Categories of Child Protection & Extra-Familial Harm:

An Interview-Based Study with Practitioners Exploring the Limits of the Children Act 1989.

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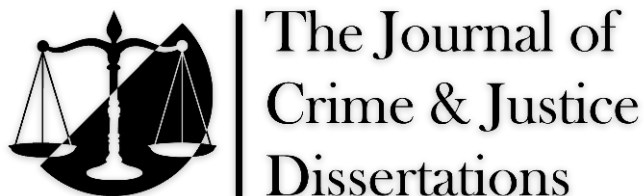
Abstract

The Children Act (1989) is a long-standing piece of legislation that defines significant harm into categories of child abuse or neglect. This was built upon the concept of harm occurring inside the home, predominantly from parents/caregivers. In modern society, the four categories of harm, thus being physical, emotional and sexual abuse and neglect, remain unchanged, with a strong focus on parental capacity. However, with advancements in social media and contextual safeguarding cases on the rise across the UK, no category of abuse or neglect currently fits the concept of extra-familial harm and limited primary research has been carried out with social work professionals to explore whether the current categories of child protection, are relevant to extra-familial harm. This research paper aims to build upon research undertaken by Firmin (2022) and address the gap in legislation whereby extra-familial harm is not listed as a category of abuse, and to explore with social work professionals through the method of structured interviews and thematic analysis, whether there is a need for a reform of current legislation. The paper provides a detailed analysis of how extra-familial harm is an emerging risk making up a large proportion of the social work caseload with child criminal and sexual exploitation being the main child protection issues faced by teenagers outside of the family home. Professionals also felt that there were strong links between looked after children (LAC) and further exposure to extra-familial harm, and that the response of placing a child under local authority care, is rarely a solution to tackles cases of contextual safeguarding. Furthermore, workers felt that the category of neglect was widely used as a catch all category due to there being no relevant category for cases of extra-familial harm. The paper also provided an insight into the powerful emotions felt by parents whose children were placed into the category of neglect and felt judgement of a 'failure to protect'. The overarching themes arising from the research paper, draws upon a need to establish amendments to current legislation, to reflect upon the changed risk profile of more risk coming from outside of the family home.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Introduction

The Children Act (1989) is based around harm occurring within the home and since its implementation, has seen no reform. With modern advancements in technology, a changing world and more children coming to notice for criminal and sexual exploitation, it is clear that contextual safeguarding cases are on the rise for young people in the UK. This qualitative research study aims to build upon the findings of Firmin (2022), using participants quotes to explore whether the current categories of child protection are relevant to extra-familial harm.

1.2 Background

The Children Act (1989) was introduced following high profile child deaths and a public inquiry into widespread child abuse in Cleveland (Wate QPM & Boulton, 2019). According to Firmin (2020), the child protection system was seen as a legislative framework for a system to safeguard children whose parents were failing to protect them or causing them harm. It was therefore abuse and parenting and not abuse in itself that resulted in action being taken by children's social care, as detailed by Bliston (2006), Harrison & Holmes (2014) and Hallett, et al. (2019). The Children Act (1989) introduced the concept of significant harm as the threshold that gives local authorities a duty under section 47 of the Act, to make enquiries if they suspect that a child is suffering or is likely to suffer significant harm. The Children Act (1989) was based on the principle that harm occurs in the home, mostly with parents. These principles are still in place today and put a focus on a child-centred approach to safeguarding. The Act was implemented at a time when investigation of child abuse dominated practice (Lonne, et al., 2009), whilst child abuse was dominated by notions of harm occurring from parents/caregivers. However, the Act was subject to various mouldings (Hacking 1998, 1991, 1992, cited in Lonne, et al., 2009), so that by the late 1980s, it included four categories of abuse: physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse, and neglect. It was also focused on young people up to age of 18 as opposed to a limitation of only young children (Lonne, et al., 2009).

