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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# A systematic review of the United Kingdom's contact child sexual exploitation perpetrator literature: Pointing a way forward for future research and practice

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## Abstract

Until recently, empirical evidence exploring Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE) has been scarce, particularly in relation to contact exploitation, where the convicted perpetrator seeks direct physical (offline) contact as opposed to solely targeting the victim online. This article presents a systematic review of the UK's *contact* CSE perpetrator literature, searching from 2009 to the present day to ensure that studies encompass the categorisations detailed within the CSE statutory definitions. Twenty-three research articles were appraised using a Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT). A narrative synthesis approach was used to synthesise the findings from qualitative and mixed methods studies identifying four significant analytical themes including (a) *barriers to examining a complex phenomenon*, (b) *recognising the contact CSE perpetrator*, (c) *understanding the contact CSE perpetrator* and (d) *responding to the contact CSE perpetrator*. This review synthesises evidence in a singular study, ideal for policy-makers and stakeholders to provide a more comprehensive safeguarding response, guide future research directions, and provide suggestions for law enforcement disruption strategies within the United Kingdom. Recommendations for policy, practice, procedure and training include improving the recording of data, re-categorising CSE as CSA, targeting harmful sexual behaviour and group offending, and designing evidenced based perpetrator treatment programmes. Future research

centring on the perpetrator's adverse experiences and the strategies used to instigate sexual contact could advance understanding of how these crimes could be prevented.

**KEYWORDS**

child sexual exploitation, contact perpetrator, systematic review

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Child sexual exploitation (CSE) is situated under the umbrella term of 'sexual abuse', distinguished by the 'imbalance of power' and 'exchange' between the perpetrator and the victim as outlined in the Department for Education [DfE] (2018) statutory definition. It is recognised as a significant and global problem due to the seriousness of the CSE related crimes and implications for victims and surrounding communities (Beckett & Pearce, 2018; Cameron et al., 2015; Casey, 2015; ECPAT, 2016; Jay, 2014; Spicer, 2018). The reach of CSE is pervasive, particularly since victims are sexually exploited regardless of their social or ethnic background, often unable to recognise that they are in an abusive relationship (Barnardo's, 2011; Beckett et al., 2017; Berelowitz et al., 2012; CEOP, 2013; Jago & Pearce, 2008; Pearce, 2018; Radford et al., 2017). Increasing pressures are now being placed on UK governments, law enforcement agencies and safeguarding practitioners to prioritise CSE on child protection agendas (Home Office, 2015; United Nations, 2017). This follows various recommendations outlined in a series of high-profile UK national case reviews and inquiries, where collective failures were detailed (Barnardo's, 2014; Bedford et al., 2015; Casey, 2015; Cockbain & Wortley, 2015; Coffey, 2014; Griffiths, 2013; Jay, 2014). Positively, the growing public and professional awareness in relation to CSE and recent calls for improved understanding (Dean, 2021; Eaton & Holmes, 2017), provides continued opportunities for researchers to explore the complexities of the phenomenon in order to respond appropriately to it.

It is well documented that there are significant gaps in the knowledge base, particularly relating to the prevalence, networks and pathways associated with *contact* CSE, therefore the true scale is unknown and remains to be a relatively hidden crime (Dean, 2021; Kelly & Karsna, 2017; Radford et al., 2017). Until recently, empirical evidence exploring CSE has been scarce, particularly in relation to contact exploitation, where the offender seeks direct physical (offline) contact as opposed to targeting the victim online (Allnock et al., 2017; Beckett et al., 2017; DeMarco, 2018). With its wealth of readily available public information and evidence trails, online CSE perpetrator research is suggested to be more ethically accessible, in comparison to researcher access for contact perpetrators (DeMarco et al., 2016). Although awareness of CSE has improved, much of the CSE research has focused on victims in isolation, such as the identification, risk factors and suitable interventions to safeguard victims of CSE without consideration of the influence of the perpetrator (Beckett & Pearce, 2018; Drummond & Southgate, 2018; Hackett & Smith, 2018; Melrose & Pearce, 2013; Walker et al., 2018a, 2018b). The available research primarily involves scoping reviews, rapid evidence assessments and threat analysis (Colley, 2019; DeMarco et al., 2018; Drummond & Southgate, 2018; ECPAT, 2016; Hackett & Smith, 2018; Radford et al., 2017; Walker et al., 2018a, 2018b). Furthermore, sample sizes were small often due to the ethical barriers in accessing and undertaking such sensitive research (CEOP, 2013; Cockbain, 2018; Kelly & Karsna, 2017; National Crime Agency, 2018). Currently, evidence is limited to the data collected by key agencies, with literature finding inconsistencies in the recording, monitoring, and recycling of this data (Cockbain, 2018; Kelly & Karsna, 2017; Taylor, 2019). The UK government has responded by commissioning research to investigate the organised aspects of CSE perpetration in response to the moral panic around grooming gangs (Home Office, 2020; Senker et al., 2020).

The aim of this review is to synthesise what is known about all types of *contact* CSE perpetration, such as the specific characteristics, modus operandi, profiles, typologies and behaviours of lone, group and online (leading to

*contact* CSE) *contact* offenders. The purpose of the study is to inform a more comprehensive safeguarding response, guide future research directions and establish new insights for law enforcement disruption, investigation and prosecution strategies within the United Kingdom.

## 2 | METHOD

This review was conducted by systematically searching academic databases to establish the frequency and relevance (to the DfE (2018) CSE statutory definition) of UK empirical *contact* CSE research available. This included Academic Search Complete, Child Development and Adolescent Studies, Criminal Justice, Social Sciences and Psychology interdisciplinary databases. An advanced search utilising Boolean operators (AND/OR), including the use of truncation and 'wild cards', such as \* and "symbols was performed to find any variation of the word within the database. After a preliminary sample search to find suitable search terms, keywords were chosen and included: "*child sexual exploit\**" or *CSE* or *groom\** or "*contact sexual contact*" or *CSA* or "*street grooming*" AND *gang\** or *group\** or *collective\** or *ring\** or *network\** or *traffick\** AND *belief\** or *perception\** or *view\** or *attitud\** or *opinion\** or *normalis\** or *characteris\** or *motivation\** or *justif\** or *predictor\** AND *perpetrat\** or *offender\** or *hebephil\**. The same keywords were subsequently run through the Scopus database, Google Scholar site and Research Rabbit Discovery app to achieve 'adequate coverage' as recommended by Bramer et al. (2017).

