Prevention of child trafficking and exploitation

A synthesis of Modern Slavery and Human Rights Policy and Evidence Centre funded research on child trafficking and child exploitation (2020-24)

Report 1: Methods and Approach

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Authors: **Dr Anna Skeels, Faaiza Bashir**

1. Introduction

This report is the **first of three reports** which, combined, along with a **Research Summary**, provide an evidence synthesis of the Modern Slavery and Human Rights Policy and Evidence Centre's (PEC) funded research portfolio on child trafficking and exploitation from Phase 1 (2020-24).

Modern Slavery and Human Rights PEC was created to improve understanding of modern slavery and to transform the effectiveness of laws and policies to address it. It has funded research across four priority areas: preventing modern slavery, survivor needs and enhancing victim support, modern slavery in business supply chains and the effectiveness of legal enforcement measures, as well as a responsive area focused on Covid-19.

Whilst a dedicated focus on children is not one of these priorities, all have relevance, to different degrees, to children. In addition, seven of the published 47 research projects funded by Modern Slavery and Human Rights PEC in Phase 1 are wholly focused on children.

These seven research projects include: (1) a desk-based review of child exploitation prevention measures (Celiksoy et al, 2024) (2) children's experiences of the Scottish Guardianship Service (Grant et al, 2024) (3) an evaluation of the Independent Child Trafficking Guardianship (ICTG) service in England and Wales (Skeels et al, 2024) (4) creating a positive outcomes framework for children (Hynes et al, 2022) (5) a trial of open conversations as a prevention measure for children with SEND in education (Franklin et al, 2024) (6) intersections between safeguarding policies and modern slavery for children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) (Franklin et al, 2024) and (7) an exploration of risks for children in Home Office operated hotels (Ayeb-Karlsson et al, 2024).

The purpose of the evidence synthesis is to draw together learning on how the seven funded child-focused studies connect, both explicitly and implicitly, on a range of topics, as well as on the approaches taken to research and knowledge production. This includes exploring how data might be combined in new and innovative ways.

Modern Slavery and Human Rights PEC will use this work to draw links between its funded research projects, furthering its objectives on making these more than the sum of their parts. The hope is also that this synthesis will help to identify common areas of evidence, gaps for further exploration and research for Phase 2 and recommendations that Modern Slavery and Human Rights PEC can feed into its policy-focused work.

This report (**Report 1: Methods and Approach**) focuses on **the nature of the funded research portfolio on children** in relation to population of interest, type of exploitation and geography within the UK, as well as methodology and approach employed, ethics and research limitations.

2. What is the nature of the funded research on children?

2.1. Population of interest

The seven reports on child trafficking and exploitation combined focus on and engage a range of 'child' population groups (in relation to age, gender, nationality and disability, for example) including both those who are at risk of and/or who have lived experience of exploitation.
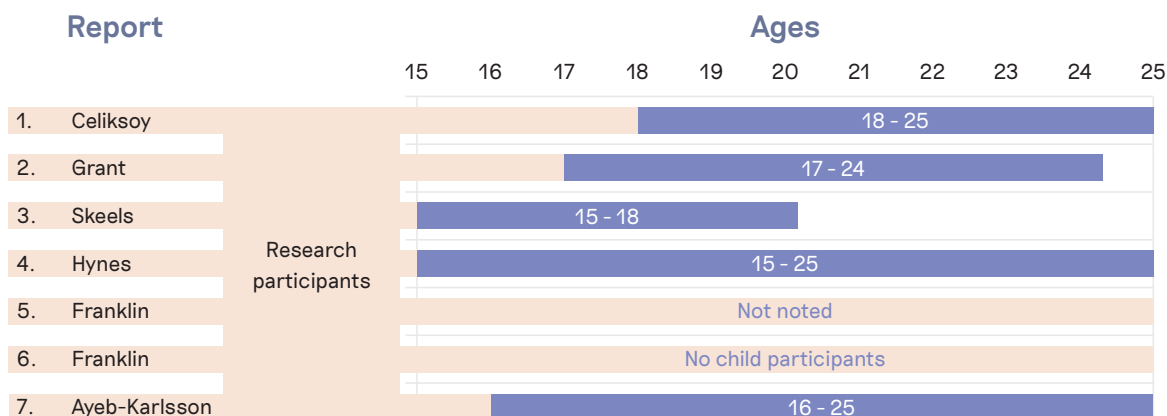
Age

Under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) – and across much of UK law, including in relation to modern slavery[1] – a 'child' is defined as anyone under the age of 18. The term 'young people' is often used for older children or adolescents, recognising that this is a separate developmental stage. 'Young adult' can also be used for children viewed as transitioning to adulthood from age 18. Other statutory definitions relate to specific needs and vulnerabilities as well as context, for example children with SEND in education are entitled to the same degree of support up to the age of 25. It is also important to note that in the context of child trafficking and exploitation, children's ages are often disputed or contested and therefore children may appear as adults in official or administrative statistics and, conversely, adults as children.