Neglect is detailed as the persistent failure to meet a child's psychological and/or physical needs which can impair their health and development. According to the NSPCC (2024), neglect is the most common form of child abuse in the UK and accounts for around half of the children who are subject of a child protection plan. Physical abuse is defined as causing physical harm to a child through incidents such as hitting, shaking, burning, suffocating and Fabricated Induced Illness (FII) whereby a parent induces

illness deliberately, or fabricates symptoms of illness. Emotional abuse is defined as persistently emotionally maltreating a child which can include making the child feel unloved and worthless, and not meeting their needs for a healthy development. It has a heavy focus on parental capacity. Sexual abuse is defined as forcing or enticing a child to participate in sexual activity (HM Government, 2023). According to Community Advocates for Family and Youth (2024), 60% of sexual abuse perpetrators are known to the child with 30% being relatives. There is a dominant overarching notion that the four categories of abuse have parents and families as the centre of causation. According to The Voice of the Child (2024) families under stress has a negative impact on the child's health, development and wellbeing either directly, or because it affects the capacity of parents to respond to the child's needs.

The Working Together to Safeguard Children document (2018) guides practitioners to take a systematic approach to enquiries using a conceptual model of the assessment framework. It investigates three domains in line with Children Act (1989) thus being parental capacity, family and environmental factors and child's development needs. It also outlines that all practitioners should approach the work with parents and carers in line with the principle of a child-centred approach within a whole family focus, with the welfare of the child being paramount and their voice being heard (HM Government, 2018). However, more recently a lot more risk to young people, comes from outside of the family home, especially as family influence declines and peer influence increases (Camden Safeguarding Children Partnership, 2021). The Working Together to Safeguard Children document, states that assessments of children in such cases should consider the individual needs and vulnerabilities of each child. They should look at the parental capacity to support the child, including helping the parents and carers to understand any risks and support them to keep children safe and assess potential risk to child (HM Government, 2023). Again, it appears that the focus is on parental capacity rather than addressing the risk to children who are beyond parental control and open to abuse due to external factors. Forms of extra-familial harm include exploitation by criminal and organised crime groups and individuals (such as county lines and financial exploitation), serious violence, modern slavery and trafficking, online harm, sexual exploitation, teenage relationship abuse, and the influences of extremism which could lead to radicalisation (HM Government, 2023). According to the National Youth Agency (2021), 450,000 young people are exposed to risks associated with gangs and 300,000 know someone in a gang (Home Office); 60,000 young people identify as a gang member or know a gang member who is a relative. (Children's Commissioner for England, 2021). This shows us the scale of exposure to extra familial harm for young people and is likely to lead to involvement with social care. According to Safer London (2024), the current safeguarding system in the UK is not set up to respond well to harm that is experienced outside of the family context.

According to Firmin (2020) where cases of extra-familial harm were identified, it was primarily seen as a policing and community safety responsibility, rather than a matter of child welfare. Success and outcomes were measured by behaviour of individuals such as how many were in education and reported missing from home etc, with assessments that sat at the heart of the child protection system being framed around the capacity of parents to keep their children safe. Effective social care responses to extra-familial harm can be outlined in five characteristics thus being, relational, interagency, contextual, extra-familial risks and harms focused, youth centred, with each response offering potential to improve service responses. (Firmin, et al., 2022). This is echoed in the recent update to the Working Together to Safeguard Children document (2023) which states that all children, including those who may be causing harm to others, should receive a safeguarding response first and practitioners should work with them to understand their experiences and what will reduce the likelihood of harm to themselves and others. Furthermore, practitioners will need to build an understanding of the context in which the harm is occurring and draw on relevant knowledge and information from the children and wider partners to decide on the most appropriate interventions (HM Government, 2023).

With more pressures on the social work responses to extra familial harm, this research paper will explore if contextual safeguarding has caused challenges to social workers and partners in the field who work in child protection and ascertain whether wider changes are needed to reform the child protection system in the UK in line with the current social welfare issue of exploitation of young people.

Chapter 2: Methodology

2.1 Ethical Considerations

This research project will be carried out via interviews with professionals that work within the field of social work. The initial proposal originally wanted to include interviews with families whose children were subject to child protection plans, but this would be inappropriate for a BSc research project and would pose an ethical dilemma. Interviewing families directly could be traumatising and triggering and potentially lead to a disengagement from services, therefore the benefits of the research would not outweigh the potential risks which would not be within ethical guidelines. Children would also not be able to give their consent for their experiences to be discussed..

