



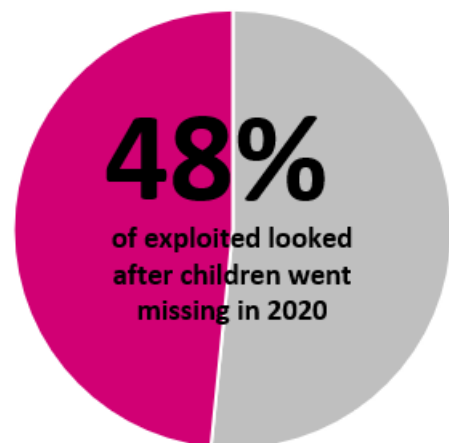
Away and at risk:

The scale of exploited children going missing from care in the UK, 2018 - 2020

This short report evidences the scale of exploited looked after children going missing from care, finding that this group of children are amongst those at highest risk of going missing, and going missing repeatedly. This data was gathered from local authorities in response to a Freedom of Information request.

Away and at risk reveals that, in 2020:

- **3,033** looked after children were identified by local authorities as being exploited.
- **Almost half (48%)** of these children went missing from their care setting (1,468 of 3,033).
- Each child who went missing in 2020 went missing an average of **10.6 times**.



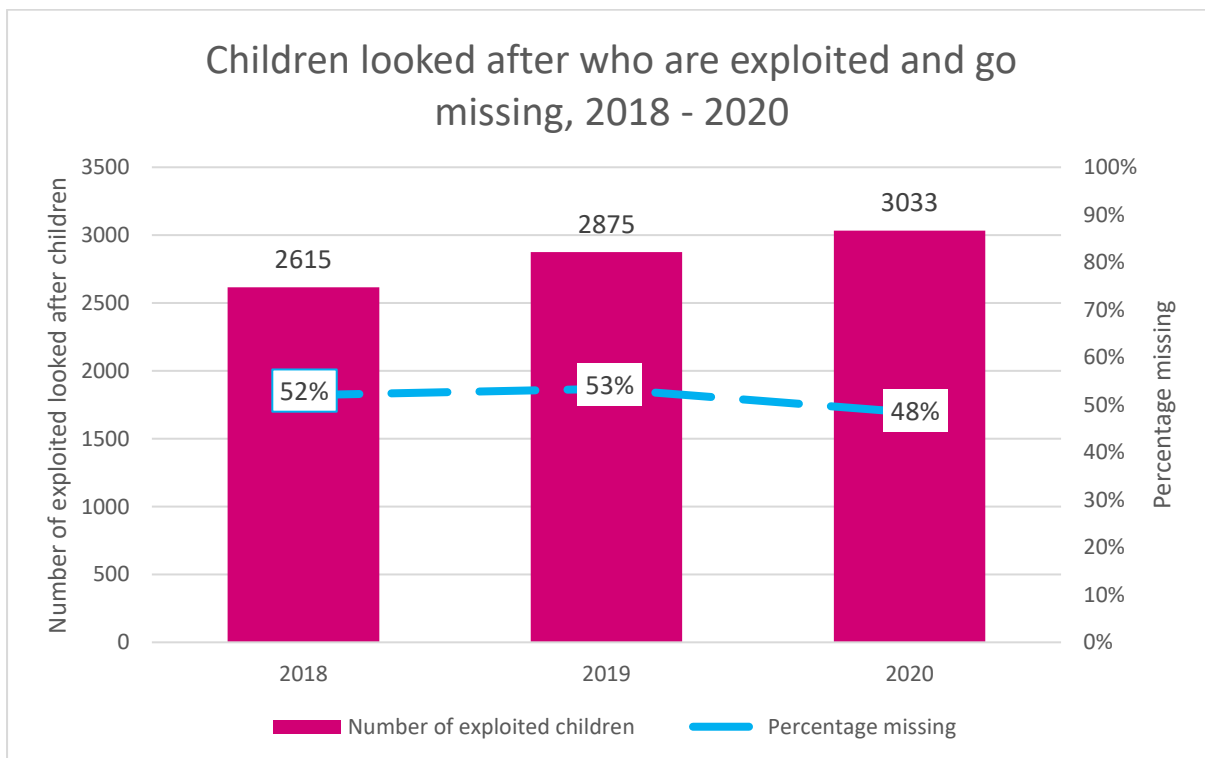
This data shows that exploited children are much more likely to go missing from care than the general looked after children population. In 2020-21, 1 in 10 looked after children were reported missing,¹ whereas for exploited looked after children this data shows that 1 in 2 (48%) were reported missing. This is in comparison to 1 in 200 children in the UK being reported missing each year.

¹ 10,880 children looked after were reported missing in 2021: *Children looked after in England including adoption, reporting year 2021*, <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/children-looked-after-in-england-including-adoptions/2021>.



