often finding themselves in even riskier situations. This cause and effect aspect of the going missing continuum is a recognised pattern (Smeaton 2012, Sharp 2012) and indicates a need for a holistic early intervention approach to service intervention.

What is clear from the narratives of the participants in this study is the central importance of the availability of a wide range of awareness raising and support services ranging from school based, early awareness raising about the risks, to long-

term relationship based, therapeutic support for those at risk of, or involved in, sexual exploitation, their families, safeguarding professionals and the wider community.

The need for *all* local authorities to make child sexual exploitation a higher priority is reflected in the recent Ofsted report Ofsted (2014). The report also notes that many local authorities are failing in their duty of care to Looked After children going missing. They state that '*not all children who go missing from home or care get good support on their return*' (Ofsted 2014:6).

Additionally, the report recommends that local authorities and partners should '*ensure that sufficient appropriate therapeutic support is available to meet the needs of local young people at risk of or who have suffered from child sexual exploitation, including care leavers*' (Ofsted 2014:9). As table 6 indicates support should be available at all stages of a person's pathway.

Recommendations

- The significance of going missing as an indicator of the risk of sexual exploitation should be recognised by safeguarding agencies as a priority and acted upon in a co-ordinated way. It is clear, particularly in light of recent reports on Rochdale, Rotherham and Oxford and the Ofsted thematic inspection (Ofsted 2014), that LSCBs must be vigilant and proactive in developing effective joined up policies and procedures that ensure no child or young person 'falls through the net' as was the case for several participants in this study. There is a need for clearer communication and understanding of the issues by professionals, young people themselves, their parents and the wider community. There is much to be learnt from some of the excellent practice that is already being undertaken in some local authorities.
- 'Kashva's' experiences indicate a need for 'joined up thinking' and planning between agencies. Co-located multi-agency teams and clear information sharing practices appear to be the way forward in identifying and supporting those at risk of sexual exploitation It is also an effective means of gathering and, where appropriate, sharing information about perpetrators.
- As several participants suggested, the voices and perceptions of young people with experience of sexual exploitation must be a central part of multi-agency professional training and peer education programmes. Local Authority LSCBs must ensure that awareness raising is undertaken with young people through schools about the risks of going missing and of sexual exploitation. There are many innovative initiatives which have been developed to address these issues including drama workshops and peer educators. Here again, examples of good practice should be built upon. Awareness raising and support should also be available for parents and the wider community to recognise the warning signs

and understand what to do to ensure early intervention by the appropriate safeguarding agencies.

- What is currently largely missing from service provision are the long-term relationship based therapeutic services. The need for '*sufficient appropriate therapeutic support to meet the needs of local young people at risk of or who have suffered from sexual exploitation, including care leavers*' is also recognised in the Ofsted report (2014:9) recommendations.

Timely, non-judgemental, relationship based, long term support was consistently identified by participants in this study as vital to them. This 'secure base' provision which, for most of this vulnerable group, has been missing in their lives is important in reducing vulnerability by aiming to develop resilience and promote agency for young and adult people who are at risk of, involved in or experiencing the consequences of sexual exploitation and selling sex.

'The project has made a big difference. I couldn't have coped without them, they are a big part of my life'. Clara

'You've got to go at their pace, you've got to listen, you've got to get the bigger picture' Sam

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Appendices



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Dear Project/Team Manager,

Routes into sexual exploitation: going missing, agency and victimhood. An exploration of the perceptions of young people's involved

I am a researcher in the School of Social Work at the University of East Anglia and am currently undertaking a research project on young people's experiences of involvement in sexual exploitation swapping and selling sex particularly those who have experience of the care system or of running away from home or care. The aim is to understand more of their perspective of those experiences and to examine whether there are any identifiable factors which determine that involvement. This knowledge will be used to raise awareness of preventative strategies which may be useful in improving multi-agency practice in this area.

I would be grateful for your help in identifying people to interview. If you know of anyone (male or female) aged 16 or over who would be prepared to be interviewed at the project offices for approximately an hour to an hour and a half at a time convenient to them I would be very grateful if you could get in touch. Participants are welcome to have a supporter with them if they choose to do so. (I will be offering a £15 voucher as a thank you for participating)

Participation is voluntary, and the person interviewed would, of course, be free to withdraw at any point. All information would be anonymised and treated as confidential unless it involves harm to the participant and/ or others when it will be passed on as required. If the young person is subject to a care order consent will also be obtained from the Local Authority.

If you would like to discuss this further I would be very happy to speak to you.

Yours sincerely

Dr Jane Dodsworth



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CONSENT FORM

My name is Dr Jane Dodsworth I am a researcher in the School of Social Work at the University of East Anglia and am undertaking a research project on:

Localised grooming into sex work: an exploration of young women's perceptions of involvement

I can be contacted at SWP, EFB, UEA, Norwich, NR4 7TJ (01603 XXXXXX)

Email address: jane.dodsworth@uea.ac.uk

Thank you for agreeing to take part in this study. After reading the following please sign to confirm your informed consent to participate in the research:

- I confirm that I have read and understood the information provided on the research project. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily.
- I understand that participation is voluntary and that I am free, without giving a reason, to stop at any time, decline to answer any question and/or withdraw my consent to my contribution being included in the research up to one month after the interview has taken place; data will then be destroyed.
- I understand that the information I give will be confidential and anonymous.