Additional searches examined the available grey literature, that included organisation reports or non-peer reviewed research on the perpetration of CSE, which is a strategy considered optimal when attempting to capture the complete understanding of the phenomenon and evidence base (Mahood et al., 2014). This search strategy proved fruitful in scope, particularly utilising the 'snowballing' technique of tracking references, which is recommended for finding sources in alternative locations (Wohlin, 2014). Documents considered for more detailed exploration included pertinent research from organisations, such as the Child Sexual Abuse (CSA) Centre of Expertise and the Home Office. All articles and research publications were scanned for relevance by title and abstract (or summaries of findings) and selected for appraisal (see appraisal tool detailed, p. 6) based on whether they referred to *contact* CSE perpetration. The search process is presented in its entirety, including the inclusion and exclusion criteria and results of articles retained at each stage in Figure 1.

Studies that were excluded comprised of, secondary literature publications, which reported on the studies included in this review (Colley, 2019; Home Office, 2020) to avoid being removed from the original data, publications discussing only online CSE or CSA (Bartels & Merdian, 2015; Gillespie et al., 2018; Henry et al., 2010), articles using data from outside of the UK (Briggs et al., 2011; Webster et al., 2012), studies focusing on online child sexual abuse rather than exploitation (McManus et al., 2014), modern slavery focused articles (Dando et al., 2016) and articles published outside of the United Kingdom (Babchishin et al., 2015; Fortin et al., 2018; Jung et al., 2013; Krone & Smith, 2017), therefore not following the recognised statutory definition of CSE (2009, updated by DfE, 2018). It is worth noting here that, although considered important, exploring how other governments (including those in the commonwealth, following similar legal practices to the UK system) tackle CSE was beyond the scope of this study. However, there will undoubtedly be lessons that could be learned from non-UK government/law enforcement agencies for future research to explore.

As part of the data extraction process, critical appraisal was undertaken, utilising a Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool [MMAT], to assess study quality, based on the suitability of study design and methodological soundness (Hong et al., 2018). The data extraction and MMAT appraisal were guided by the standards of the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis (PRISMA) Statement (Page et al., 2021) and the extraction and appraisal table are available on request to the author if required.

As meta-analysis was not viable with the heterogeneous studies, narrative synthesis was performed to unify findings from included studies. Narrative synthesis is the textual approach to explaining qualitative and quantitative findings with words (Guise et al., 2014). A thematic inductive analysis was performed to translate the data and

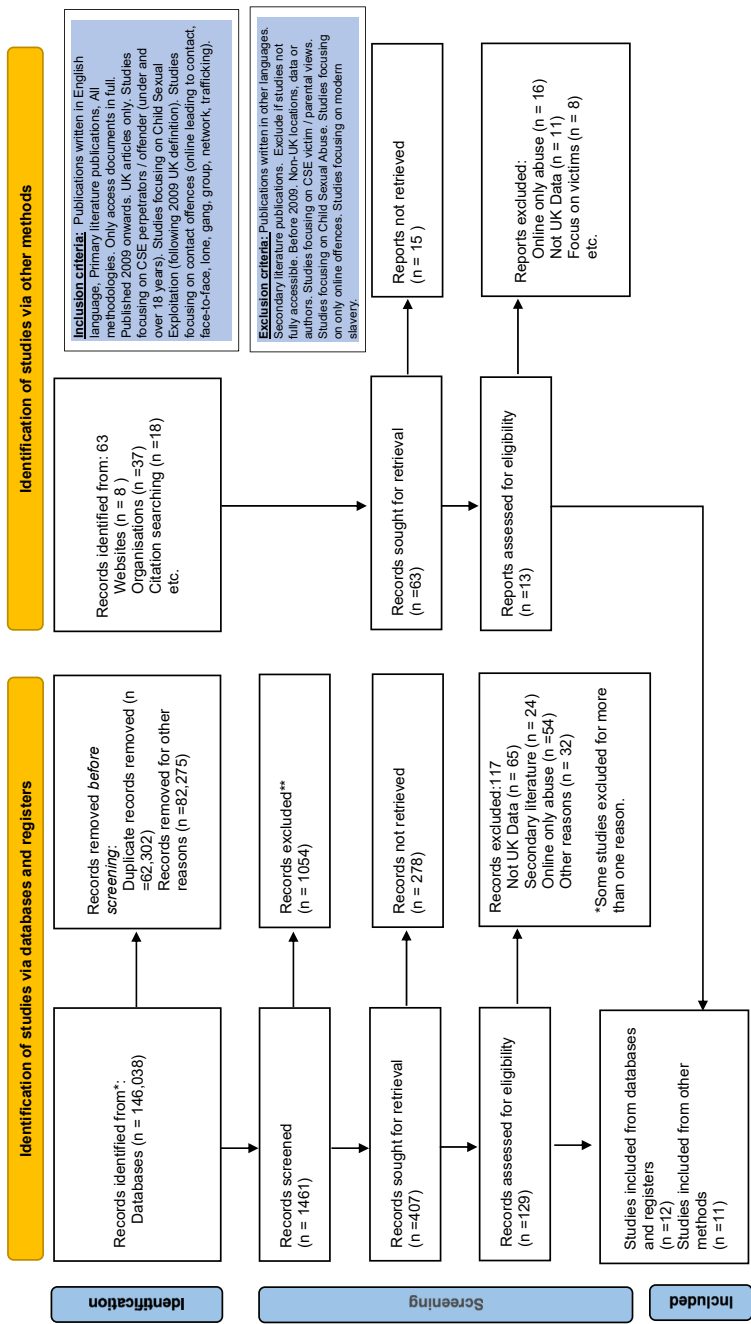


FIGURE 1 Flow diagram of the search process and study selection following PRISMA guidelines

establish analytical themes of interest between the findings in the different studies, as recommended by guidance (albeit dated) from Popay et al. (2006). Following Snilstveit et al. (2012) recommendations, studies were coded and then grouped to develop descriptive and analytical themes from the diverse body of research. Themes of interest were progressively refined from singular ideas to higher level central concepts as Clarke and Braun (2009) recommended. An example that can be provided from the 'barriers to examining a complex phenomenon' theme involved coding the singular ideas which the researcher coded if they blocking advances to the understanding of contact CSE, such as inaccuracies with flagging CSE crimes or differences in the terminology used by professionals.