2.2 Research Method

The research project will use structured interviews conducted with professionals that work within the field of social work, who work with children that are subject to Section 47 child protection plans, with a focus on extra-familial harm. Interviewing professionals within the children's social care sector can provide a wider overview of experiences, patterns and social work responses to contextual safeguarding, and whether the current categories of child protection can capture the changed risk profile of risk outside of the family home.

Prior to commencing the interviews, interview questions were developed and refined with the support from the dissertation supervisor. The questions were designed to gain research participants perspectives on their social work world, and to gain meaningful information in relation to the research focus and any related theoretical framework (Clarke, et al., 2021). Themes and areas related to the research question guided the interview questions to ensure that the interviews were structured, clear and uncomplicated in terms of the focus of the research.

Before conducting the interviews, potential research participants from the field of social work were identified and contact was made via email asking them if they would like to participate in the research study. A consent form and information sheet were provided to ensure that ethical guidelines were followed by ensuring that participants were well informed and able to give informed consent.

The interviews were planned to be conducted either face to face or online using Microsoft teams according to the availability and preference of the research participants. However, due to the

researcher developing sudden ill health, the interview method was changed to the interview questions being sent via email. Although disappointing, this method has its benefits: due to the busy nature of the professionals approached as participants, this approach allowed for samples that would be otherwise hard to reach. Additionally, it gave the participants a greater amount of control in choosing when they responded according to their changing schedules and this could lead to facilitating a relationship of mutual trust (Mason & Ide, 2014 cited in Clarke, et al., 2021, p439).

2.3 Analysis Method

The data obtained from the structured interviews were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022). During the research project the following phases of thematic analysis were used: dataset familiarisation; data coding; initial theme generation; theme development and review; then refining, defining and naming; and writing up the report (Braun & Clarke, 2022). According to Braun & Clarke (2006), it is vital to immerse yourself in the data to the extent that you are familiar with the depth and breadth of the context. Eight interviews were conducted, and the data gathered took a significant amount of time to read through. Each interview was re-read several times to give a deeper understanding of the collected data in an active way, allowing for active searching for meanings and patterns (Braun & Clarke, 2022). This phase of familiarisation provided a firm foundation for the analysis that followed.

Initial codes were applied to the data to ensure systematic engagement with meaning and patterning across the entire dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2022) to allow development of themes to be based on detailed analysis. The data was mapped in colour to allow the researcher to make sense of the data in relation to the research question (Elliott, 2018) and organise it into meaningful groups. Following the initial coding of the data, the entire dataset was reviewed and analysed, looking at how the initial codes could be grouped within wider overarching themes. This allowed for the researcher to be provided with a basis for a theoretical understanding of the data, related to the research focus (Clarke, et al., 2021). Any data not relating to the research question was disregarded. A thematic map was then created to provide a visual representation of the research process.

The thematic map was used to help refine, define, and name themes. This working document was used to identify patterns of meaning and possible connections, interconnections and disconnections, related to the research focus (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Interview extracts were then used to capture the intrinsic nature of the identified themes in more detail.

Following the completion of refining and defining the themes, the research report was written. According to Braun & Clarke (2022), the aim of writing the research report is to bring together your data and "convince the reader of the validity and quality of your analysis" (Braun & Clarke, 2022) in a logical and succinct way.