The 'children' who are the subject of Modern Slavery and Human Rights PEC's funded research vary in relation to age. Celiksoy (2024) focuses on children and young adults aged 0-25; Grant (2023) and Skeels (2024) are concerned respectively with children and young people supported by the Scottish Guardianship Service (0-25) and ICTG Service (0-17 with some support post-18). In practice, however, Skeels (2024) reports that the vast majority of those supported by the ICTG service (95%) are over the age of 13. Hynes' (2022) child rights-informed focus relates to children under the age of 18. Franklin's focus in (2024a) is children in education with SEND (a 'child' is someone up to the age of 16 and a 'young person' age 16-25) and in (2024b) ages 0-25. Ayeb-Karlsson (2024) is focused on children under the age of 18 accommodated in Home Office hotels.

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1. The National Referral Mechanism (NRM) uses this definition of the child, articulated as '17 and under'

Table 1 below shows the age of children engaged as *research participants* in the research. The youngest research participant is age 15 with no younger children directly involved.

Table 1: Age of children and young people participating in the research

Report	Ages										
	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25
1. Celiksoy				18 - 25							
2. Grant			17 - 24								
3. Skeels	15 - 18										
4. Hynes	15 - 25										
5. Franklin	Not noted										
6. Franklin	No child participants										
7. Ayeb-Karlsson		16 - 25									

Research participants

Gender

Males represent a higher proportion of identified child trafficking and exploitation statistics in the NRM. Reflecting this, in Grant's (2023) study, 63% of young people (n=105) in the Scottish Guardianship Service case file data over an 11-year period to October 2022 were identified as male and 37% (n=61) as female and ICTG service data for England and Wales in Skeels (2024) shows a greater proportion of male referrals to the service (77%) for the period February 2017 to September 2022.

The gender breakdown of children and young people engaged directly as research participants in the studies is mostly not recorded, except for Skeels (2024) where 20 males and 5 females made up the 25 young people participating directly in the research and Ayeb-Karlsson (2024) where five young adult research participants aged 20-25 included four males and one female.

Nationality

The most recorded country of origin for child referrals to the NRM for 2023 is the UK. ICTG service data from Skeels (2024) shows 50% of children in the service were recorded as being UK nationals.

Three of the seven child-focused studies (Grant, 2023; Hynes, 2022 and Ayeb-Karlsson, 2024) are wholly concerned with children who are not UK-born and who have migrated to the UK. For example, Grant (2023) records 12 countries of origin from case file analysis for the Scottish Guardianship Service, which solely supports unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, with a very high percentage

of children (compared to England) coming from Vietnam (73%). The largest proportion of children by country of origin after this come from Sudan, China, Somalia and Nigeria (4% to 6% each). It is suggested in the report that these demographics warrant further investigation:

> *'There is presently no clear understanding of why this pattern has emerged. While professionals had on-going concerns about the number of Vietnamese young people trafficked to Scotland, there remains much confusion and uncertainty, with limited understanding of the high representation of Vietnamese nationals of NRM data for Scotland (ECPAT 2019; Rigby et al 2020).'*
> **Grant, 2023:13**

Celiksoy (2024) and Skeels (2024) are concerned with both UK-born and non-UK born children. Two reports (Franklin, 2024a and 2024b) focus solely on children with SEND who have been internally trafficked within the UK. Franklin (2024b) cautions against the assumption that these children are all UK-born and considers this to be an under-researched area of need.

For the studies which engage children and young people directly in the research, the nationality of these research participants, where known, is shown in **Table 2** below. The same information is portrayed in map form in **Figure 1**.

Table 2: Nationality of children and young people participating in the research

		Report						
		1. Celiksoy	2. Grant	3. Skeels	4. Hynes	5. Franklin	6. Franklin	7. Ayeb-Karlsson
Nationality	UK			●				
	Non-UK	●*	●					
	Afghanistan			●	●			
	Albania			●	●			●
	Brunei			●				
	Ethiopia			●	●			
	Eritrea			●	●			●
	Ghana			●	●			
	Guinea			●				
	Nigeria				●			
	Sierra Leone			●	●			
	Sudan			●	●			
	Syria							●
	Vietnam			●	●			
	Not stated					●	●	

*Mostly West African

Figure 1: Nationalities of children and young people participating in the research
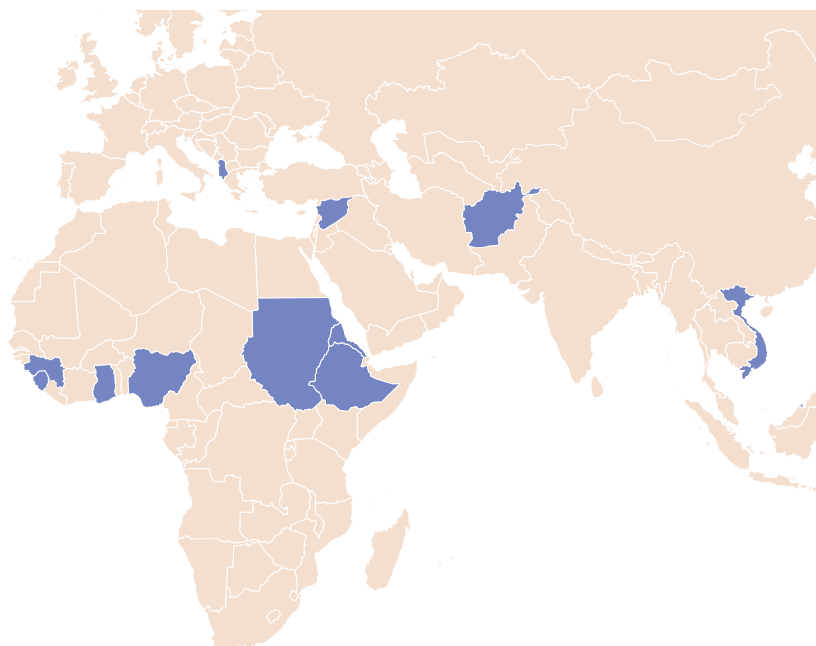
Children with SEND