### 3 | RESULTS

Twenty-three research articles were appraised, and the results are detailed below under the headings of characteristics, quality, and narrative synthesis from Sections 3.1–3.3.

#### 3.1 | Characteristics of studies appraised

Of the 23 studies reviewed, 44% ( $n = 10$ ) include peer reviewed empirical studies and the others comprise of organisational research (52%,  $n = 12$ ) and only one article (4%,  $n = 1$ ) via the SSRN platform for dissemination of early-stage research, with publications spanning from 2009 to 2020. Eight of the 23 reviewed studies were published within 5 years of the initial 2009 definition and this figure increases to 22 within a 10-year period, which highlights the mounting attention to the topic. The publishing Academic Journals were: *Sexual Abuse* ( $n = 2$ ); *Policing: A Journal of Policy and Practice* ( $n = 2$ ); *Crime Science* ( $n = 1$ ); *Sexual Abuse - A Journal of Research and Treatment* ( $n = 2$ ); *International Journal for Crime, Justice and Social Democracy* ( $n = 2$ ); *Social Policy Administration* ( $n = 1$ ).

#### 3.2 | Quality of the studies involved

The MMAT was considered appropriate to provide markers of quality for the varied qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods studies (Hong et al., 2018). Overall, non-peer reviewed studies fell short on expected quality standards when discussing their chosen methodology, by not providing a detailed approach to their inquiry or limiting the detail about the process of collecting their data in the methods (Levitt et al., 2018). This was particularly relevant for the mixed methods approach found in the Quilliam report (2017), whereby the recommended mixed methods criteria was not fully met or one method was favoured over another as emphasised by Hesse-Biber (2010) and Creswell and Plano Clark (2017). Many of the organisational studies ( $n = 11$ ) were commissioned by either the UK government or high-profile UK organisations.

The majority of articles ( $n = 12$ ) exclusively employed a qualitative approach to study design as would be expected for the more explorative stage of understanding a phenomenon and deemed appropriate to address the research questions (Guest et al., 2013). Perhaps a more dated view postulates that a reliance on qualitative approaches impacts on interpretive precision and generates difficulties with extending findings to the wider population (Atieno, 2009) as many of the reviewed articles documented ( $n = 16$ ). However, there is now a recognition that qualitative research should not be judged by positivist standards but by markers of quality, such as those refined by the APA JARS-Qual (Levitt et al., 2018) and the MMAT tool used in this study. The remaining articles ( $n = 11$ ), employ mixed methods, potentially to overcome some of the issues raised for qualitative research, yet this combined method is also not without criticism, in relation to rigour, reductionist findings and accuracy and would require quality markers for both (Tafreshi et al., 2016).

Although sample sizes and study populations varied, many studies ( $n = 13$ ) failed to provide clear descriptions or at least document the sampling processes involved in selecting their study population, which is typical when publishing for Journals with limited word counts for manuscripts (Levitt et al., 2018). This is thought to have implications for replication, bias and quality appraisal (Vasileiou et al., 2018). Typically, this appeared to be associated with the non-academic papers, however where details were included many involved would fit the description of purposive sampling. Purposive sampling is said to be particularly useful in achieving data saturation but has the potential for bias and subjectivity, because it is based on the judgements of the researcher (Etikan et al., 2016). The study population characteristics of those ( $n = 22$ ) articles reporting on samples were: 9207 perpetrators (specifically 3172 *contact* offenders); 11,293 victims, 341 professional/expert interviews or responses, 40 perpetrator interviews, 43 victim interviews, 101 groups or gangs and 2100 newspaper articles/media reports. Much of the sample population were convicted perpetrators, rather than suspects, which will potentially skew the true sample available because of poor attrition rates related to Sexual Offences within the Criminal Justice System.

### 3.3 | Narrative synthesis

Four analytical themes of interest have been synthesised narratively: (a) *barriers to examining a complex phenomenon*; (b) *recognising the contact CSE perpetrator*, (c) *understanding the contact CSE perpetrator* and (d) *responding to the contact CSE perpetrator* (see Sections 3.3.1–3.3.4).

#### 3.3.1 | Barriers to examining a complex phenomenon

Five of the studies were assigned to barriers to examining a complex phenomenon' focused on CSE in a broad sense; thus, contextualising rather than solely discussing challenges in relation to *contact* CSE. The studies reviewed from 2009 to the present-day documented the difficulties faced by professionals, prosecutors, researchers, and even the perpetrators or victims themselves in understanding what constitutes CSE. This was despite the various statutory definitional updates. A lack of definitional clarity was reported to delay professional responses, impede prosecutions and prevent researchers improving the knowledge base on such serious CSE crimes, due to difficulties with interpretation and differing threshold levels for protection (Drummond & Southgate, 2018; Kelly & Karsna, 2017; Hackett & Smith, 2018; Walker et al., 2018a, 2018b). The studies report that definitional clarification was attempted with the introduction of the DfE (2018) statutory definition of CSE; however, Radcliffe et al. (2020) argues that CSE will always be "a fluid and changing problem with no single local manifestation" (2019, p. 1224). Similarly, there was agreement within the studies about the overlap between the many categorisations used to describe the CSE crimes committed, resulting in flagging and data recording issues, such as CSE cases being recorded as CSA, criminal exploitation or domestic abuse making it harder to analyse (CEOP, 2013; Kelly & Karsna, 2017). Terminology used within the studies to frame CSE include: *child grooming* (Gill & Harrison, 2015); *internal trafficking* (Cockbain et al., 2011); *group localised CSE (GLCSE)* (Bhatti-Sinclair & Sutcliffe, 2018); *child sexual abuse and exploitation (CSA/E)* (Kelly & Karsna, 2017); and *associated with organised crime and offending networks* (Senker et al., 2020; Skidmore et al., 2016). Societal expectations and reactions to CSE could potentially be blurred by such shifting terminology and therefore lead to a differing operational response from law enforcement teams, such as the comparison between organised offending networks and lone offenders. Moreover, if there is no consensus amongst practitioners in defining the phenomenon, it is not surprising that the victims themselves fail to recognise that they are involved in exploitative relationships, as reported in Radcliffe et al. (2020), resulting in serious safeguarding implications, with an obvious similarity to stalking (Richards et al., 2012).