Chapter 3: Findings & Discussion

3.1 Extra-Familial Harm – An Emerging Risk

Interviews were conducted with participants practicing across five London boroughs. Seven out of eight participants stated that they had seen an increase of up to a third in cases of contextual safeguarding in the last five years. Many participants mentioned social media as being a contributing factor as it portrayed a view of attainable wealth through participation in acts that are considered as extra-familial harm. They felt that these acts were glamourised on social media thus leading to temptation for money and/or drugs. Participants stated:

> Undoubtedly this is a growing phenomenon and our knowledge of it continues to expand. There is a greater exposure to young people through social media, from those who could criminally or sexually exploit them (...) (Interview 2)

However, one participant from an undisclosed borough, was unable to comment on the last five years as they had only been in the social work field for three years. They felt that they had not seen an increase but also made mention of extra-familial harm being a somewhat hidden type of harm. They stated:

> In my experience over three years, contextual safeguarding cases have made up a large proportion of my work, however, I do not feel that I have seen an increase. Contextual safeguarding cases remain a consistent concern. It is very likely that many cases go unseen due to the complexity and often hidden nature of these worries. (Interview 3)

All participants stated that secondary school aged children aged between 11 and 18 years old, were prone to exploitation, with teenagers being the most vulnerable. They theorised that this was due to increased exposure to the community and desire to be experimental at that age. Participants stated:

> 12-17 (...) Teenagers are growing to be more independent and being exposed to more and more people. They tend to have access to social media which can be a breeding ground for predators. Some will experiment with drugs/alcohol, increasing

their potential for exposure to unsafe adults, or other children that have been groomed into exploitation. (Interview 3)

In all interviews, participants stated that criminal and sexual exploitation were some of the main child protection issues faced by children outside of the family home, ultimately leading to an elevated risk of harmful behaviours such as county lines and gang affiliation. Participants explained:

Some of the main child protection issues faced by children outside of the home can include criminal and sexual exploitation, gangs (…) being at risk of serious youth violence (…) grooming from people outside the home, substance misuse concerns (…) (Interview 5)

Furthermore, participants spoke of how the social work responses to extra-familial harm were more challenging with teenagers due to their imminent transition into adult social care, in which they may not be eligible for support. In addition to this, participants stated that child protection plans were rarely effective or successful in this instance, as they are not able to remain open for a length of time long enough to effect positive change and put in dedicated support and intervention with the child and family. Participants stated:

(…)when a child is 17 years old and due to turn 18 where they may not be eligible for adult social care (…) the risks do not reduce or disappear on the 18th birthday (…) Unfortunately, 16-17 year olds at that point are so deeply involved, child protection plans are meaningless as they are open for a year on the cusp of transitioning to adult services. (Interview 6).

3.2 Looked After Children (LAC) and Further Exposure

Many participants had strong feelings on the link between looked after children and the further risk of exposure to extra-familial harm. They felt that when children are involved in extra-familial harm and their behaviour at home escalates, they are then subsequently deemed to be beyond parental control and the response is then to place the child in local authority accommodation. Participants felt that this could then lead to further exposure to extra-familial harm, thus increasing the risk to the child as they would then be mixing with others in similar situations. Participants stated:

I feel that children are quick to be placed into care when they are beyond parental control, and this can then lead to more risks for the young person. (Interview 7)

This was further supported by participants who also spoke of how children coming into care as a result of extra-familial harm, is rarely a solution to the problem. They explained that movements between accommodation could allow the child potential to become more deeply involved in criminality and further exposed to harm from external factors. Participants stated:

(...) certainly became more at risk in care as other county lines were opened up to him as he was moved around (...) partner agencies often think that placing the child in care will somehow reduce the risk, when in fact, it often highlights the vulnerabilities of the child. (Interview 2)

Furthermore, another participant explained that the adverse childhood experience of coming into care, could cause the child to continue the behaviours into adulthood and become not only at risk themselves, but also a risk others. One participant explained:

(...) was shot leading to care proceedings, but he was also stabbed as a looked after child, and ultimately as an adult, stabbed and killed another young person. It seems as though a path was laid out at the time he was first recruited and shot, and no matter what interventions were used, (...) he continued on that path. (Interview 2)

3.3 Category of Neglect

An overarching theme across the majority of interviews, was that neglect was the category of child protection most used for children experiencing or at risk of extra-familial harm. Participants felt that this was the only option available to social work professionals as the other three categories of sexual, physical, and emotional abuse were not an accurate fit. Participants felt that there should be an additional category for contextual safeguarding, to reflect the changed risk profile of an increase to risk of harm more frequently occurring from outside of the family home. Participants stated:

