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Exploited for the Cause?: The Potential for a Cross-Harm Approach to Children's Online Engagement in Terrorism

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The traditional intersection of exploitation and terrorism lies within armed conflict, whereby individuals are subjected to physical abuses for financial, sexual or warring gains to a rebel movement. However, recently the language of exploitation victimization has gained momentum in the United Kingdom in relation to children's digital recruitment and involvement in terrorist activity. This article applies an exploitation lens to the dynamics and purpose of children's recruitment into terrorism. Through 30 interviews and two workshops with experts engaged in counter-terrorism, anti-exploitation and digital safety, it explores the parameters of what might constitute online child terrorist exploitation. The study identifies the challenges and consequences of recognizing cases of child victim-perpetrators, and the implications for effective cross-harm safeguarding and violence prevention.

KEY WORDS: terrorism, radicalization, criminal exploitation, human trafficking, modern slavery, children

INTRODUCTION

On 30 December 2021, a UK terrorism case against a 14-year-old female defendant was discontinued (Hymas 2022). According to her solicitor, Laura Cook (2023), the girl faced six charges relating to purely online terrorist activity: five counts of possession of extreme right-wing propaganda, and possession of an article for terrorist purposes—the downloaded instruction manual for manufacturing a FGC-9 3D-printed firearm. Her case was discontinued not through lack of evidence of her engagement with extremist networks, but rather on account of the circumstances and power dynamics involved in her digital relationships therein. The Home Office Single Competent Authority (SCA) 'accepted that she was a victim of modern slavery in the UK for a period between March 2020 and October 2020 for the specific purposes of criminal exploitation and sexual exploitation' (Cook 2023). Despite no physical interaction, the girl's online communications with an adult male extremist in the USA were found to be sufficient evidence for the SCA to confirm that 'she had been recruited by [the American man] online for the purpose of sexual exploitation *and radicalisation leading to criminal exploitation*' (Cook 2023, emphasis added).

This case is arguably both an exception and (part of) the rule. The UK is currently experiencing the highest levels of juvenile terrorism prosecutions in history, with 42 children arrested in the last year alone (Home Office 2025*b*). Since 2016, 59 children have been convicted for offences ranging from downloading terrorist content, disseminating propaganda and even preparing to commit terrorist acts in the UK and overseas (Rose and Vale 2023). However, this 14-year-old girl is the first and only person to be granted a defence for terrorism charges under the non-punishment principle for victims of exploitation, as set out in section 45 of the UK *Modern Slavery Act 2015* (hereafter MSA). This may never change. While two other legal cases in the UK have since followed this example to explicitly raise potential exploitation victimization in the context of children's terrorist mobilization (Courts and Tribunals Judiciary 2023; Keogh 2023), their efforts were unsuccessful.

There are built-in limits to the protections afforded by the MSA. Schedule 4 stipulates serious offences to which the section 45 defence is not applicable, meaning that victims can be prosecuted by virtue of being exploited within that particular 'type' of modern slavery (Ofer 2019). On 27 February 2024, the UK Home Secretary—then, James Cleverly—responded to the 2021 report of the Independent Reviewer of Terrorism Legislation to 'accept in full [the] recommendation that all terrorism offences should be added to schedule 4 to the MSA', thereby 'removing terrorism offences from the ambit of the section 45 defence'. He went on to say that '[t]his change will be made at the next practicable opportunity' (Home Office 2024). At the time of writing, the MSA has not been updated, and it is unclear following the UK general election and change of government whether this change will be implemented. It is, therefore, a critical time to consider the benefits and challenges of adopting a cross-harm approach for such cases—one that acknowledges and responds to interconnected experiences of exploitation *and* radicalization.

The traditional intersection of exploitation and terrorism lies within contexts of armed conflict, with the predominant goal of financial or warring gains for a rebel movement (Avdan and Omelicheva 2021; Malik 2017; UNCTED 2019). When involving children, this is often subsumed into frameworks of child soldiering, whereby individuals are physically kidnapped, trafficked and subjected to forced labour or sexual abuses (Conradi 2013; Hurtado *et al.* 2018). Most recently, in light of the thousands of children transported to, or born within, the territory of the Islamic State terrorist group in Iraq and Syria, scholars and humanitarian organizations are increasingly employing the language of exploitation, human trafficking and modern slavery to advocate for a victim-first response to those now held in securitized camps and prisons (Binetti 2015; Reprieve 2021).

The case of the 14-year-old girl is unique for its omission of the physical element of child criminal exploitation traditionally associated with violent armed groups. Her purely online activity prompts questions concerning the classification and parameters of exploitation in the context of child radicalization and subsequent offending. In particular, the relational dynamics of online communications between victims and recruiters, and the ideological purpose of subsequent terrorism offences perpetrated by victims, requires examination through an exploitation lens. The legal implications and practical ramifications for such an application of the nonpunishment principle (currently) afforded by the MSA are thus not fully understood.

The figure of the exploitation-victim-terrorist-perpetrator has received little attention. While perhaps an uncomfortable dual identity to reconcile, lack of nuance hampers both preventative and responsive counter-efforts. Through 30 interviews and two workshops with experts engaged in these interconnected sectors, this article explores the potential to conceptualize and respond to children's online terrorist engagement as an iteration of child criminal exploitation. With particular attention paid to the UK context, it finds broad consensus for such a cross-harm approach in theory, but in practice, policy-makers and practitioners face challenges to untangle national

(and international) legal frameworks, align siloed professional practice and overcome political barriers to recognizing victim-perpetrators.