Children and young people with Special Educational Needs or Disabilities (SEND) not only have vulnerabilities as children, but face additional barriers and risks related to their communication, learning or neurodivergent needs which are often unmet. Franklin (2024a) defines children and young people with SEND as those who have additional needs, whether through mental health, physical needs, foetal alcohol spectrum disorder or neurodiversity, as well as children and young people whose experiences and trauma significantly impacts their ability to access education and learn.

Two reports (Franklin 2024a and 2024b) are solely concerned with children and young people with undiagnosed or recognised SEND in the UK. Young people with SEND at risk of or having experienced exploitation are also engaged by Franklin (2024a) as research participants.

SEND is not mentioned in four reports (Grant, 2023; Skeels, 2024; Hynes, 2022 and Ayeb-Karlsson, 2024) and it is not clear if, or how many of, the young research participants involved in these studies have diagnosed or undiagnosed SEND. Celiksoy (2024) references the work of Franklin (2024a) to include SEND as a risk factor in relation to the prevention of exploitation of children.

Given the number of children with SEND in the UK – for example, Franklin (2024b) notes that over 1.5 million children were identified in July 2023 in England alone as having SEN, plus the many children with undiagnosed, awaiting diagnosis or unrecognised SEND – this seems an oversight for those reports where SEND is not mentioned or explored, although this may not always be possible or appropriate due to data limitations or other concerns.

Type of exploitation

Children and young people may experience multiple and intersecting forms of exploitation, commonly thought to include child criminal exploitation (CCE), child sexual exploitation (CSE), child labour, domestic servitude, organ harvesting and child marriage. Franklin (2024b) draws on Cooper et al, 2017) to refer to 17 forms of child trafficking and exploitation offences identified by the Home Office.

None of the research studies have a type or types of child exploitation as an explicit, substantive focus. However, one of Franklin's studies (2024a) notes that the exploration of child exploitation and SEND is only in relation to CCE and CSE and the other study (2024b) notes that most of the data collected for the research refers to these two forms of child exploitation.

No information is shared by any of the research studies on the nature of exploitation experienced by any of the young research participants. This is ethical and appropriate, including for purposes of anonymity and not required for the purpose of the research.

Geography (UK)

The seven studies on child trafficking and exploitation combined have a broad UK coverage, with the notable exception of any substantive focus on Northern Ireland. This information is presented as a map and in tabular form in figures 3 and 4 below:

Celiksoy's (2024) study is UK-wide but not all strands of the research or research findings relate to all parts of the UK (**Table 3** and **Figure 2**). For example, the Freedom of Information request was sent to local authorities in England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland, but it is unclear whether a response from any local authority in Northern Ireland was received, whilst there were responses from the other three nations. Also, local authority policy documents were not reviewed for Scotland, but only for England, Northern Ireland and Wales.

Grant (2023) and Skeels (2024) focus on support services with a defined geographical focus: Scotland in the first instance and across two thirds of local authorities in England and Wales for the latter.[2] Hynes' (2022) research with young people is undertaken in England and Scotland; Franklin's research (2024a) covers only schools as 'sites of protection' in England and in the study (2024b) Franklin explores policies, practices and experiences in England and Wales. Ayeb-Karlsson (2024) takes a micro-geographic focus and is explicitly concerned with Brighton and Hove.

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2. The Home Office has recently released a Request for Information on commissioning the ICTG service across the whole of England and Wales from 2025.

Table 3: Geographical focus of the research on children

		Report						
		1. Celiksoy	2. Grant	3. Skeels	4. Hynes	5. Franklin	6. Franklin	7. Ayeb-Karlsson
Geography	UK-wide	●						
	England			●	●	●	●	
	Wales			●			●	
	Scotland		●		●			
	Northern Ireland							
	Local population (Brighton and Hove)							●