The only category available is that of neglect (...) we use it as a 'catch all' when none of the other three categories fit. (Interview 2)

I think that there should be a new category of child protection for extra-familial harm (…) They usually get put on the plan under the category of neglect as this is the easiest option. (Interview 7)

This was supported by a comment from another participant who felt that this was unfair on parents stating:

(…) if parents are engaging with services and doing all they can to safeguard their child, then the child should not be placed under the category of neglect. (Interview 5)

All interview participants stated that the category of neglect elicited emotional responses from parents where the category was used in cases of extra-familial harm. A common theme across all interviews was that the word neglect held such a negative meaning for parents and felt oppressive when the risk was coming from outside of the family home and difficult to control. Participants stated:

I find the worse responses tend to come when a child is placed under the category of neglect. This inevitably places blame on the parents when it may have been something they could not prevent (…) Parents often feel blamed for 'failure to protect'. (Interview 3)

Furthermore, participants understood the emotional responses from parents and acknowledged that current legislation placed a focus on parental capacity to protect a child from harm, which could take away from external factors that parents are unable to control. Participants explained:

They are emotional which is understandable. (…) At times it is not a reflection of their parenting (…) there are some things/areas that parents/carers do not have control over (…) this needs to be remembered and acknowledged. Does this overlook the issue of extra-familial harm? It shouldn't but the lines can become blurred. (Interview 1)

3.3 Policy and Legislation – A Call for Reform?

In all interviews, participants felt that the Children Act (1989) was unable to capture the changed risk profile of more risk occurring outside of the family home. All participants felt that reforms of the UK

child protection system were needed to reflect the issue of extra-familial harm affecting young people, nor did they feel that it was it representative of current social work practice. Participants stated:

> I do not feel that the current Children Act is an accurate reflection of modern-day social work and child protection concerns, specifically, when considering contextual safeguarding. (…) a reform would be beneficial to capture more of our day-to-day work, rather than the typical focus on familial abuse. (Interview 3)

Furthermore, participants spoke of the Children Act (1989) being the legislation that guides their practice yet felt let down that it was outdated guidance with no updates to reflect emerging threats and risks to children from outside of the family home. With no current shift in the Children Act, social work professionals felt that it was difficult to fully address the risks associated with extra-familial harm. Participants stated:

> The Children Act is as old as we know it (…) not with the times (…) not up to date for practitioners. (Interview 6)

In all interviews, participants felt that the recent Working Together to Safeguard Children (2023) document, was somewhat incomplete, too brief, and still required improvement. They stated that whilst it was a good place to start, they still felt that the amendment was more of a description of extra-familial harm which gave recognition to emerging risk on a national level as opposed to just local or regional. They felt it was rather a step-by-step guide to recognising harm outside of the family home rather than a guide on how to accurately respond to the risk. Participants stated:

> (…) legislation and guidance are catching up to what's happening in safeguarding across the country. It is positive that contextual safeguarding is recognised, but the amendment does not (…) go far enough to support social workers and other agencies to tackle the problem with a clear structure and guidance. The amendment appears to be a definition rather than a solution. (Interview 2)

However, a small number of participants were supportive of the recent amendment to the document in comparison to the previous 2018 version, as it now recognised the forms of extra-familial harm and shone a light on how external spaces can pose risk and not just the family home. Participants stated:

> I feel it is useful guidance and shows how different spaces outside of the home can
> pose a risk to children and young people. (…) it recognises the forms of harm outside
> of the home (…) (Interview 5)

3.4 Discussion

Extra-familial harm appears to be a growing phenomenon nationwide, affecting young people in the UK. By its nature, it is often associated to locations beyond the family home and in this sense, it can be unpredictable (Firmin, 2020).