THE TERRORISM-EXPLOITATION NEXUS

Children's involvement in terrorism and children as victims of exploitation are hitherto largely separate areas of academic inquiry. Debates within terrorism studies have sought to make sense of children's motivational drivers or youth-specific vulnerabilities that would draw or entice a potential recruit to a particular network or worldview (see Schils and Verhage 2017). Whilst varying levels of agency are acknowledged throughout this process, consensus points to children operating under their own will—however, uninformed or misdirected. This contrasts with exploitation scholarship that focuses on children's vulnerabilities that are magnified by the criminogenic opportunities of online spaces (see Mishna *et al.* 2009; Stone 2018). A nascent approach has begun to apply a human trafficking lens to children's conflict-related pathways into and physical exploitation within, terrorist groups. This prompts questions as to the classification and consequences of purely online terrorist activity as a form of child criminal exploitation.

Child recruitment into terrorism

The last decade has seen a significant expansion in children's political violence beyond kidnapping and quest for survival in active conflict. Rising cases of 'homegrown' juvenile propagandists, financiers and even attack plotters has urged inquiry into how and why a child might come to self-identify or self-align with an extremist movement. Identified push/pull factors include a search for, and answer to, meaning and significance; an outlet for adventure or response to (perceived) injustice; and the need for social inclusion (Schils and Verhage 2017: 4), across which ideology accentuates grievances and encourages violence against an identified target (Holbrook and Horgan 2019). Building on this foundation, scholars have sought to understand child-specific pathways. For example, due to their exemption from the right to vote, minors may experience political alienation or disillusionment (Böckler *et al.* 2018: 11). Bjørgo (2009) also finds that right-wing adolescent violence often stems from thrill-seeking behaviour, which, for boys in particular, has also been linked to a hypermasculine 'glamorization of violence' that is magnified within extremist networks (Cardeli *et al.* 2022: 323).

Discussions of children's terrorist motivation also rightfully acknowledge youth-specific experiences, pressures and vulnerabilities that inform decision-making. Youth does not, and should not, automatically signal naivety. However, scholars warn of teenage vulnerability from an unquestioned socialization process within the family unit (Hafez 2016) and, conversely, impulsive rebellion against adult control that amplifies peer influence (Browne 2018: 141). During childhood and adolescence, a period of transition and identity development, both online and offline connections have been found to play a vital role in norm-creation relating to violent ideals and the 'lowering of individual thresholds for use of violence' (Böckler *et al.* 2018: 20). In other words, both adults and peers facilitate connections to terrorist networks through which youth can endeavour to achieve the belonging, respect and adventure that they seek.

Despite the acknowledgement of persons and pressures that may restrict countervailing ideas and pathways, the UK appears to have experienced a paradigm shift towards responsibilization of children associated with terrorism. Shaban (2020: 548) observes that early-days media narratives of British teenage girls 'lured' by recruiters to join Islamic State in Syria operated through a framework of grooming and victimization, 'simultaneously denying them agency and instead lending it to social media platforms.' Contemporaneously, Malik's (2019) analysis of 20 cases of the Family Division of the High Court in England and Wales reveals the initial safeguarding and

non-criminalization of children who engaged with terrorist content and even attempted travel to conflict zones. This was implemented via the provision of court wardship orders to separate the child from an adult relative deemed to be influential or responsible for their radicalization. Yet, it appears that court wardship for terrorism cases petered out in or around 2016. Since then, narratives of deception or coercion have given way to vilification and prosecution of children who should—or could—have known better (Jackson 2021).

The last decade has seen a significant—and ongoing—rise in arrests and convictions of children under terrorism legislation in England and Wales (Rose and Vale 2023). A minor has yet to 'successfully' carry out a terrorist attack on UK soil. The vast majority of the child-perpetrated offences relate to downloads of terrorist propaganda from online spaces that have been acknowledged to lack robust regulation and monitoring (Hall 2022). Unpicking the framings of these juvenile offenders, Vale and Rose (2025) find that aggravating factors at sentencing frequently construct the child as deviant and beyond normative expectations of childhood. While mitigations frequently acknowledge youth and immaturity, only two cases—one boy and one girl—explicitly question a power imbalance with familial or network recruiters through a dynamic of 'grooming' (Vale and Rose 2025: 9, 12). Yet, both were sentenced to 11+ years' imprisonment.

Existing scholarship has explored the duality of children's vulnerabilities and motivational drivers for involvement in 'homegrown' terrorism. Particularly visible in the UK context, these studies reveal that the level of childhood agency is rightfully always in question, but rarely to the extent of—or with direct reference to—exploitation. In other words, some level of free will is always implied or taken for granted. The increasing criminalization of children as perpetrators of terrorism offences has overshadowed their potential simultaneous victimization. This reveals a significant gap in understanding the complex mechanisms of children's terrorist recruitment and engagement, and highlights the need for clear parameters to recognize—and respond to—exploitation for terrorist purposes.

Child exploitation … for terrorism?

In the UK, 5,999 potential child victims of exploitation were identified via the National Referral Mechanism (NRM) in 2024; the majority (2,819 or 48%) relate to criminal exploitation (Home Office 2025a). These figures include a dedicated spreadsheet for county lines as a subtype of criminal exploitation; yet, it is unclear whether and how terrorism fits into this policy framework or remaining caseload. This reflects the definitional complexity and competing legal interpretations of exploitation. The potential overlay of terrorism complicates matters further, but would have significant implications for both safeguarding and criminal justice responses. While scholarship recognizes children's unique and evolving vulnerabilities to exploitation in online spaces, nascent debates concerning the parameters of children's exploitation for terrorist purposes have thus far centred on offline—particularly territorial—groups, whereby tangible exploitation is facilitated by physical (often international) trafficking.