Further analysis revealed that there are few effective (specifically national) centralised systems for initial identification, flagging, mapping, monitoring and tracking perpetration through the CJS and thus the true scale of the

problem remains hidden (Berelowitz et al., 2012; Bhatti-Sinclair & Sutcliffe, 2018; CEOP, 2011, 2013). Studies report; (a) poor responses to calls for evidence, (b) differing threshold levels, (c) variations in regional data based on jurisdictions, and (d) levels of awareness and resources impacting on accurate prevalence data (Berelowitz et al., 2012; CEOP, 2011, 2013; Kelly & Karsna, 2017; Perkins et al., 2018).

### 3.3.2 | Recognising the *contact* CSE perpetrator

The ability for safeguarding agencies and law enforcement to accurately identify the *contact* CSE perpetrator is limited, firstly by the aforementioned demographic data disparities (CEOP, 2013), yet a dominant debate in four of the studies is on whether race is a central feature of CSE perpetration. Two studies explored the validity of the media representations of the racialised threat finding that it is highly emotive, often unsubstantiated, and reliant on sensationalist reporting (Gill & Harrison, 2015; Tufail, 2015). Tufail (2015) prepared the most in depth examination of media coverage (over a 4-year period from 2010 to 2014), in comparison to Gill and Harrison's (2015) 1-year timeframe (between 2012 and 2013). Despite the varying lengths of examination of media coverage, consensus coalesced around one single factor: of being a racially motivated crime, leading to moral panic.

The research also explored the political repercussions of the coverage focusing on agencies fearing reprisals if they acknowledged CSE perpetrated by Asian males or the complete lack of media focus on groups of white sexual offenders. The two studies also raise the inappropriate use of the generalised terms 'Asian' and 'Muslim' linked with 'grooming' scandals, suggested to have intensified Islamophobia and anti-Muslim racism, subsequently condemning whole communities. Tufail (2015) concludes that there should be less focus on race and more on identifying the scale of the problem.

More recently, Rafiq and Adil (2017) published research via the Quilliam Foundation (a counter-extremism organisation) attempting to explore this issue further by analysing available secondary data from CEOP (2013), identifying 58 cases of 'grooming gangs' over an 11-year period (between 2005 and 2017 resulting in 264 convictions) and analysing 10 case studies for emerging patterns (from 2010 to 2017). The report found that there was a disproportionate number of Asian (of Pakistani origin) males perpetrating CSE crimes against white females, further claiming that this was due to their backgrounds in relation to views of relationships and treatment of women. Similarly, Bhatti-Sinclair and Sutcliffe (2018) concluded that Muslims, particularly Pakistanis, dominated GLCSE prosecutions from the data collected (involving 498 defendants in 73 prosecutions between 1997 and 2017) from newspaper articles and offered reasons for the over-represented offenders. Explanations focused on perpetrators bonding with 'like-minded alliances', living lives away from partners, in front facing jobs, usually in the night-time economy with access and power over vulnerable victims.

Studies focusing on what is known about *contact* CSE perpetration, highlight that CSE crimes can be committed by a lone offender or perpetrated by groups, gangs and networks (Berelowitz et al., 2012; CEOP, 2011; Cockbain & Wortley, 2015). Studies report on what characteristics of CSE perpetrators (such as age, gender, ethnicity) are available within their sample or from the calls for evidence and conclude that most CSE perpetration occurs by single, low skilled, young, white males, acting alone or in groups. For example, the CEOP (2013) study findings revealed young adult (aged 18–24 years) males (87%) from predominantly white (30%) or Asian (28%) ethnic backgrounds, although, 38% of ethnicities were omitted from this study due to lack of information making it difficult to draw conclusions. In the follow up to this study, CEOP (2013) identified variations between the perpetrator groups, the first being Group 1 which is reported to involve anywhere between 2 and 25 offenders, with four being the most common and can be identified by their loosely organised networks. The age range was found to be similar to the earlier study involving mostly younger offenders (77% below aged 30 years). In comparison, Group 2 differed in nearly every demographic or category. Offenders were older (58% above 40 years), involving smaller groups (between 2 and 5) and were ethnically classified as white. This group were more likely to be motivated by more of a paedophilic sexual interest in children and were deemed less likely to be involved in what is considered localised or street grooming. The final category



CEOP (2013) included was gang associated abuse but the findings from only one case were not considered "sufficient to draw conclusions in relation to gang demographics" (p. 21). Nonetheless, the OCC (2012) inquiry into gangs and groups detailed that it was mostly male perpetrators against female victims.

Despite data inconsistencies, studies have reported that where offending takes place in groups or gangs, there is typically only loose connections, mostly via friends or relatives, often involved in criminality, and associated with ethnic homogeneity (Bhatti-Sinclair & Sutcliffe, 2018; CEOP, 2013; Cockbain & Wortley, 2015; Rafiq & Adil, 2017; Senker et al., 2020). Therefore, contradicting Skidmore et al.'s (2016) association between group perpetration and 'organised crime'. Senker et al.'s (2020) research did not find sophisticated networks or criminal hierarchies within the groups interviewed. Radcliffe et al.'s (2020) reported that the common group 'working together' stereotype was "unhelpful and inaccurate" (p. 1224). Despite such views, CEOP (2013) suggested that large offending groups did not always equate to more victims, but rather the same repeat victims where the gravity of offences becomes more serious. The more recent study by Senker et al. (2020) created 3 groups where some distinctions in characteristics could be made. The first group being those adopting a double life and offending online. The second group living a hedonistic lifestyle where infidelity was frequent, and offending was opportunistic. The final group was considered more vulnerable and more likely to have been coerced or threatened to take part in group offending. The second group fits more with the hedonistic lifestyle likely to be taking place within the night-time economy, whereby legitimate and illegitimate behaviour, such as exploitation, drug dealing and opportunities to meet vulnerable young people can exist within society, as mentioned by Bhatti-Sinclair and Sutcliffe (2018).