The interview participants stated that the main risks faced by young people outside of the family home included criminal and sexual exploitation, whereby this often resulted in gang affiliation, county lines and exchanging sexual and/or criminal acts in exchange for money and drugs. As such, the UK child protection systems frame extra-familial harm as primarily crime and community safety issues (Firmin, 2020). Young people are often viewed as perpetrators rather than victims of exploitation. The gains of money, status and drugs that young people gain from those that exploit them, can blur our vision and put a focus on what young people appear to be 'getting', rather than what they lose or have taken from them in the process of abuse (Eaton & Holmes, 2017;Firmin, 2010;Hudeck, 2018;Pearce, 2013, as cited in Firmin, 2020). With safeguarding cases on the rise, it is important to address this on a national level with policy and legislation acknowledging extra-familial harm as a category of abuse.

An overarching theme throughout the interviews, was that social media was a largely contributing factor to extra-familial harm. One participant explained:

> (…) There is a lot of exploitation, there is a lot more of criminal exploitation, gang
> exploitation and grooming. I don't think social media and technology helps the
> situation (…) People know how to prey on the vulnerable (…) Contextual
> safeguarding is very much on the increase (…) We cannot police social media and
> kids are one step ahead. This is a common theme (Interview 6).

According to Unseen (2024), county lines gangs are using social media to target, groom, and exploit children. At least 27,000 children are believed to be trapped in county lines across the UK (UK Parliament, 2024). The scope of online grooming crimes resulting in extra-familial harm against children is large. Between 2017 and 2022, there was an 82% increase in exploitation Unseen, 2024). Furthermore, the end of year 2023 summary of the National Referral Mechanism (NRM) and Duty to

Refer statistics in relation to modern slavery, showed that the number of referrals for child potential victims were at their highest on record at 44% (GOV.UK). Furthermore, a recent inspection of how well the National Crime Agency tackle the online sexual abuse and exploitation of children, showed that there were no nationally agreed standards of practice, resulting in poorly managed risk assessments and forces not sharing information with their statutory safeguarding partners at the time when significant risk to children is first known (HMICFRS, 2023).

The research study aligned with previous research undertaken by Firmin who determined that an ecological approach was needed to consider the spaces where young people experience harm. Firmin's contextual safeguarding model aims to support practitioners to identify the full range of social influences, risks and pressures children face in their daily lives. The approach advocates for professionals to target a child's social conditions in the round; and use effective partnerships between children's services, young people, parents, wider communities, and agencies to reduce the level of harm children are exposed to (London Assembly, 2023 p19). Her contextual safeguarding framework guided local authorities to understand and respond to risk of harm beyond the family home, acknowledging two levels: referral of the child to safeguard, and referral of the place harm occurred to give context. The framework aims to locate contextual work within the field of child protection, child welfare and safeguarding, rather than crime reduction and community safety (Firmin, 2020). The contextual dynamics of abuse, vulnerability and risk constructed by Firmin in 2015, recognises peer groups as a domain to form negative peer connections, schools as a place whereby young people can get recruited into extra-familial harm, and neighbourhoods as external places where child criminal exploitation and child sexual exploitation can take place. The risks within the home are identified as neglect and parental capacity (Firmin & Knowles, 2020).

In the absence of a child protection system that can reach into extra-familial contexts, local areas and government departments created responses to separate issues that might emerge in those contexts. Each type of abuse such as child criminal exploitation and child sexual exploitation, has been independent of the others but rarely anchored to a broader child protection system geared to address extra-familial harm (Firmin, 2020).

The research demonstrated that currently, the only category of child protection available to place children under in cases of extra-familial harm, was that of neglect. All participants interviewed felt that this category was a 'catch all' when no other category fit. They felt strongly that extra-familial harm needed its own category within the Children Act as a form of abuse. One participant explained:

> (...) criminal activity is trickier and can frequently end up being placed under neglect.
> I don't necessarily agree with this and do feel that the categories would benefit from
> some change to reflect contextual safeguarding issues (Interview 3)

Another participant stated:

> Neglect seems to be the category that covers everything except for sexual abuse.
> It's like a one size fits all which is not great (Interview 6)

The UK is enshrined in law under the Children Act (1989) which predominantly places parental capacity at the forefront of neglect and the focus of assessments and child protection section 47 enquiries. Section 47 inquiries, which form the basis of a statutory assessment of a child at risk of significant harm, only ask questions in relation to the child and family (Firmin, 2020). However, extra-familial risks and harms are not, by definition, caused by neglect, parental abuse or inadequate parenting, but still pose a risk of significant harm to young people's welfare (Firmin, et al., 2022). According to Firmin, et al (2022), social work roles and the safeguarding systems in which they are deployed, were not designed with extra-familial harm in mind, nor were they designed to deal with risks beyond the family home. The intended target of the child protection system has been children and families (Firmin, 2020) and this was reflected in the research study.