Exploitation is said to be 'a large tent' that subsumes all forms of human trafficking, slavery and forced labour (Allain 2013: 369). Scholarship has emphasized the blurry and overlapping nature of these abuses (Quirk 2006: 567), and their constant contention through macrolevel political, economic and criminal justice discourse. Barlow argues that exploitation is an 'elastic concept' and advocates for its conceptualization as a 'social practice that can be studied independently of any legal criteria' (2024: 42). Rather than create a typology of characteristics, Green *et al.* define exploitation as 'using a position of power or privilege to unfairly benefit at the expense of a disadvantaged person or group. This includes not only financial gain, but can include any other benefit, including power or wellbeing' (2025: 3). This more dynamic sociological approach arguably leaves the door open to the recognition of ideological gains of exploitation.

In practice, exploitation has been primarily addressed and responded to via the criminalization of human trafficking and modern slavery,[1] with definitions forged and revised through international conventions, protocols and domestic legislation. The UN Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons Especially Women and Children (UN Trafficking Protocol) definition requires three elements to determine human trafficking: the act, the means and the purpose (UNODC 2004: 42). First, the 'act' covers activities—such as recruitment, transportation, transfer or harbouring—that intentionally lead to exploitation of the victim. Second, the 'means' by which someone is trafficked can be either physical or non-physical, to include the use of force, threat, coercion, deception, fraud and abuse of power or a position of vulnerability. Third, human trafficking must have an exploitative 'purpose' or intent. In conflict settings, the UNODC (2018: 11) highlights that the purpose of trafficking can encompass exploitation to carry out or provide support to terrorist activities. The OSCE further elaborates that the benefits to terrorist groups afforded by human exploitation are both tangible and intangible, such as tactical adaptability and ideological reinforcement (2021: 53). The question remains as to whether such socio-legal frameworks can also encompass ideological gains from purely digital harms.

For an adult to qualify as a victim of human trafficking or modern slavery all three elements must be present. For children, it is not legally necessary to prove means. Considered unable to consent to their own exploitation (Elliott 2015: 112), trafficking of a child has occurred as soon as the act and intention to exploit are present. While not to deny children's agency in their decision-making, exploitation rests on the relational dynamics and power-imbalance that shape such decisions. Perpetrators target existing vulnerabilities to create a conducive environment for child exploitation—often through entrapment, coercive control and isolation from protective networks (Hopper and Hidalgo 2006; Stone 2018). Factors that heighten a child's risk of victimization include exclusion or lack of education opportunities (Ezeibe et al. 2021), adverse childhood experiences including neglect and abuse (Turner et al. 2019) and special educational needs and disability (SEND). Children with SEND constitute 40 per cent of criminally exploited minors in the UK (Barlow et al. 2022: 6)—a figure that closely aligns with juvenile terrorism offenders (Vale and Rose 2025: 10–11).

Opportunities and mechanisms for the purposeful targeting and manipulation of vulnerable persons have grown significantly in the digital sphere. Children are abused in different environments, and the role of the Internet and modern information communication technologies (ICT) in enabling sexual violence and exploitation has been subject to considerable scholarly and policy inquiry (Hudson et al. 2022; Mishna et al. 2009). In particular, research has warned of the evolving threat of remote-directed child sexual abuse facilitated by live-chat, live-streaming and pay-per-view schemes (Drejer et al. 2024). However, less attention has been paid to the role of ICT in other forms of exploitation, such as forced criminality. Indeed, Havard et al. (2023: 324–25) advocate for further research on technologically-mediated exploitation, with early indications of its role in exacerbating and masking coercive control of young women in gangs. Caluori et al. (2022: 13–14) go as far as to warn of a 'collective social media blind spot' concerning the relationship between ICT and children's involvement in serious violence and organized criminal groups. This is surprising given the centrality of mobile phone technology to county lines drugs distribution in the UK. In addition to customer-facing phone lines, older gang members have also been found to use social media to recruit, coordinate and control younger boys as dealers and runners through 'remote mothering' (Storrod and Densley 2017: 687–89). Further work is needed to understand the uses of online tools across different actors and types of abuse, including in relation to terrorism.

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[1]   The terms 'human trafficking' and 'modern slavery' are often used interchangeably, with the former preferred globally. In the UK, the MSA refers to modern slavery as an umbrella term that also incorporates slavery, servitude, and forced or compulsory labour.

The introduction of the UK *Online Safety Act 2023* has initiated further debates concerning unlawful online activity. While praised for its aim to stymie proliferation and access to child sexual abuse material (CSAM) and branded terrorist content, the legislation has faced considerable criticism for its application only to major platforms (Watkin 2023: 3), and an approach that seems centred on the exclusion of children from potentially dangerous online spaces, rather than child-safe redesign (Woods 2024). Particularly relevant for this study is its focus on systems rather than people. Regulations appear to target recommender algorithms and illegal *content* moderation (Ofcom 2024*b*), rather than a more nuanced consideration of *communication dynamics* across harm types. As such, terrorism appears to be treated as an 'additive' to an infrastructure primarily designed to combat CSAM. The Act itself references 'exploitation' 17 times, as well as 'grooming' twice; however, all mentions exclusively relate to CSAM under the *Sexual Offences Act 2003*. This approach was crystalized in 2024, when Ofcom rejected the recommendation of Jonathan Hall (2024: 7) to extend requirements for content moderation, enhanced user controls and support for child users beyond CSAM to include terrorism. The rejection is stated explicitly alongside the acknowledgement that 'the measure may mitigate the radicalisation of children in some cases where the targeted functionalities are used in a similar way to commit grooming' (Ofcom 2024*a*: 366, fn. 1285).