The Hackett and Smith's (2018) study explored young people who perpetrate CSE yielding similarities with adult perpetrators detailed above in that they were most likely lone (or in pairs), white and male targeting female victims. However, the ages were younger, ranging from 14 to 21 years yet still with considerable offending histories, and with a tendency for sexual offences to be committed against peers but not whilst part of a gang. Despite the small size of the sample ( $n = 14$ ) and the analysis of data not initially intended for research, the study found patterns in young people's offending characteristics and deviance. It was posited that further investigation into the links between CSE pathways and deviance during adolescence would be particularly beneficial.

It is clear from the studies reviewed that understanding the characteristics and modus operandi of a CSE perpetrator is an important and a much-needed research focus to be able to fully recognise and understand the threat. However, studies report that an equally important factor are the methods used by the perpetrator which make CSE crimes distinct from any other sexual offence or form of abuse (Brayley et al., 2011; Kloess et al., 2019). CSE perpetrator methods have been described in nine studies, usually by way of models, such as the 'boyfriend', party house, social networks or lone predator (Cockbain et al., 2011; Senker et al., 2020). Berelowitz et al. (2012) highlight that in cases involving groups, the 'boyfriend model' of grooming is less common and instead victims are either frequently contacted via phone or social media and taken to various locations where the abuse can occur with others, usually in cars, private houses, parties, food establishments and hotels, linked to the 'night-time economy'. This was also supported in the findings from Radcliffe et al. (2020), whereby food establishments with free Wifi was likely to be the most successful grooming method, where adult attention would be viewed as flattering and non-threatening. Social media and free messaging services, such as WhatsApp and Snapchat were reported to be the main method for initiating contact with victims.

Kloess et al.'s (2017) study found that exploitative strategies used to initiate face-to-face sexual contact via online mechanisms ranged from "flattery, compliments, and affection to severe manipulation in the form of persistent and pressurising requests and orders" (p. 573). The suggestive or direct discursive styles considered to be successful manipulative techniques, were found to be emotionally loaded, minimising the act, focusing on secrecy and achieving sexual arousal. Although not included for review, Craven et al. (2006) used the term 'grooming' to describe the preparatory processes involved from gaining access to the victim to instigating sexual activity. Eighteen studies reviewed, used the term 'grooming' to describe perpetrator methods used in *contact* CSE, particularly referring to the 'boyfriend model'. However, Kloess et al.'s (2019) study contradicts the widely held face-to-face behaviours, reporting that online (leading to) *contact* CSE processes involve either indirect (rapport building) or direct (blunt,

demanding and aggressive) manipulative approaches, with no particular order, leading to highly sexualised but short lived interactions. Therefore, lacking the traditional linear grooming techniques outlined in previous research.

Moving away from focusing on the presence of grooming in CSE crimes, Radcliffe et al. (2020) suggested focusing on the “risky sites” where groups informally gather for parties and the likelihood for exploitation is increased would be more beneficial. Furthermore, Cockbain and Wortley (2015) suggest that unlike other forms of sexual abuse, exploitation in the form of internal trafficking is more likely to take place in semi-public or public places where ordinarily measures to avoid detection would be expected by the perpetrators, yet were rarely adopted. Thus, bringing to the fore societal norms, lack of guardianship and normalised abuse in the absence of any sophisticated predatory behaviour. This is especially important when many of the offences in the Cockbain and Wortley (2015) sample (76%,  $n = 32$ ) resulted in vaginal, anal or oral penetration, considered the most serious as Sec. 1 Rape or Sec. 2 Assault by Penetration in the Sexual Offences Act, 2003, carrying a maximum of life imprisonment.

### 3.3.3 | Understanding the *contact* CSE perpetrator

The analytical theme of ‘understanding the *contact* CSE perpetrator’ involved studies relating to the perspectives of the perpetrator and reasoning behind the crime. Firstly, Psychological profiles have been explored within three of the studies suggesting an association between poor attachments, difficulty establishing relationships, and a propensity towards having mental health issues with CSE perpetrators (Elliott et al., 2009, 2013; Walker et al., 2018a, 2018b).

Walker et al. (2018a, 2018b) analysed redacted Police interviews and conducted interviews with both CSE and non-CSE offenders, yielding notable individual internal, and relational/environmental external characteristics in the narratives. These characteristics were further broken down into functions or dysfunctions, with functioning factors associated only with relationships, and dysfunctional factors linked to the individual, relational and environmental themes. The most prevalent individual dysfunctional characteristic was poor mental health with participants describing difficulties with severe depression, anxiety and stress. Other significant dysfunctional features for individuals included the extreme and addictive use of pornography, low self-esteem, and an excessive use of substances, such as drugs and alcohol. Within the dysfunctional relationship theme, absent fathers or minimal friendships was common, whereas a functioning relationship with a mother could be viewed as a protective factor. Similarly, dysfunctional environmental factors were mostly linked to unstable childhood environments. Furthermore, many perpetrators grew up in an environment that was described as chaotic, as many witnessed violence, had experienced bullying and abuse from adults and peers, moved schools and care placements and displayed disruptive behaviour resulting in further punishment at home or school. Many perpetrators justified their behaviour in terms of past and present features, such as, the build-up of internal and external dysfunctions, in addition to minimising offences and being deserving of sexual gratification. Walker et al. (2018a, 2018b) discuss their findings through an ecological lens, which recognised the interplay between the individual, social, familial and cultural risk factors influencing offending behaviour.