All participants spoke of neglect as being the only category available in cases of extra-familial harm, and detailed how this category elicited the most emotional responses in parents, for whose children's behaviour they could no longer control. They stated that parents felt blamed for a failure to protect. Young people may become involved in extra-familial harm even when parents are taking all necessary steps to keep their children safe (Pike, et al., 2019; Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel, 2020 as cited in Firmin, et al., 2022). The research aligned with previous research undertaken by Pike, et al, 2019 as cited in in Firmin, et al., 2022, whereby it was found that parents experiences were that social care staff were fixated on them as a problem rather than them being seen as partners in safeguarding. It could therefore be argued that the current legislation that social workers work within, places an emphasis on parental capacity which may inadvertently lead to the issue of extra-familial harm being overlooked.

Findings from a national review of social care responses to criminal exploitation in 2020, suggested that child welfare and social care systems in the UK, required adaptations to specifically engage with the dynamics of extra-familial harm. Furthermore, there were particular concerns about the ability of social

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care systems in the UK, to adopt a welfare (and where required child protection) approach to harms that were not in mind at the point of the system design (McAlister, 2021 cited in Firmin, et al, 2022).

Another common theme in the research project was the link between looked after children (LAC) and further exposure to extra-familial harm. Participants felt that being accommodated by the local authority, was rarely a solution to the problem, and instead of mitigating risk, highlighted the vulnerabilities of the child, thus making them more prone to further harm from exploitation. However, participants felt that all to often, children are placed into care as a social work response to contextual safeguarding cases. One participant explained:

> I feel that children are quick to be placed into care when they are beyond parental
> control, and this can then lead to more risks for the young person (Interview 7)

HM Government (2016) cited in Firmin (2020), stated that residential children's care homes were being targeted by exploiters of extra-familial harm, yet in 2020, Firmin surveyed 13 local areas in London to capture in a one-month period, how many children became looked after as a result of extra-familial harm. The findings from her research showed that within this period 45 children were placed outside of their family home. Young people in care are then opened up to further risks as they are living with others in similar situations and have more county lines opened up to them as they move around. Children who are looked after are at heightened risk of going missing and being exposed to extra-familial harm and go missing frequently. In 2022 – 2023 alone, 9370 children were reported as missing to the police, with 1 in 10 stating that they had been victims of exploitation in their return home interviews (London Assembly, 2023). Furthermore, Peck (2023) from Safer London, told the police and crime committee for the missing children in London report, that the "biggest protective factor" from risks of a child going missing was in the family (London Assembly, 2023). This therefore supports the argument that children are more prone to further extra-familial harm if they become looked after, as this protective factor is then removed. This aligns with the research study, that suggests that placing children into care as a response to extra-familial harm is not a solution to mitigate and respond to risks outside of the family home.

Throughout the research study, an overarching theme was that all participants called for a change in legislation and policy, so that risks coming from outside of the family home, were encompassed within the legislation that guides social work practice and child protection procedures across the UK. All professionals interviewed, called for inclusion of extra-familial harm as an additional category of abuse, as they felt that the Children Act (1989) was outdated and not reflective of modern-day risks or practice.