Important work is underway to investigate digital mechanisms of the terrorism-exploitation nexus globally. Scholars have begun to make the connection between sex trafficking and targeted online recruitment by designated terrorist groups (Badurdeen 2019; Binetti 2015). Specifically, cyber-enticement, deception and 'lover boy' techniques used to 'lure' children from online chats to join the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria have been compared to 'paedophiles grooming young victims' (Bloom 2020: 77–79). While proof of deceptive or coercive means is not required for children, these dynamics were observed across a study of 20 cases of online recruitment by terrorist groups (OSCE 2021: 14–15). For example, girls were painted a 'distorted view' of life inside Islamic State that omits the reality of the group's extreme violence, to which many themselves were later subject (Binetti 2015: 3). These studies have broken ground in their explicit calls to recognize human trafficking into terrorism. However, beyond online recruitment, all cases hitherto studied involve international travel to a conflict zone and subsequent physical exploitation in the form of labour, forced marriage, sex or combat. Omitted from an exploitation lens is the potentiality of purely online activity centred on digital relationships, information sharing and amplification of terrorist ideals and content.

Examining the nature of child terrorist exploitation online has wide-ranging consequences for policy-makers and practitioners. Any effort to identify and respond to such cases must navigate a web of international and national legal frameworks for both anti-trafficking and counter-terrorism. The UN Trafficking Protocol set out a strict criminal justice approach to prosecuting perpetrators alongside a safeguarding approach for victims (UNODC 2004). However, this is not without challenges, as scholars have criticized its restrictive organized crime and migration-focused framework (Desyllas 2007). By contrast, the 2005 Council of Europe Convention broadened the scope of trafficking to include acts perpetrated both within and across borders, and introduced one of the most important obligations for victim safeguarding: the non-punishment principle (NPP). This ensures that victims of exploitation should not be penalized or prosecuted for unlawful activities committed as a direct consequence of victimization (Piotrowicz and Sorrentino 2016). The UN Security Council Resolution 2388 (2017, para. 17) explicitly reinforces the application of the NPP to circumstances of exploitation and forced criminality by armed and terrorist groups—albeit again within conflict settings. Moreover, domestic legal frameworks regarding human trafficking and terrorism are often distinct from one another. Across the OSCE review of legal responses to 20 cases of potential trafficking into terrorism, it is concerning to find that *all* cases 'have been addressed exclusively through a terrorism lens, with no consideration of

trafficking elements' (2021: 16). In the UK, this may reflect what has been termed a 'narrow understanding of victimhood' (Heys 2023), and the need for greater awareness and training for judges and legal practitioners in the complexities and application of the NPP and MSA section 45 defence (Murphy *et al.* 2022).

This research comes at a legislative turning point alongside a concerning upward trend in children's engagement in 'homegrown' extremism. Scholarship has begun to question whether recruitment into terrorism fits the criteria of the act, means and purpose of human trafficking. However, these understandings are as yet constrained to cases of international travel to conflict zones and subjection to physical abuses. Literature on ICT in child sexual and criminal exploitation provides important frameworks through which to analyse purely digital forms of recruitment and ideologically focused exploitation by terrorist networks. This study explores the potential for a cross-harm approach that recognizes the relationship, parameters and implications of purely online child recruitment and exploitation for terrorist ends. Whilst often difficult to reconcile, the recognition of victim-perpetrators is vital for more nuanced safeguarding and criminal justice approaches to the terrorism-exploitation nexus.

DATA AND METHODS

This study is designed to investigate a novel intersection of terrorism and exploitation, with particular attention to online harms against children. As such, the research draws from 30 remote semistructured interviews and two hybrid workshops with scholars, policy-makers and practitioners who work in the (hitherto largely unconnected) fields of counter-terrorism and child exploitation.[2] The net was intentionally cast wide to capture different approaches and perspectives across sectors. These flexible parameters alongside snowball sampling proved vital to recruitment. With the exception of legal practitioners engaged in the three aforementioned British legal cases that explicitly connect terrorism and the exploitation of a child, the majority of interviewees did not self-identify as an expert on *both* areas of the nexus. Introductions and chain referrals were therefore critical to convey the exploratory nature of the study and the value of their contribution—even if only to highlight the disjuncture of work on these harms. The result was interviews with experts from legal practice (6), third sector organizations (6), academia/research (3), multilateral organizations (3), law enforcement (2), government (1), social work (1), forensic psychology (1), digital safety (1) and journalism (1), with a further 5 experts who wished to remain fully anonymous. Of the 30 interviewees, 12 are men and 18 are women. Fifteen interviewees focus exclusively on the domestic UK context, with the other half engaged in counter-terrorism or anti-trafficking work both within and beyond the UK.[3]

Semistructured interviews provided a framework of questions for every participant, alongside space to raise additional relevant issues, examples and concerns. All interviewees were asked to discuss their perspective on the parameters and potential overlap of children's involvement in terrorism and exploitation, as well as the potential and challenges to policy, legal or social support responses to such interconnected harms or known cases. Initial findings from the individual interviews—in addition to the above review of extant scholarly literature, relevant legal cases and UK government policy—were presented and discussed at two hybrid workshops attended by nine and thirty attendees respectively under the condition of non-attribution. The workshops captured debates between multisector experts who approach the nexus from varied perspectives in both theory and practice, therefore, identifying areas of convergence as well as 'sticking points'

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[2] This research was approved by the University of Southampton Ethics Committee (ref: 79464.A1).
[3] The interviews and workshops were held in January–July 2023. The participants contributions, therefore, precede and add further critical weight to former UK Home Secretary James Cleverly's published intention to expand schedule 4 of the MSA to exempt all terrorism offences from the section 45 defence.

for a cross-harm approach. The findings of this study are based on a thematic analysis of the key issues, concerns and implications inductively drawn from the individual and collective discussions of multisector experts.