Figure 2: Map showing geographical focus of research on children

1, 2 & 4

1

Report 1 is UK-wide

1, 3 & 6

1, 3, 4, 5 & 6

7
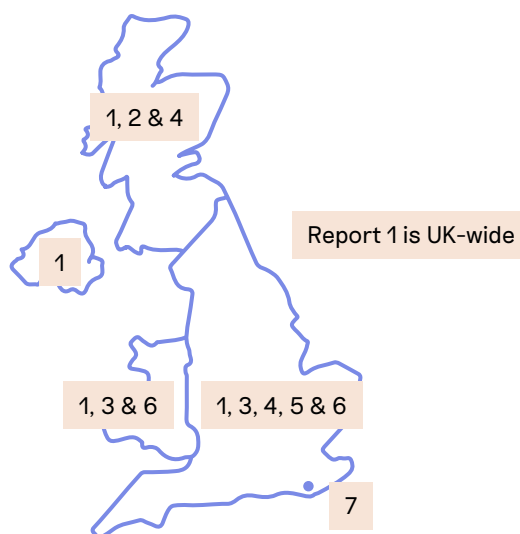
2.2 Methodology and Approach

Table 4 summarises the approaches, methods and data employed across the seven child-focused studies funded by Modern Slavery and Human Rights PEC. From this table, we can see that:

- **A rich variety of research methods have been utilised in these investigations**, including systematic literature and scoping reviews, administrative data analysis, a Freedom of Information (FoI) request, rapid review (of toolkits), global call for practice evidence, focus group discussions, online consultations, semi-structured interviews, case file review and analysis, Q-methodology, legal and empirical storytelling, case studies and a creative participatory 'toolkit' approach.

- **Multiple methods have been employed within each study's research design** (ranging from three to six, see **Appendix** for further detail) suggesting that findings and recommendations are highly reliable, verified by more than one primary data source within each study (see Hynes, 2022, as one example of such 'triangulation'). This rigour is strengthened by findings in the reports cross-referencing extant research or referencing prior research in their respective fields, including from academic articles, other primary research and Government and policy reports. The use of systematic literature reviews (for example, Celiksoy, 2024), a method widely agreed to be both comprehensive and scientifically reliable, adds further rigour. Hynes (2022) use of a 'systematic scoping review' approach incorporates the benefits of a systematic approach (e.g., transparency and thoroughness) with flexibility to be more iterative where needed to navigate the complexity of the concepts studied and the related fields of literature under investigation. Two projects engaged a group of children and young people affected by human trafficking to inform research methods and design (Skeels, 2024 and Franklin 2024b).

- **Quantitative data analysis (four of seven studies) takes the form of descriptive statistics using administrative and service-related data,** including publicly available data from the UK Government (for example the NRM), novel analysis of data sets secured through data sharing agreements (e.g. data from the ICTG service and Scottish Guardianship Service) and data secured through responses to Requests for Information (e.g. local authorities). Researchers use this data to explain the nature and prevalence of child trafficking and exploitation, as well as to better understand the population and characteristics of children and young people affected. Skeels (2024) and Grant (2023) take a novel approach through their independent analysis of ICTG and Scottish Guardianship Service data sets, data previously analysed internally by the Home Office. Data from these two support services is also scrutinised over extensive periods of time. A few studies highlight the limitations of the administrative data available on child trafficking and exploitation and this is discussed later in this report.

- **Novel creative, participatory approaches have been utilised**, for example:
  - Hynes (2022) undertakes a 12-month research project co-developing a new positive outcomes framework with young survivors of human trafficking. The approach taken is underpinned by the four **Guiding Principles of the UNCRC** (UN Convention on the Rights of the Child) and draws on **Lundy's model of participation** based on the UNCRC's Article 12. Hynes (2022) employs **a creative 'toolkit' approach** which includes a range of arts, talking, storytelling and multimedia-based activities.
  - Skeels (2024) uses **Q-methodology (or 'Q')** to engage young survivors in evaluating the ICTG service. Q-methodology is a qualitative approach with a statistical component which *'draw[s] out patterns, areas of difference and consensus on a particular area of focus or theme where a range of*

different perspectives are possible (Watts and Stenner, 2012)'. Using innovative methods such as Q-methodology and a creative toolkit approach to conduct research with young survivors of modern slavery could help further widen the scope of methods available and used in practice within this domain.

- Ayeb-Karlsson (2024) uses a **storytelling method** in interviews with unaccompanied children seeking asylum where open-ended questions allow opportunities for the participants to fully explore their perceptions, life experiences, opinions, and values, with empirical insights guiding the narrative.

In addition:

- Celiksoy (2024) employs a **Freedom of Information (FOI) request** to local authorities, a novel approach not utilised in any other report and additionally far reaching (requesting information from local authorities who made NRM referrals between 2018-23).
- Franklin (2024b) undertakes a mapping and analysis of relevant law, policy and guidance relevant to protecting the specific needs of children with SEND. The analysis uses a **15-point critical appraisal framework** co-developed with the study's advisory group to examine areas such as recognition of increased vulnerability and specific duties to meet additional needs and has potential for use by other researchers with other groups of children and young people in relation to modern slavery.

- **Two studies (Skeels, 2024; Franklin, 2024b) engaged young people not just as research participants but as part of the research process itself**, with young people advising and providing a child-friendly steer on the research. Skeels (2024) worked with Barnardo's ICTG service to set up a Young People's Advisory Group to help shape research design, analysis of findings and dissemination of results. Franklin (2024b) involved an established research group of children and young people with SEND, some with experience of modern slavery, in providing their feedback on findings and informing the recommendations developed by the research.