Research from Elliott et al.’s (2009) study found that more social risks were associated with *contact* offending and avoided by online only offenders, argued to be linked with ‘low self-esteem’ and ‘emotional loneliness’. However, *contact* offenders were said to have higher levels of congruence with children, a bias towards favourable self-description, externalised locus of control and likely to respond over-assertively. Elliott et al.’s (2013) found that *contact* offenders had greater cognitive and victim empathy distortions than mixed or online offenders. Pro-offending attitudes, such as believing that the victim did not object to the act or was not harmed, manifested more with *contact* offenders than online perpetrators. Conversely, the mixed and online offenders had improved self-management skills, whereby they were more likely to demonstrate self-control favouring fictional online material over *contact* offending.

Kloess et al.’s (2017) posits that the motivating factors for all types of perpetrator was said to be either sexual or financial, whereby interactions provided “sexual stimulation for offenders, and mental imagery for fantasy formation” (p. 576), even if the offender did not meet the victim in person. This was supported in the findings of the Walker et al. (2018a, 2018b) research where sexual or financial motivations were also reported.

Other research focusing on understanding group or gang CSE perpetration suggested that there was an apparent social acceptance of treating victims as sexual commodities associated with offenders who offend with others (Cockbain & Wortley, 2015; Senker et al., 2020). Moreover, it was posited that it is the normalisation and perception of entitlement within groups that perpetuates the crimes being committed (Cockbain & Wortley, 2015; OCC, 2012). For the perpetrator, there are benefits to remain socially connected if group members are assisting in accessing and sharing victims (Cockbain & Wortley, 2015). A proactive policing tool with the potential to combat offenders operating in groups or gangs was investigated by Cockbain et al. (2011), involving Social Network Analysis (SNA). The technique was suggested to aid live operations involving networks by targeting, disrupting and prosecuting those involved. With “no clear ringleaders” of networks with perpetrators offending “en masse”, defying previous “lover boy” stereotypes, recommendations were made to educate and increase the “perceived risk” of such offending. Examples of disruptive tactics linked to the SNA findings included campaigning to remove any “excuses for criminality”, improving opportunities for police informants and increasing pressure on offenders by way of targeting other aspects of their criminality. Similarly, an additional proactive policing tool presented in the Brayley et al. (2011) study involved the use of crime scripts to deconstruct the internal trafficking crimes, whereby all agencies involved could contribute to map the features of the crime from initial meeting between perpetrator and victim, tracking through to the ending. Although this tool is not designed to solve crimes it is said to be useful for prevention and intervention, however, the systematic review did not locate any further reporting on whether it had been utilised in the 10 years following the initial study by Brayley et al. (2011).

### 3.3.4 | Responding to the CSE perpetrator

The final analytical theme of ‘responding to the CSE perpetrator’ included studies discussing CSE treatment programmes and interventions. As more CSE perpetrator research highlights patterns and areas to focus targeted prevention strategies to avert further CSE offending, little research exists about those already requiring recidivism intervention within the Criminal Justice System (CJS). Drummond and Southgate's (2018) qualitative study focused on scoping the available literature and conducting interviews with experts on appropriate CSE interventions. As the knowledge base on understanding the CSE perpetrator is scarce, it is perhaps unsurprising that there are no specific interventions available for CSE offenders (Drummond & Southgate, 2018). It was found that in the same way that Police monitoring of perpetrators is poor there are few systems in place to track the trajectories of CSE offenders through the CJS, thus impacting on determining eligibility for intervention programmes (Drummond & Southgate, 2018). Experts interviewed in the study made reference to the distinct definitions between CSA and CSE as not helpful to tackling CSE. However, a consensus was made amongst experts in terms of permitting distinctions between how the offences were committed to provide a tailor-made response to prevent further offending. This view related to the many different possible CSE cases, such as lone or gang offending or those offences sexually or financially motivated.

It was agreed that the current sex offender treatment programmes (SOTP) were based on responses to the more mature, often paedophilic sex offender, conducted via a group based approach, likely to be over-subscribed due to limited resources and an increase in numbers of sex offenders (Drummond & Southgate, 2018). The experts critiqued the SOTP for younger perpetrators who might struggle with the group dynamics, particularly as the topics discussed failed to acknowledge the role of technology (arguably even more relevant to younger CSE perpetrators accessing victims or grooming via social media platforms) or exploring hostile attitudes to women (Drummond & Southgate, 2018). The future of CSE perpetrator intervention would therefore be more relevant to address the types of offending (i.e., gang related) and would involve ways to re-engage offenders back into society, particularly if they are more likely to be younger offenders. The authors conclude by suggesting a more preventative community supportive approach to rehabilitate offenders.

Similarly, findings from the Perkins et al. (2018) study focusing on technology facilitated exploitation revealed flaws in the treatment response for online (including those leading to *contact*) CSE perpetrators who were seeking gain beyond sexual gratification. The report highlighted that offline and online perpetration were not 'clearly distinguishable' and often moved from one to another. The results yielded information that interventions were often responding to need, with a rapid increase in online offending, rather than built on sound empirically tested or evaluated intervention and therefore placing high demands on under-resourced services. Existing interventions have adopted a psycho-educational approach, yet it is recognised that more knowledge is needed on risks presented by online offenders. Sex education and community action was suggested as suitable prevention approaches for those not convicted or known to the Criminal Justice System.

## 4 | DISCUSSION

The aim of this review was to clarify what is known about how all forms of *contact* CSE occurs. Twenty-three publications were identified by a systematic search over a period spanning 13 years, predominantly involving interdisciplinary literature with either qualitative or mixed methods approaches. Analysis of lived experiences, statutory agency data or public sources of information from victims, perpetrators and professionals yielded results that were coded and narratively synthesised into four analytical themes: (a) *barriers to examining a complex phenomenon*, (b) *recognising the contact CSE perpetrator*, (c) *understanding to the contact CSE perpetrator* and (d) *responding to the contact CSE perpetrator*.