ONLINE CHILD TERRORIST EXPLOITATION?: POTENTIAL AND CHALLENGES TO RECOGNITION AND RESPONSE

Despite significant expertise in issues of online child exploitation and counter-terrorism, for many participants this was the first time that a cross-harm approach to this nexus had been considered. The findings presented below therefore represent early considerations. There is a growing consensus that purely online terrorist recruitment and engagement of children could—and should—be understood as a form of child criminal exploitation. However, the response to such cases was less clear. Significant hurdles emerged, including the limitations of existing legal frameworks, the challenges of overcoming siloed professional practice and a lack of political will to acknowledge and effectively respond to victim-perpetrators.

The case for a cross-harm approach

The potential of a cross-harm approach hinges upon whether purely online terrorist recruitment and engagement of children could fall within the remit of criminal exploitation. The overwhelming majority of experts not only agreed that it could, but that society needs a paradigm shift. A workshop participant stated, 'we are now at a coalface of having to recognize that some people who are engaged in terrorism are not there as free thinkers, but rather individuals who have vulnerabilities that are being exploited by clever controllers. And that is across the spectrum of terrorism'. Such a shift should prompt reconsideration of the rising juvenile terrorism prosecutions in the UK. Rather than looking only at *what* children do to offend, a deeper understanding of *why* and *how* they engage in these acts is needed in order to avoid repeating past mistakes, whereby the child 'receive[s] custodial sentencing for something that we didn't understand was a type of exploitation, but we do now' (Interviewee 28 2023).

Significant commonalities were identified in the mechanisms and patterns of radicalization and exploitation, with a focus on targeted vulnerabilities and push/pull factors. Terrorist recruitment was consistently likened to online grooming or 'trauma bonding' (Szablewska 2023), with the core dynamic of power imbalance through which the recruiter-exploiter identifies and takes advantage of the victim-recruit's particular characteristics or skills. Echoing scholarship on both terrorism and modern slavery, multiple experts proactively offered connections between inherent, contextual or perceived vulnerabilities (including youth, gender and neurodivergence, as well as the need for belonging, protection or empowerment) of children targeted across multiple forms of exploitation—sexual abuse, gang recruitment, county lines and terrorism (Baghirova 2023; Barlow 2023; Muraszkiewicz 2023).

The purpose or gain from the control or exploitation of a child is usually individual or personal to the recruiter-exploiter—often sexual, financial—although scholarship has begun to expand parameters to include the warring and tactical gains of armed groups in conflict (Avdan and Omelicheva 2021; UNCTED 2019). In the context of online terrorist engagement, the potential purpose would be ideological, to benefit not only the individual recruiter, but also the wider network or abstract cause. Though it was acknowledged that terrorism 'kind of breaks the mould in what we understand of the purpose of exploitation' (Interviewee 6 2023), there was broad consensus that the flexible legal definitions of exploitation extend beyond purely personal benefit (see Green *et al.* 2025). However, greater debate focused on the need to attribute said goals to a detectable recruiter-exploiter. While some participants contend that exploitation can be 'faceless' and that 'victimhood is not dependant on whether or not

there is a perpetrator' (Baghirova 2023; Gerry 2023), an academic argued that the wording of the MSA ('a person commits an offence if…') suggests that exploitation requires an identifiable person or group of individuals to engage with the child. This is a significant challenge in the online sphere given the frequent use of or migration to, encrypted and anonymous platforms by malign actors such as terrorist networks and CSAM offenders (Audina and Zaky 2025; Graham 2016). These tools not only facilitate isolation, recruitment and exploitation of children, but also hamper law enforcement detection and prosecution of the individual perpetrator(s) (Hillman 2023; Szablewska 2023). However, this requirement of an identifiable recruiter-exploiter importantly precludes a defence for self-driven terrorist engagement (Interviewee 6 2023). While concern was expressed for the accessibility of illegal content and harmful connectivity online (Interviewee 19 2023; Interviewee 28 2023), all participants were careful to highlight the proportionality and limits of the nexus, and distinguished 'voluntary' activity from the *intentional* online recruitment and exploitation of a child for terrorist purposes.