- **One study conducted research with the parents or carers** of children and young people who had lived experience of modern slavery (Franklin, 2024b), enabling them to provide a strong, high-level overview of what their children were experiencing and connecting this to legal and policy frameworks in the research. The findings from this study suggest that this is an important population group to engage, where possible, to form a more holistic understanding of the experiences of children and young people at risk, or who have lived experience, of modern slavery.

Table 4: Research design, methodology and sampling across the portfolio

	Report						
	1. Celiksoy (2024)	2. Grant (2023)	3. Skeels (2024)	4. Hynes (2022)	5. Franklin (2024a)	6. Franklin (2024b)	7. Ayeb-Karlsson (2024)
Sampling							
	Freedom of Information sent to LAs making child NRM referrals 2018-23 Purposive sampling of key informants	Snowball sampling (professionals for online consultation)	Purposive sampling of YP and practitioners	Purposive sampling of YP	Not included (draft)	Recruitment of parents from national vol support org Convenience sampling of LA areas for focus groups	Purposive sampling ofkey informants Controlled snowball sampling (UASC)
Methodology							
Systematic review	✓ n=66			✓ UK: n=86 Intl: n=69			
Desk review (other)	✓ Policy review n=179 docs				✓ Desk reivew of toolkits & resources Rapid review	✓ Policy, law & guidance review	✓ Legal study and analysis n=67
Request for evidence	✓ FoI request to LAs			✓ Global call for evidence n=15			
Administrative data analysis	✓ n=20 LAs	✓ n=166 case files	✓ Quant: n=1470; Qual: n=400 case files				

	Report						
	1. Celiksoy (2024)	2. Grant (2023)	3. Skeels (2024)	4. Hynes (2022)	5. Franklin (2024a)	6. Franklin (2024b)	7. Ayeb-Karlsson (2024)
Survey	✓ n=1					✓ Survey LSCBs n=1 not included	
Interview	✓ Professionals n=29	✓ Professionals (online) n=11 YP n=19				✓ Parent / carers n=12	✓ Life history narrative interviews Adults n=17 YP n=4
Focus group			✓ Online / in-person professionals n=56			✓ Multi-agency professionals n=26	
Online consultation					✓ Professionals n=26	✓ Events n=3 Professionals n=14	
Participatory / creative	✓ Workshops (YP) n=7		✓ Workshops with Young People's Advisory Group n=10 Q-methodology with YP n=25	✓ Toolkit of creative participatory methods (YP) n=31	✓ Workshops (YP) n=10	✓ Parents Advisory Group and shared recs with YP group	

YP = young people (also highlighted in blue)

LA = Local Authorities;

UASC = Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children

2.3. Ethics and a 'trauma-informed approach'

There is increasing exploration of what it means to conduct modern slavery research ethically (for example, Asquith et al, forthcoming, 2024). Modern Slavery and Human Rights PEC's funded research on child trafficking and exploitation contributes to this. The studies focused on children, combined, move beyond confirming that formal ethical review processes were adhered to, and ethical approval received, to consider some of the unique ethical issues and challenges relating to research with children and young people affected by exploitation.

In some of the studies, ethical considerations are shared as part of the section on methods, for example Franklin (2024b) considers the sensitivities and issues around consent and anonymity involved in interviews with parents and Ayeb-Karlsson (2024) includes details on remuneration of research participants through vouchers and approaches to gaining informed consent.

Franklin (2024a) describes the degree of flexibility and choice involved in the workshops conducted with child research participants with SEND and/or lived experience of exploitation (for example choice over whether these took place online or in person, as smaller or larger groups, through one or over multiple sessions). Franklin suggests that further exploration and insight into the practice of engaging children with SEND who may be at risk of modern slavery in research could prove useful for other researchers.

In general, a consideration of ethics in relation to research methodology in the funded portfolio includes setting out how the approach and research methods selected are safer (do no harm), more empowering (respect autonomy) and have more positive outcomes (consider who benefits) for those children and young people involved. For example, Skeels (2024) and Ayeb-Karlsson (2024) comment specifically on how the research methods they employ are considered more ethical, meaningful and beneficial for marginalised children and young people. Skeels (2024) notes that Q-methodology is thought to increase agency, provide more control for research participants, elicit more and/or different data and benefit those involved. Ayeb-Karlsson states that a storytelling method was employed in her research:

> *'...because it has been widely praised for empowering vulnerable and marginalised people to speak their truth and tell their authentic stories (Hodge et al., 2002; Rodriguez, 2010; Ali, 2013; Ash, 2023). This method also allows for collecting deep data on sensitive topics, values, and behaviours when direct and prescriptive interviews feel inappropriate or extractive.' (2024:16)*

Importantly and uniquely amongst the seven reports, Ayeb-Karlsson comments on the inclusive and accessible nature of the methodology selected (equality of access / justice):

'By following this approach, more agency is awarded to the participants, with the researcher's understandings, viewpoints, and biases being reduced, while social and cultural values can be shared in between sentences or throughout storylines (Overcash, 2003; Pfahl & Wiessner, 2007; Ayeb-Karlsson 2020a, 2021).'
2024:16

Hynes (2022) is the only report that dedicates a substantive and clearly explicit focus to ethical issues in her section on 'ethics and governance'. This includes identification of ethical issues specific to children and young people with lived experience of human trafficking, in relation to vulnerability, dignity, being harmed and dehumanised, and in relation to the focus of her research. A rights-based methodology, combined with the interplay of dignity, safety and voice in the study's approach, aims to address such concerns.