The rate of repeat missing is also notable in this data, with each missing exploited child going missing an average of **10.6 times** in 2020. Again, this is much higher than for any other group of children. Other high-risk groups of missing children have previously been identified as looked after children (6.6 missing episodes per year), and trafficked children (7.2 missing episodes each year).

Over the 3 years from 2018 to 2020, there has been an increase in the number of exploited children in local authority care:



And while the proportion of missing children has decreased slightly in 2020 compared to 2018 and 2019, this should be seen in the context of the pandemic, when the UK faced a number of lockdowns and related measures.

Links Between Missing and Exploitation

Previous research has shown that exploited children a group at high risk of going missing. Missing episodes are both key indicators of exploitation and common consequences of both criminal and sexual exploitation:

- Children will regularly go missing whilst they are being exploited in CCE and CSE activity. Young people can be lured or coerced away from safety by groomers or go missing whilst trying to escape the consequences of exploitation. They will often be missing while being exploited, for example through county lines. As such, going missing is a recognised risk factor for exploitation.²
- 1 in 7 children who completed return home interviews with Missing People between July 2017 - March 2018 disclosed that they had been sexually exploited, and 1 in 12 were either a current or past victim of criminal or another form of child exploitation.³

This new data confirms these findings, while also providing evidence that the scale of exploited children going missing from local authority care is exceptionally high.

Exploitation in the pandemic

Data from 2020 shows the number of exploited looked after children going missing during the first year of the covid-19 pandemic. Previous research has shown an unclear picture about the impact of the pandemic on exploitation. Restrictions brought in initially in March 2020 were suspected by some of hampering activities of exploiters due to the reduction in children's exposure to the people that could potentially do them harm during lockdowns,⁴

² See for example, *All of us were broken*, Missing People, 2019: https://www.missingpeople.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/MP_Allofuswerebrokenreport_A4_Final_ONLINE.pdf

³ *A Safer Return*, Missing People, 2019: https://www.missingpeople.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/A_Safer_Return-full.pdf

⁴ *Isolated and struggling: Social isolation, and the risks of child maltreatment, in lockdown and beyond*, NSPCC Evidence team, June 2020: <https://learning.nspcc.org.uk/media/2246/isolated-and-struggling-social-isolation-risk-child-maltreatment-lockdown-and-beyond.pdf> p.13

and due to challenges in travelling undetected.⁵ There were also reports of significant reductions in the number of children reported missing during the early pandemic.⁶

However, the pandemic has also hampered the ability of frontline agencies to identify and risk assess child exploitation, and restrictions are suspected to have increased children's exposure to some types of exploitation, including online.⁷ County lines operating models are thought to have evolved, with young people remaining in trap houses for longer, more local children being recruited, and tactics changing to avoid being stopped in public.⁸

This may somewhat explain the reduction in the proportion of exploited children going missing from care in 2020, despite the continuing upward trend in the number of victims being identified. Concerningly if this is the case, the lifting of restrictions may mean even greater increases in the future.

Methodology

The study uses data collected through freedom of information requests to 218 local authorities across the UK, asking how many exploited children went missing from care in the years 2018-2020. For all three years, responses were received from 81% of local authorities (176 of 218). Local authorities were asked:

“Please release the following information relating to looked after children in the care of your authority for the periods:

- 1 January 2018 to 31 December 2018
- 1 January 2019 to 31 December 2019
- 1 January 2020 to 31 December 2020

1. The total number of looked after children in the care of your authority that have identified as being a victim of exploitation.
2. The total number of looked after children in the care of your authority identified as being a victim of exploitation and that have gone missing or absent.
3. The total number of individual incidents (which could involve the same child on more than one occasion) of looked after children in the care of your authority identified as being a victim of exploitation and that have gone missing or absent.”

⁵ *County lines after COVID – a new threat?* Crest Advisory, May 2020:

https://www.crestadvisory.com/amp/county-lines-after-covid-a-new-threat?_twitter_impression=true ;
'Coronavirus: County lines drug dealers 'stick out like a sore thumb' during lockdown, say police,' *The Independent*, 20 April 2020:

<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/crime/coronavirus-lockdown-county-lines-drugs-street-police-arrest-a9473301.html>

⁶ *County lines after COVID – a new threat?* Crest Advisory, May 2020:

https://www.crestadvisory.com/amp/county-lines-after-covid-a-new-threat?_twitter_impression=true

⁷ *Isolated and struggling: Social isolation, and the risks of child maltreatment, in lockdown and beyond*, NSPCC Evidence team, June 2020: <https://learning.nspcc.org.uk/media/2246/isolated-and-struggling-social-isolation-risk-child-maltreatment-lockdown-and-beyond.pdf> p.12

⁸ <https://www.nottingham.ac.uk/research/beacons-of-excellence/rights-lab/resources/reports-and-briefings/2020/november/briefing-the-impact-of-covid-19-on-child-criminal-exploitation.pdf> p.1