Legal frameworks and 'muddled thinking'

The UK context is particularly conducive to safeguard and prosecute purely online forms of exploitation, due to the MSA extending provision beyond human trafficking to also include slavery, servitude and forced or compulsory labour. This is relevant for the element—or, rather, absence—of physical movement or transfer of persons traditionally associated with child criminal exploitation. An academic explained: 'I think it's a fundamental part of the *Modern Slavery Act* that it brought in this form of exploitation that doesn't have to include the movement, and I'm not sure that that's really taken advantage of enough' (Interviewee 6 2023). There was no question that recruitment and exploitation of children was no longer confined to in-person interactions such as in parks or schools. Technological advancement had changed the tools (Interviewee 19), but 'the rationales behind are pretty much the same' so that 'if physically someone might be still in the bedroom in front of the computer, they can be found to be a victim' (Hillman 2023; Muraszkiewicz 2023). However, while online terrorist recruitment may theoretically fit the legal frameworks of child criminal exploitation, there were concerns raised for its recognition in practice. Courts were said to find it difficult to identify and apply the NPP to nonphysical dynamics, such as exploitation of vulnerability or coercive control (Baghirova 2023; Interviewee 3 2023). One participant highlighted that it is an area of 'muddled thinking' for prosecution, and suggested that if a child had been deceived and blackmailed for example by sexual photographs, then it would more likely fail the public interest test to prosecute rather than trigger a modern slavery defence (Interviewee 2 2023).

Schedule 4 of the MSA includes 12 terrorism offences to which the section 45 statutory defence does not apply—only a fraction of offence titles under UK terrorism legislation. The exemptions were noted to apply to the 'most serious' acts, albeit with an unclear, 'arbitrary' or even 'bizarre' line drawn between those included or not (Hillman 2023; Interviewee 2 2023). Owing to the novelty of the nexus, some of the participants for this study admitted to the misconception that all terrorism offending was subject to a blanket exemption from the section 45 defence. The case of the 14-year-old girl discussed above has certainly raised the profile and process of NRM referral and NPP application in the context of terrorism, with several experts critiquing a broader 'lack of engagement', 'lazy' approach and 'vacuum of properly considered legislation' relating to the section 45 defence for terrorism offending (Haughey 2023; Hillman 2023).

The section 45 defence was 'never intended to be a carte blanche for all offenders' (Interviewee 3 2023). Rightfully no participant suggested as such. However, the recommendation of the Independent Reviewer of Terrorism Legislation to render all terrorism offences exempt

from the defence prompted considerable debate (Hall 2023: 122–23). While a precedent had now been set for the use of the section 45 defence for juvenile terrorism offending, two participants raised concerns about whether it should, and if this risked 'opening the flood gates' to other claimants. This position stemmed from the seriousness of terrorism offending (Interviewee 2 2023), and the need to prevent any perception of impunity (Interviewee 8 2023). However, the majority of participants heavily criticized the proposal to extend schedule 4, arguing that children's terrorism offending can be proportionately minor, and it would be wrong to expand legislation that would equate, for example, downloading a terrorist document with plotting an attack (Baghirova 2023; Hillman 2023). Similarly, Dr. Felicity Gerry KC (2023) argued that the level of criminality should not preclude an individual from drawing on the defence, as both of the above examples could easily be driven by the control and command of an online connection. Instead, participants emphasized that the cornerstone of section 45 is—and should remain—protection and defence in cases of erasure of voluntariness in committing a crime.

Organizational 'turf' and siloed practice

While the majority of participants argue for a cross-harm approach in theory, there are challenges to recognition and response in practice. Fragmented legislation and multidisciplinary perspectives have long raised concerns and efforts to combat a 'silo mentality' towards types of exploitation, modern slavery and human trafficking (Hilland *et al.* 2022; Long and Risko 2024). When terrorism is added to the mix, this issue appears to be compounded. During the project workshops, it quickly became apparent that little dialogue exists between approaches to traditionally separate(d) harms and crime types. This applies both across and within sectors—government, criminal justice, civil society and technology. The compartmentalization of governmental and non-governmental workstreams was said to have created formalized or perceived lines of jurisdiction that are not to be crossed. This was felt to crystalize boundaries of institutional knowledge or purview of *either* counter-terrorism *or* exploitation, trafficking and modern slavery, but not both. Several interviewees commented on the special 'turf', 'peculiarity' or exclusivity of counter-terrorism practitioners, with the sense that other institutions 'would get their wrists slapped' for getting 'close to a terrorism case' (Interviewee 5 2023; Interviewee 16 2023). In response, experts advocated for a multidisciplinary or multi-agency approach that prioritized child welfare and needs, thereby enabling more flexible pathways to support and services—irrespective of their provider (Baghirova 2023; Interviewee 16 2023). However, the workshops also highlighted that institutional objectives and policies were often at odds, further hampering trust, collaboration and the sharing of sensitive data. Such ringfenced 'specialisms', and differing data privileges, raise barriers to responding to children's online terrorist exploitation.

Even within organizations, cases were often placed in rigid categorical boxes. A digital safety expert explained that this stemmed from the design and phrasing of the *Online Safety Act*, which sets up platforms and regulators to 'recognise them as distinct, and [to] devote time and resource [to] thinking about how each manifests individually'. This results in guidance and enforcement on a 'harm by harm basis' (Interviewee 19 2023). Similarly, the governance structure of UK law enforcement shapes a culture of separate areas of specialism and hinders cross-learning and reflection. A recently retired Metropolitan Police officer explained that counter-terrorism and modern slavery teams were not set up to learn from each other's policies, meaning that there was a disjointed top-down 'approach around exploitative crimes'. However, informally, connections are being made. From personal experience, the officer recalled counter-terrorism team members reaching out to discuss 'elements of modern slavery' identified in cases, though with the emphasis that these collaborations 'came down more to personalities' and an 'operational, individual perspective' rather than formalized strategies (Interviewee 8 2023).