The studies engaging children and young people as research participants all note that a 'trauma-informed approach' has been used (Celiksoy, 2024; Hynes, 2022; Skeels, 2024; Ayeb-Karlsson, 2024; Grant, 2023) but not all elaborate on what this means in practice. Celiksoy's study confirms that workshops with children and young people 'were facilitated in a safe and supportive environment...to ensure the emotional well-being of the participants' (2024:11) and Hynes employs Lundy's model of participation and related concept of 'safe, inclusive and trauma-informed spaces' to inform engagement of young survivors (2022:11).

Children and young people involved directly as research participants in the studies ranged from age 15 to 25. It's important to note that the voices of younger children as research participants are not featured across any of the reports, although research participants may have experienced and be reflecting on experiences of exploitation from a younger age. In relation to the ICTG service, Skeels notes that between February 2017 and September 2022, most children entering the service at the age of 16 or 17 (around 50%) but with 95% of children supported being over the age of 13 (2024:21). Younger children, then, are also being referred. While there are greater ethical and safeguarding concerns and challenges around engaging younger children with lived experience of exploitation in research, it is still important to have a deliberate conversation around this. It is important to know if, or under which circumstances and conditions and with what kind of support, approaches and methodologies, this gap might be safely and appropriately addressed. Reflection on this by the studies would have been useful.

The children's research portfolio does not explicitly reflect iteratively on what might be considered the 'everyday ethics' of conducting research. Researchers can often be reluctant to share ethical challenges and dilemmas faced but such 'failures', and tacit learning, are essential if research is to fully engage, protect, benefit and do no harm to children.

Ethical issues are not made equally explicit or foregrounded across the seven reports but interesting and useful, in some cases innovative, content on research ethics and child trafficking and exploitation is shared. It is important to encourage, even require, future research funded by Modern Slavery and Human Rights PEC on the exploitation of children to detail the unique ethical challenges involved over the life course of the research and the bespoke mitigation plans put in place as well as any innovation in this field. This is a valuable opportunity for increasing evidence and learning.

2.4. Research limitations

The child-focused reports clearly set out the state of the relevant evidence base for their studies and gaps they aim to address. For example, Franklin notes 'a dearth of evidence to support the development of quality policy and practice responses' for children with SEND (2024b:5) and 'a lack of research as to how specifically children and young people with SEND build trust, approach and respond to staff in places where practitioners and professionals interact with children and young people' (Franklin, 2024a:5).

Most of the seven studies include some integrated focus on the limitations of the data and/or their research.[3] In most cases, this includes reference to the quality, accessibility and availability of data on child trafficking and exploitation (for example, Celiksoy, 2024; Grant, 2023; Skeels, 2024; Hynes, 2022) including how certain issues are at the forefront of practice while others can remain hidden (Franklin, 2024a). For example, Celiksoy's (2024) FoI request to Local Authorities reveals data gaps as well as inconsistencies between indicators of child exploitation in Department for Education Children in Need data and NRM referrals.

The two reports that focus on a specific service for children affected by exploitation (Grant, 2023; Skeels, 2024) discuss constraints on retrospective data analysis including access to, and the nature of, administrative data available. Both recognise that this is driven by service need and/or service key performance indicators, rather than research enquiry and design. Grant (2023) notes that the research can only use what is administratively recorded which may mean partial, missing or inaccurate data as well as the reorganisation of data recording at different points in the period under study. Similarly, Skeels (2024) comments on the reorganisation of data collection by the ICTG service as well

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3. There is no explicit focus on research limitations in Franklin (2024a and 2024b) but it's important to note that some of the reports shared for analysis were in draft form and so not necessarily complete.

as the limits of information provided for the period under study – i.e., not all information held on the ICTG service was shared, only that used for Home Office commissioned evaluations to date – impacting on the analysis (see Appendices in Skeels, 2024). For both Grant (2023) and Skeels (2024), such limitations have a knock-on effect of not fully accurate statistical data informing service planning and policy development.

With an almost exclusive engagement of non-UK born young people migrating to the UK in their research, Skeels (2024), Grant (2023) and Hynes (2022) all suggest further exploration of the broader application and relevance of their research, given that 2023 child referrals to the NRM at UK level are predominantly UK nationals. Grant (2023) also notes that, even if the numbers of young people engaged and studied as part of her research on the Scottish Guardianship Service are significant for the service, these are relatively small numbers in the bigger context and caution is still required with results. For both Grant (2023) and Skeels (2024), a lack of post-service data or mandate or secure data linkage means that outcomes cannot be explored in the longer-term / once cases are closed.