The Children Act (1989) received royal assent over 30 years ago and could not have foreseen the increased risk profile of extra-familial harm (Firmin, 2020). Participants explained:

> The Children Act has been around abuse within the home (…) Reform is needed (…) to be able to ensure that children are safeguarded and measures in place (…) to respond to emerging threats and risks to children (Interview 5)

The assessments that sit at the heart of the child protection system in the UK in line with the Children Act (1989), are framed around children and the capacity of their parents to keep them safe. Assessments currently decide whether a child is in need (section 17) and/or likely to suffer significant harm (section 47). Both assessments place a focus on gathering information about the child and family (Firmin, 2020), thus overlooking harm in extra-familial settings. This is reflected in earlier discussion, whereby cases of extra-familial harm are placed under the category of neglect, which can then appear that parents are to 'blame' as outlined in the current 'outdated' legislation and policy.

The research study shows that social workers appear to be bound by outdated guidance which has seen no shift or reform. However, there have been reforms to other UK legislations such as the Marriage (same sex couples) Act (2013) and the Abortion (amendment) Regulations (2022). Law reforms in the UK, aim to conduct research into certain areas of law to make recommendations to parliament where reforms are needed (Bodleian Libraries, 2021). The research study, along with many others, has identified that that Children Act (1989) is archaic and not reflective of the current harm that children are becoming increasingly exposed to beyond the family home. It is therefore difficult to gauge the reasons behind the lack of reform to the UK child protection system. In addition to the Children Act (1989), participants also reflected upon the Working Together to Safeguard Children (2023) document, and agreed that it was too brief and required more work in guiding social workers on how to respond to extra-familial harm, with one participant stating:

> (…) the amendment is a definition not a solution. (Interview 2).

Chapter 4: Conclusion

The research project has explored whether the categories of child protection are relevant to extra-familial harm, which expands upon research by Firmin (2022). The research demonstrates that contextual safeguarding cases make up a large proportion of social work cases, and that it is often overlooked, as current legislation and policy do not list extra-familial harm as a category of abuse. The research project highlighted that many practitioners in the field of child protection, are calling for reforms to the longstanding Children Act (1989) legislation which has shown no shift towards highlighting abuse that occurs outside of the family home, and the changed risk profile that this now creates for children living in a modern and technological world.

Due to the nature of the BSc research project, the sample size of interviewed participants was small, thus providing some limitations. To further develop the study, additional boroughs outside of London should have been contacted to explore whether their views aligned with the participants from London boroughs that were initially contacted.

The research project and interviews have highlighted themes that can be explored in more depth such as the social services role in supporting 16–17-year-olds experiencing extra-familial harm, when on the cusp of transitioning into adult social care where they may not be eligible for support. The research project also highlighted the links between LAC and further exposure which in turn, affected missing episodes from children. This is an area that can be explored more deeply by engaging with external partners such as the police and missing outreach teams, to gain a complete and comprehensive understanding.

Another theme highlighted that could be explored in more depth, is the exploiters vs the exploited, as one participant explained:

> There are some great people and professionals working in the space with children and young people at risk of exploitation and extra-familial harm. (…) and more needs to be done in relation to disruption of adults who are grooming and exploiting children, sales of weapons and drug market etc. (Interview 5)

The focus of the research project has primarily been on whether the categories of child protection are relevant to extra-familial harm, within a system based on harm occurring within the home. It would be interesting to explore this topic in more depth and on a larger scale, and to repeat the study upon release of any updated guidance on safeguarding children.

By undertaking this research project, I have gained vital skills relevant to social work practice. Time management has been a key part of learning. During the research project I have had to learn to find a balance between work and home life alongside ill health and other commitments. The research topic itself was developed from a keen interest in the subject area of child protection and extra-familial harm so choosing the topic was a relatively easy choice. However, the workload that developed from analysing the collected data from the primary research was challenging. Regular supervision helped to focus my thoughts and prioritise what was relevant, which also lends itself well to social work practice as supervision is a key area of practice. Critical reflection was developed along the route of exploring the topic and allowed time to think of where the gaps lie in legislation and policy. As social work advocates for social justice and human rights, the research project allowed me to have these components in mind when exploring whether children were being let down by a system that was built to protect them yet had seen no shift in acknowledging the modern challenges that they face outside of the home. In conclusion, the research study has fundamentally highlighted a need for change in the categories of child protection to reflect extra-familial harm, and to have contextual safeguarding embedded within the Children Act as a separate category of abuse.

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