- I understand that anonymised quotations may be used in the final research paper which may be published but my name and identity will not be divulged in this document.
- I understand that I can have access to the published paper.

- I agree to take part in the above research project.

Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed for this study.

Name of participant:

Date:

Signature:



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Research project on: young people's views and experiences of being in care, running away from care or home and becoming involved in selling sex

I am a researcher at the University of East Anglia and I am doing some research on young people's views about, and experiences of, becoming involved in sexual exploitation, swapping and selling sex particularly young people who are or have been in care or have ever run away from home or care. I hope to understand more of what young people think about those experiences and to see whether that helps find ways for services to understand young people's views & build services which take those views into account. I would be very grateful for your help.

If you are interested in being interviewed, or know of anyone else who is known to the project and would be prepared to be interviewed at the project offices, for approximately one hour to an hour and a half at a time convenient to you I would be very grateful if you could get in touch. You are welcome to bring a supporter of your choice with you to the interview if you want to.

Being interviewed is voluntary, and you would be free to withdraw at any point. All information would be anonymised and treated as confidential unless it involves harm to the participant and/ or others when it will be passed on as required.

If after the interview you feel you need, & agree to, further support I will make sure that that is provided. I will be offering a £15 voucher to say thank you for taking part in the study.

If you would be prepared to be interviewed please let leave your contact details in the box in the project office or, if you prefer, ring me or email me and we can discuss the project and arrange a time for an interview.

Many thanks.

Yours sincerely

Jane Dodsworth

Young people's views and experiences of being in care, running away from care or home and becoming involved in selling sex

I am a researcher in at the University of East Anglia and am currently undertaking a research project on young people's experiences of involvement in sexual exploitation swapping and selling sex particularly those who have experience of the care system or of running away from home or care.

Interview schedule

I am doing some research on young people's experience of involvement in sex work and how they first became involved. I am interested in listening to your experience of how you became involved, what led to your involvement and what has happened since.

The results of the research may be published to help professionals understand the experience of sex work better, but the information will be anonymised and you will not be identifiable

I also want to remind you that you do not have to answer any question you would rather not answer and can stop the interview at any point. You can withdraw up to a month after the interview has taken place if you wish to do so. I would like to tape the interview to make sure that I have got down exactly what you say and not just what I think I heard.

I want to discuss your experience of involvement in sexual exploitation, swapping & selling sex –but it would help me understand how you became involved if I could ask you about your memories of your childhood, family, schooldays and friends. We can then go on to talk about your experience of sexual exploitation and sex work and finally what is happening now—if that is ok with you.

I most want to hear what you feel is important, so please tell me what you think are the important things.

Are you happy to go ahead?

How old you are now?

How old you were when you became involved in sex work?

Family History

Early childhood

- Where were you born?
- Who was in your family then?
- Where did you live?
- What did your family do for a living?
- What would a day in your family life be like when you were little?
- What was your relationship with your parents like as a young child?
- Who were you closest to when you were a child?

- How did you get on with your siblings?
- How would you describe yourself as a child?
- How do you think your mother/father/siblings would describe you when you were very young?
- Tell me about friends when you were very young
- What are your happiest memories of your childhood?
- What are your saddest memories?
- Where you ever made to feel unhappy/rejected/abused by your birth family?
- Was there a time when you were separated from your family?
- Have you ever run away from home or care?
- Were there any other adults who were important to you as a child?
- Is there anything else you think is important to know about your early childhood?

School

- What was school like for you when you were very young?
- How do you think your teachers would describe you?
- Thinking about when you were a teenager-what was school like then?
- How would your teachers have described you when you were a teenager?
- How old were you when you left school?
- What did you want to do when you left?
- What did you do?

Teenage years

- How would you describe yourself as a teenager?
- How do you think your parents would describe you?
- What was your relationship with your parent/s/carers like when you were a teenager?
- Who did you live with as a teenager?
- Tell me about friends when you were a teenager
- How do you think your friends would have described you as a teenager?
- Happiest time?
- Saddest time?
- Is there anything else you think is important to know about your teenage years?

Sexual exploitation/Sex Work

- Can you tell me how you first got involved?
- Were you using or being asked to use drugs or alcohol when you became involved?
- Had you run away from care/home when you became involved?
- Was anyone else involved in you becoming involved?
- Who and how were they involved?
- Did you want to continue or not?
- Could you/did you talk to anyone about it?
- Who?
- Did anyone in your family know?

- What did they do/say?
- What do you think they felt about it?
- Can you describe your feelings about your first experience?
- Is there anything else you think is important to know about how you first became involved?

Current circumstances

- Are you still involved in sexual exploitation/sex work?
- Can you tell me about what is happening now?
- What do you think led to you exiting/staying involved?
- Do you think anything or anyone influenced your decision?
- Is there anything that would lead you to exit/return to sexual exploitation sex work?
- What if any help or support have you received & from where?
- What help or support would you have liked/would still like?

Adulthood

- What kind of person are you now would you say?
- How do you think other people would describe you?
- What is your relationship with your parents like for you now you are an adult?
- Who is in your family now?
- Who do you live with? (children/partner etc)
- How would your partner/child/ren describe you?
- What would someone get to know about you if they got to know you well?
- Do you think there is a link between how you are now and the past?

Future

- How do you see yourself in 5/10 years time?
- If you had 3 wishes what would they be?
- What would you wish for your child/ren?
- What advice would you give to a social worker /outreach worker or other agency worker about working with a young person who may be becoming or is involved in sex work?

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