Across the studies there was a consensus about the many barriers to researching all forms of CSE, whether it be online (leading to *contact*) or *contact* CSE perpetration, particularly related to the shifting CSE definitions and terminology. The lack of accurate prevalence data, particularly perpetrator characteristics has led to a dominant debate focusing on *contact* CSE crimes being racially motivated by predatory gangs, which has lasted the full 13 years under review. It is suggested that such polarising discourse, often fuelled by the media or reliant on rudimentary data has resulted in an unreliable assessment of threat from *contact* CSE perpetrators (Cockbain, 2013, 2018; Cockbain & Tufail, 2020; Radford et al., 2017). The outcome of this is the public perception of a racial problem that needs 'fixing' and results in solutions focusing on the broader yet crude concepts of culture and communities (Tufail, 2015). It is suggested that the demonised portrayal of minorities in the media is not a new phenomenon, but its implications are far reaching, having serious repercussions for Muslim communities, left and right wing political debates and not least the disservice to the victims (Cockbain & Tufail, 2020; Rowe, 2018; Stubbs & Spooner, 2018; Tufail, 2015). However, until data disparities are addressed, this will likely continue. More recently, there have been calls to move away from focusing on one single factor and prioritise addressing the large gaps around prevalence, patterns and pathways of offending and relationship dynamics involved in CSE (Dean, 2021).

Despite the barriers associated with the categorising of the *contact* CSE perpetrator, specific characteristics, motivations and behaviours have been found to be involved in *contact* perpetration of CSE (Elliot et al., 2009; Walker et al., 2018a, 2018b). The young, lone, white, male is said to be the dominant *contact* CSE perpetrator (CEOP, 2013), but the behaviour and motivation to commit the crime appear to differ if offending with others and within the group typologies provided. Motivations were linked to either financial or sexual gain depending on age of the victim targeted and some perpetrators were likely to be leading more hedonistic lifestyles where access to victims was more opportunistic (Senker et al., 2020). Notably, those offending with others were more likely to act in a more abusive manner towards their victim, many of whom are repeat victims, which is suggested to be associated with the irregular social standards involved in co-offending and the coercive nature of the relationships (Cockbain, 2018). Thus, the impetus for research might be on establishing how to protect such repeat victims rather than focusing on how groups are associated.

Studies investigating the methods of exploitation found that the stereotypical preparatory stages known as grooming were not always present, particularly during online interactions leading to *contact* exploitation (Elliott

et al., 2013). In such cases, approaches were direct in instigating sexual activity, involving highly sexualised discourse. Otherwise, more suggestive methods might be used to instigate sexual activity, which was likely to involve normalising and desensitising techniques (Brayley et al., 2011). Studies focusing on face-to-face *contact* offending suggested that more focus should be on "risky sites" or establishments that attract young people, such as food places with free WiFi or private accommodation hosting parties. The night-time economy was reported to enable the perpetrator in leading a double life and having access to victims that might be lacking in appropriate guardianship. Good practice was discussed in relation to community-based projects targeting mosques and the night-time economy to further prevent and disrupt offending (Bhatti-Sinclair & Sutcliffe, 2018).

It was common that *contact* CSE crimes were justified by offenders, blaming their victims for seeking their attention, which concurs with the discovery by Elliott et al. (2013) that *contact* perpetrators have greater cognitive and victim empathy distortions than other offenders. Other significant dysfunctional factors associated with *contact* CSE perpetrators included previous adverse experiences, such as having witnessed domestic abuse and having deviant criminal histories (Walker et al., 2018a, 2018b). Poor mental health, low self-esteem and attachment difficulties were common psychological profiles reported in the available studies (Elliott et al., 2013; Walker et al., 2018a, 2018b).

Operationally, there are few effective (specifically national) systems for initial identification, mapping, monitoring and tracking perpetration through the CJS (NCA, 2018). This is likely to be linked to the blurred boundaries or ability to differentiate between other sexual offending (i.e., sexual abuse or sexual exploitation), particularly when collecting data (Allnock et al., 2017; Cockbain, 2018; Kelly & Karsna, 2017). Furthermore, if the phases from being suspected of CSE perpetration to prosecution are regarded as inconsistent and faced with obstacles, it is unsurprising that prevention and recidivism programmes are too regarded as ineffective and focused on general sexual offending (Drummond & Southgate, 2018). The current offender programmes fail to address the specific CSE elements of the offending such as co-offending, use of technology and preparatory methods to sexual activity (Drummond & Southgate, 2018). Additionally, Radford et al. (2017) acknowledge the lack of intervention for those not convicted or who present with harmful sexual behaviour, recommending more preventative work to managing offenders.

This review faced several limitations. Firstly, definitional challenges resulted in difficulties with effective identification and cross comparison between the studies. Studies were predominantly included or excluded based on their compatibility with the UK statutory CSE definition involving *contact* offences and invariably there was overlap. An example of this was with studies involving Internet *contact* sexual offenders, whereby it was not made explicit if they received any 'exchange' as typified in CSE offending but were included due to being *contact*. The DfE (2018) statutory definition raises the issue of 'exchange', (see below) and as such it would be helpful for studies to make this obvious:

If sexual gratification, or exercise of power and control, is the only gain for the perpetrator (and there is no gain for the child/young person) this would not normally constitute CSE, but should be responded to as a different form of child sexual abuse (p. 6).

Similarly, this was also the case for studies involving CSE-Material (CSEM) users, where it was unclear if the users had progressed their sexual offending to *contact* offences, where the gain was sexual gratification solely for the perpetrator, and were therefore excluded on this basis. Furthermore, studies focusing on CSE outside of the UK were excluded to ensure that the phenomenon and its legal responses were not conflated with countries who did not follow the same statutory definition. For example, most UK law enforcement agencies (with minor differences in Scotland, Wales and Ireland) will follow the statutory definition and respond to CSE related offences by means of the Sexual Offences Act 2003, and Serious Crime Act (2015). Thus, it is expected that despite a rigorous sifting process for appropriate research, there will undoubtedly be relevant studies that have been excluded because *contact* CSE offending is not an easily identifiable discrete group. As a single researcher, there was no ability to seek the opinions from other independent reviewers to check for accuracy, identify gaps, resolve potential discrepancies, and ensure completeness within the search process.