Only Hynes (2022) and Ayeb-Karlsson (2024) have a dedicated section on study limitations which, for Ayeb-Karlsson, includes the constraints of a short project timeline and time needed to build relationships with potentially vulnerable populations. This is echoed by Franklin (2024b) who notes that the study remit and short time for the research limited the ability for direct work with children and young people. Hynes (2022) includes how discussions were framed by the methods involved as well as the limited and exploratory nature of research in an emergent field.
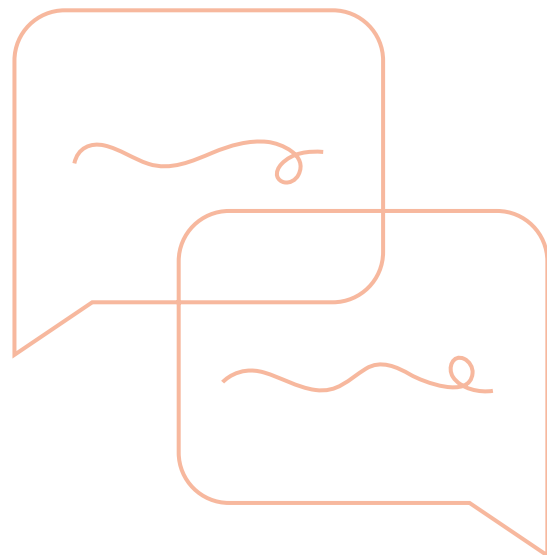
3. Key takeaways and recommendations

From analysis of the nature of the Modern Slavery and Human Rights PEC's funded research portfolio on children, we find the below key takeaways and make associated recommendations for Modern Slavery and Human Rights PEC's future funded research:

- Children and young people engaged in the research were all aged between 15-25. **Recommendation: Targeted research on/with younger children where safe and ethical is recommended** to address this gap and for the purpose of inclusion. Continuous tracking of the age of young research participants in Modern Slavery and Human Rights PEC funded child-focused research would also be of use.

- The research is spread across the UK, including targeted reports on Scotland, England and Wales. **Recommendation: Northern Ireland remains a gap in the research which should be addressed.** Two reports have a targeted or 'micro' geographical focus: a promising approach for future research. **Recommendation: future research should further explore a more targeted geographical focus where appropriate.**

- The types of child exploitation most focused on by the research are child criminal and child sexual exploitation. **Recommendation: an exploration of the complexity of intersecting types of child exploitation is recommended to challenge crude categories, aiding identification and support.**

- SEND as a risk factor for child exploitation, along with the extent of UK-born children with SEND (diagnosed and undiagnosed), as well as non-UK born children with SEND as an under-researched area of need (Franklin 2024a), suggests the importance of a focus on SEND. **Recommendation: SEND should be a cross-cutting consideration for future funded child-focused research.**

- There is a rich variety of research methods including those that are creative, survivor-centred and participatory and, in places, innovative, as well as multiple methods employed for increased rigour and reliability. Combined, these make for a strong portfolio. **Recommendation: that emphasis continues to be placed on innovative, participatory and multi-method approaches in funding calls and commissions.** For example, there is the potential to further explore longitudinal research using linked administrative

data and to include the participation of parents and carers more in child exploitation research. **Recommendation: future funding calls should enable, even require, children's participation in research design and the research process itself where safe and ethical to do so.**

- A consideration of some of the unique ethical challenges faced in research with children at risk of or affected by exploitation and the practical application of a trauma-informed approach. **Recommendation: future funding calls should encourage, or even require, research studies to further detail the ethical challenges, mitigations and innovations over the projects' duration.**
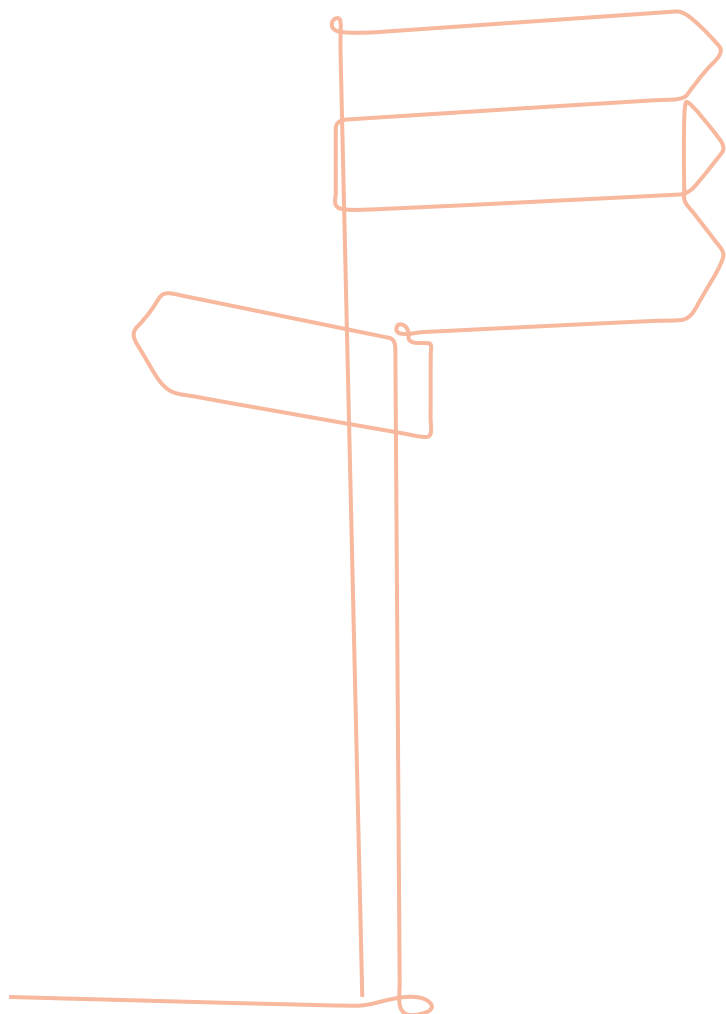
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Appendix