Recognizing and responding to victim-perpetrators

Examination of terrorism cases through an exploitation lens requires practitioners to recognize—or at least question—victimhood alongside criminality. Many interviewees explicitly or implicitly drew on Nils Christie's (1986) concept of the 'ideal victim' to lament 'discriminatory approaches' and stereotypical 'tick boxes' of accepted vulnerability (Baghirova 2023; Muraszkiewicz 2023). Alongside age, race and ethnicity, neurodivergence and disability (Gerry 2023; Haughey 2023; Interviewee 6 2023), gender in particular was flagged in relation to 'heavily, heavily skewed' understandings of victims of exploitation, which would have a knock-on effect for terrorism investigations. For (women and) girls, responses were said to reflect 'two different ends of the spectrum'—to assume a predisposition to manipulation of inherent innocence and lack of agency that renders them a 'much more sympathetic character' (Walker 2023) or a 'complete vilification' of those whose criminality transgresses gender expectations (Interviewee 16 2023). Conversely, there is 'very clearly […] a blanket assumption of culpability and of men and boys posing a threat' to the point that 'nobody takes any chances' of treating them through any nuanced or victim lens (Interviewee 16 2023; Barlow 2023).

Greater training of first responders is vital to challenge assumptions of victimhood. In particular, the police were viewed as a critical gateway either to prosecution or victim safeguarding. A retired Metropolitan Police officer reinforced that there is no formal process to question potential victimhood alongside alleged criminality, and therefore, a counter-terrorism officer would naturally recognize radicalization but not the 'missing element' of vulnerability or compulsion (Interviewee 8 2023). This blinkered approach to victimhood fits within and reinforces broader concerns over its 'relative status' in the minds of criminal and youth justice practitioners (Marshall 2024). For example, UK police responses to county lines and cuckooing have only recently begun to overturn a 'vulnerability narrative', which has traditionally overlooked and undermined the threat facing children, and instead resulted in their responsibilization and criminalization (Dando *et al.* 2023: 347; Espeute and Lanskey 2023; Stone 2018). In general, legal practitioners expressed frustration that policing was still not sufficiently trauma-informed, often resulting in inaction and deferment of questioning exploitation 'as a matter for a judge' (Gerry 2023).

The issue of training clearly extends beyond the police. One expert contends that exploitation 'gets missed all the time by all professionals involved—that's probation, psychology, judges—everybody can miss exploitation and slavery' (Interviewee 21 2023). To prevent entry into the criminal justice system altogether, better awareness and understanding of safeguarding and referral mechanisms is needed in the community, such as for teachers and social workers (Barlow 2023; Interviewee 8 2023). Legal counsel was also viewed as a critical intervention point, but recognition 'takes time, of which lawyers don't have an awful lot, so they're not in the best position quite often to be able to judge this' (Gerry 2023; Hillman 2023). Improved awareness, tools and space to recognize child criminal exploitation were thus considered vital to 'ask the right questions' when faced with a suspected juvenile terrorism case in order to meet that child's needs (Hunt 2023), and to avoid making 'the wrong decision' that would 'doubly victimis[e] them' (Interviewee 12 2023).

Above all, unappreciation of potential victimhood precludes access to vital safeguarding. The solicitor and barrister for the 14-year-old girl both stated that hers was the first terrorism case known to them to be referred to the NRM for suspected exploitation, and lamented crucial missed opportunities for intervention. The girl was first arrested in October 2020. She was never interviewed as a potential victim, even after formal request. By April 2021, she had mistakenly breached her bail conditions and herself phoned the police to be re-arrested—an act that both lawyers highlight should have been a warning sign of her vulnerability, not terrorist intention. However, the decision to charge for six terrorism offences was made that same afternoon. It was at that point that her legal team first requested a referral to the NRM, and again following her first court hearing.

The trial was originally set for August 2021, but the preparation of many expert reports delayed until March 2022. Meanwhile, the SCA review continued for eight months, with the conclusive grounds decision made on 10 November 2021. However, it was not until 30 December 2021 that the case was discontinued (Cook 2023; Hillman 2023). Less than five months later, the girl died by suicide in the children's care home to which she had been remanded throughout the ordeal.

Among the lessons learned from her case is the need for greater awareness and expansion of practitioners who are eligible to make a referral to the NRM. Lawyers are not classed as 'first responders' to exploitation, human trafficking and modern slavery, and therefore, the girl's solicitor and barrister relied on Counter-Terrorism Police East Midlands to submit the referral—after two requests. Moreover, as legal counsel they are not privy to the NRM documentation submitted, and only received a highly redacted notification of the conclusive grounds assessment in mid-February 2022—two months after the case discontinuation. Upon reflection on the process, her solicitor, Laura Cook (2023) stated that 'the police should have done the NRM referral the first time she was arrested', and she suggested that juvenile terrorism cases should automatically trigger a NRM referral, on account of the severity of the alleged offences and age of suspect. Her recommendation perhaps has been heard. For the second juvenile terrorism case, although the reasonable grounds result was negative, she explained that a NRM referral was promptly done at the police station, 'because we were two years down the line, I think they've learned … and they've had quite a few more' (Cook 2023).

The delays experienced in the girl's case are not unique, and raise further concerns for re-victimizing children. Several interviewees lamented their experience with juvenile cases whereby the defendant has chosen to plead guilty and refuse a lengthy NRM referral in order to be eligible for a non-custodial referral order—a sentence only available before their 18th birthday (Barlow 2023; Hillman 2023). A guilty plea in the youth court would also preserve the child's anonymity—a significant consideration given the stigma associated with terrorism in particular. The choice not to trigger a NRM referral reinforces that the criminal justice system is not set up to adequately support children whose recruitment and engagement in terrorism has been facilitated or compelled through online exploitation. At every stage, 'there's nothing to attract a person to say, "this is what's happening to me, please help"' (Gerry 2023).