Moreover, the quality of the studies analysed in the review varied greatly methodologically, by way of differences in study design, sample size, presentation of data and interpretation of results. Despite heterogeneity in designs, the MMAT was utilised to aid the analysis of quality of the studies, finding that those explicitly detailing the entire research process fared better. Strengths were found in studies that had considered a theoretical framework and detailed the full data collection and analytical methods used. Weaknesses were associated with how successful the sample was in generalising to the wider population. Despite the systematic approach to this review, the use of the MMAT and subsequent narrative synthesis relies heavily on interpretation of the findings and thus influences the final conclusions drawn and potential for researcher bias. That said, any bias was balanced by the researcher constantly confronting personal opinions and prejudices with the data and findings have been discussed in context in line with similar research.

Positively, there are many successes and advances in CSE research to be celebrated, firstly in acknowledging these group methods of exploitation, the 'night-time economy' has been proactively targeted in an attempt to disrupt potential CSE activity in 'hotspot' locations (Kerr et al., 2017). Furthermore, the evidence base for proactive policing techniques, such as the use of Social Network Analysis and crime scripts are being explored to disrupt the recognised methods of exploitation. Lastly, there has been a significant increase in reporting of CSE crimes over recent years and perpetrators are more likely to be charged compared to any other sexual offence, suggesting improved awareness and response despite the well documented challenges (Kelly & Karsna, 2017). However, this might not transfer to prosecutions, and if not, could breed further opportunities for CSE, when the offender 'gets away with the offence' and the victim is revictimised by the CJS.

Overall, the review findings can contribute to providing a more comprehensive safeguarding response to *contact* perpetration and establish new insights for law enforcement disruption strategies within the UK. Lavis (2009) postulates that a systematic review, presented in this way, synthesises evidence for policy-makers and stakeholders, highlighting "decision relevant information" in comparison to studies presented individually. As such, policy makers can refer to this singular study to find alternative framings and the "review derived products" (Lavis, 2009), from the varied methodological approaches employed to understand *contact* CSE perpetration. This study presents the following recommendations for the purposes of improving policy, practice, procedure, research and training:

## 4.1 | Policy and practice

- Urge all relevant UK agencies to recognise CSE as one characteristic of CSA. Therefore, only one singular definition would exist to explain the sexual abuse involving a child using the different exploitative methods that is within the family, outside of the family, online or in groups.
- Promote consistent safeguarding threshold levels for the protection of victims across all relevant UK agencies.
- Provide clear guidance and adequate resourcing for the accurate recording and evaluation of contact CSE perpetrator data on centralised systems that is demographic data or monitoring attrition rates.
- Hold the media more accountable for publishing spurious statistics which could be viewed as divisive and unhelpful in accurately understanding the nature of CSE perpetration.
- Train all relevant safeguarding services to flag and record CSE data more consistently and accurately.
- Design and evaluate specific sex offender treatment programmes to address specific CSE offending characteristics, such as, contact, familial or online perpetrators.
- Provide trauma informed therapeutic services at the earliest opportunity to prevent the likelihood of lifelong problems associated with adversity and to support the building of healthy relationships
- Provide confidential, non-judgemental services to respond to the young people displaying harmful sexual behaviour or the potential perpetrators seeking help to avoid instigating sexual activity with children.
- Educate young people on the discursive styles commonly used by perpetrators to initiate sexual activity and the propensity for the more serious sexual offences to be committed in groups.

- Disruption strategies to focus on group-based offending and target 'risky sites', particularly in the night-time economy.
- All agencies to respond to the researcher or inquiry 'calls for evidence', in order to achieve a better understanding of the *contact* CSE perpetrator threat.

## 4.2 | Research

- Future research directions to benefit from exploring similar research topics associated with other methods of sexual offending, such as familial abuse or rape, to determine if research parallels could be made with the CSE perpetrator. Other sexual offender studies have explored: normalisation; denial; blaming; preconditions; circumstances; opportunity; attitude towards or restrictions in discussing sex; social norms, masculinity; models of offending; victim-perpetrator dynamics; sexual violence prevention and identifying risk and protective factors, which could ultimately transfer to inform CSE prevention and response (Banyard et al., 2010; Cockbain, 2018; El Feki et al., 2017; Finkelhor et al., 2017; Fulu et al., 2013; McAlinden, 2014; McGrath et al., 2007; Radford et al., 2017; Smallbone & Rayment-McHugh, 2013).
- Further explore correlations between harmful sexual behaviours, deviance, or adverse childhood experiences as pathways to *contact* CSE perpetration.
- Future research to cease entering the racially divisive debates until more precise data is available, and to instead, address gaps in CSE perpetrator literature, using empirically robust methods to build on the established knowledgebase detailed in this review.

## 5 | CONCLUSION

In summary, the four analytical themes that emerged from this systematic review have highlighted the many barriers to examining such a complex phenomenon and advanced our understanding of what is needed for future research and practice. The lack of available data has generated opportunities for inaccurate discourse, which until exact data is available, is simply a distraction to the progress, that is, or could be, being made in understanding *contact* CSE perpetration. An improved knowledgebase of how and why *contact* CSE crimes are committed is likely to be more helpful in informing prevention and response, than a definition that has continued to cause confusion throughout the period under review. This is particularly so when the gravity of sexual crimes committed becomes more severe when perpetrators offend with others, perceiving it to be socially acceptable. Significant findings for practice and research suggest that there is scope to explore correlations between *contact* offenders experiencing adversity, mental health issues, cognitive and victim empathy distortions to support treatment and rehabilitation. Furthermore, the targeting of harmful sexual behaviour in young people and educating society about manipulative strategies used by online (leading to *contact*) and *contact* perpetrators when interacting with victims, might safeguard potential future victims. As the findings suggest, the agencies policing and responding to *contact* CSE crimes, particularly the rehabilitation of such perpetrators, requires the most effective and evidenced based tools and programmes to be in place. The findings of this review may be useful to guide future research and prompt policy leaders to comprehensively address the equivocal classification, language, and characteristics of CSE.

### CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

### DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.



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