Detail on research methodology by report

Celiksoy (2024)

Celiksoy combined six primary methods of data collection and analysis encompassing a range of sources and perspectives that are likely to contribute to providing a holistic understanding of the topic, particularly as findings are generally presented thematically based on combining the findings from the array of sources. The methodological approaches that are notable in this report include the inclusion of a systematic review, an approach that is a widely agreed to be a comprehensive and reliable scientific method and a Freedom of Information request to local authorities for referral data as this was a novel approach not utilised in any other report and additionally far reaching in that it covered around half the local authorities across the UK.

Grant (2023)

Grant conducted analysis of case files spanning 11 years from the Scottish Guardianship Service who had all received positive conclusive grounds regarding their NRM decision. In addition, interviews with 19 young people who had experienced child trafficking, as well as online semi-structured interviews with professionals who support young people in a range of roles, including Guardians, lawyers, and social workers.

Skeels (2024)

Skeels used four methods: analysis of quantitative administrative data from the NRM and ICTG service, analysis of qualitative administrative data from the NRM and ICTG service (case closure summaries), focus groups with ICTG service practitioners at all levels who work across the UK, and Q-methodology with children and young people in the ICTG service. As well as this, creative participatory methods were employed with the Young People's Advisory Group.

Hynes (2022)

Hynes utilised three methodologies. The first is the participatory research study with young people (migrant population) over a one-year period. The authors describe their approach as a 'rights-based methodology', and this influenced how the research was conducted. For example, the researchers sought to protect the dignity, voice and safety of young people through the process. We can see this in how the participatory toolkit was designed. It combined therapeutic and research elements and was co-designed by an 'arts therapist and a participatory researcher, both with extensive experience of working with trafficked, exploited and separated migrant children'. The second method is the systematic scoping review of UK and international academic evidence that contained three strands (i) UK academic literature on outcomes for children and young people (ii) UK academic literature on the 5 study themes (participation, inclusion, protection, empowerment and recovery) and (iii) international academic systematic reviews on human trafficking (and adjacent) research including 'What Works' literature. The authors cite their approach enabled them to reap the benefits of a systematic approach (including thoroughness and transparency) but with the flexibility to be more iterative where needed to navigate the complex fields of literature on the concepts under investigation. The final method was a global call for practice evidence through ECPAT's global network. One of the reasons for this was to 'capture evidence on innovations, knowledge, experiences and perspectives that are underrepresented or absent in published sources.'

Franklin (2024a)

Franklin utilises three methods used. The first is a rapid review of toolkits, online reports and tools for professionals to support the prevention of exploitation and trafficking amongst children and young people with SEND. The resources were gathered from desk research and recommendations from the team's advisory group. The second approach were online consultations with staff in different settings who are in contact with children and young people to talk about their current practices and knowledge. Many of the participants were teachers and staff working in schools (16 of 26) and others from youth justice, the voluntary sector, health sector and the local authority. The final methods were workshops with CYP a who either identified as having SEND and/or experience of exploitation. The workshops were made flexible for the children and young people, so they could choose whether to participate online or in person, whether to meet as a group or with other groups, and whether to have the content across one session or two. Further insight into the practice of engaging with children and young people with SEND and who may be at risk of modern slavery could prove useful for other researchers.

Franklin (2024b)

Franklin lists six methods. The first is a mapping and analysis of relevant law, policy, guidance relevant to protecting the specific needs of children with SEND. The analysis uses a 15-point critical appraisal framework that was co-developed by authors with the advisory group of the study. This framework could be considered by other researchers for adaptation with other populations on children and young people and modern slavery. The second method is interviews with parents/carers of children with SEND who have been exploited. The third approach was research with frontline and strategic multi-agency workers at the local authority level. The fourth strand entailed consultations (three two-hour sessions online) with multi-agency statutory and voluntary sector strategic and frontline organisations at the national level. The fifth method emerged from a recommendation from advisory group to survey Local Safeguarding Children's Boards (LSCBs) but this yielded only one response and the data was not used. Finally, children and young people with SEND (an established research group, some with experience of MS) were involved in providing their feedback and informing the recommendations developed by this research. The researchers highlight that the study remit and short time for the research limited the ability for direct work with children and young people on this occasion.

Ayeb-Karlsson (2024)

Ayeb-Karlsson uses three main methods: adult expert interviews (exploring narratives around migration to and within the UK, unaccompanied children's accommodation and Home Office hotels, human trafficking risks and impacts, legal protections, and future policy developments in relation to children and trafficking and exploitation); interviews with young people (exploring living conditions and sense of belonging, overall well-being in the UK, support systems and social networks, accommodations and Home Office hotels, and human trafficking risks); storytelling method within qualitative narrative interviewing technique.

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