Exceptionalism of terrorism

When discussing challenges to recognition and response to victim-perpetrators, there was a resounding sense of exceptionalism of terrorism to the extent that a victim-first paradigm 'goes out the window' (Interviewee 14 2023; Interviewee 28 2023; Szablewska 2023). This includes child rights, which were viewed as taking second place to national security (Interviewee 21 2023). One interviewee highlighted a 'false distinction' between children recruited into designated terrorist organizations versus other violent groups, with the former treated as 'security threats' and an 'unattractive population to defend', while the latter are 'perceiv[ed] much more as victims'. The different framing was attributed to the 'perception of their ideological alignment to the group that makes them more of a danger' (Interviewee 13 2023). Indeed, the ideological element of radicalization, indoctrination or being 'brainwashed' was seen as a critical stumbling block to recognition of exploitation victimhood, with many participants criticizing the assumption of a child's volition in their engagement with extremist ideology (Henkoma 2023; Interviewee 6 2023; Interviewee 13 2023). Consensus sadly reinforced that children exploited for criminal activities are 'not-so-ideal victims' (Oude Breuil 2021), and terrorism frequently disqualifies victimhood altogether.

In practice, the erasure of victimhood in terrorism offending also shifts the NRM into the shadows of Prevent—the UK's strategy to identify individuals at risk of radicalization, for which public sector authorities have a statutory duty to refer adults and children of concern. As part of

this study, a Freedom of Information request was sent to the Home Office to confirm the number of NRM referrals for child criminal exploitation that relate specifically to terrorism, and how many of these have been approved. The response received on 4 May 2023 stated: 'The Home Office does not hold data on the number of cases that were referred to the National Referral Mechanism under the Section 45 defense for slavery or trafficking victims who commit an offence.'[4] Upon sharing this update at the workshops, the participants were appalled at the lack of oversight and transparency. Although there are only three legal cases that have publicly questioned exploitation in relation to juvenile terrorism offending, Gerard Hillman (2023) explained that he had referred on advice five or six cases through the NRM since the 14-year-old girl, but none had passed the point of reasonable grounds. He went on to state that Youth Offending Teams had even appealed several of those decisions. Given their oversight and experience across types of juvenile offending, he said 'for them to be appealing them suggests to me that these are cases that should have passed the reasonable grounds point at the SCA's desk' (Hillman 2023). Moreover, one workshop participant even shared that the prosecution counsel on a juvenile terrorism case 'had a phone call from the SCA asking what the effect of us finding your client to be a victim of trafficking would be on the case'. This is a serious allegation, but it reinforces a picture of vested interest and special treatment of terrorism cases that prioritizes state interests over child safeguarding.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The convergence of child criminal exploitation and terrorism offending creates a complex landscape. This article has sought to bring together experts across government, academia and practice to open discussion on this novel aspect of the nexus—perhaps at this stage prompting more questions than providing answers.

Experiences of exploitation and terrorist engagement are messy and non-linear, often challenging traditional legal conceptualizations and disciplinary boundaries. We face a very different context to children recruited, internationally trafficked and harboured in armed conflict zones. This research has focused on the often-hidden digital sphere. In the UK, rates of teenagers engaged in terrorism have catapulted (Home Office 2025b)—largely facilitated by online networks, child-focused propaganda and encrypted and anonymous messaging tools. These are no longer exceptional cases.

A cross-harm approach acknowledges the complex interplay of vulnerabilities and exploitative environments that can lead children to become involved in online extremism. While not all cases are publicly known, the precedent of the nexus highlights the need for more nuanced responses to coercive crimes that share commonalities in their causes and manifestations. Key recommendations include the establishment of multi-agency working groups to prevent siloed approaches across and within government, criminal justice, civil society and the tech sector. The study workshops highlighted the need for collaborative and innovative approaches to design upstream cross-harm online protections and regulatory frameworks, as well as trauma-informed approaches to recognize, safeguard and divert victim-perpetrators from the criminal justice system. In particular, lawyers working on the three UK legal cases to have connected exploitation victimization and juvenile terrorism offending highlight the need for expansion and greater training of 'first-responders' to exploitation, as well as automatic dual referral to both the NRM *and* Prevent. This will ensure that civil society can provide robust support services that address both exploitation *and* indoctrination, thereby realigning securitization and safeguarding priorities to develop

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[4] Even after clarification of the request relating to the NRM (rather than Section 45), the Home Office issued an almost identical response on 31 May 2023.

a trauma-informed and victim-first approach to child criminal exploitation—one that pushes against the exceptionalism of terrorism.

Section 45 of the MSA is central to this paradigm shift. While not intended or proposed as a blanket 'get out of jail free card' to all children associated with terrorism, the opportunity for a statutory defence acts as an important backstop against default criminalization, to instead question the circumstances, relationships and power dynamics of the offending pathway. Rather than prioritize child welfare, the threshold for prosecution for children's engagement with terrorism appears to be lowering, with the suggested expansion of MSA schedule 4 to include all terrorism offences. Reliance on the public interest test for prosecution, or mitigation at sentencing, has thus far resulted in surging numbers of juvenile terrorism convictions.

Failure to identify children as victim-perpetrators serves to deny important safeguards, the consequences of which can be fatal. Reflecting on the case of the 14-year-old girl, her solicitor Laura Cook (2023) simply stated: 'I believe she would still be alive if she hadn't been prosecuted'.

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