Exploitation of Adults with Cognitive Impairment in England

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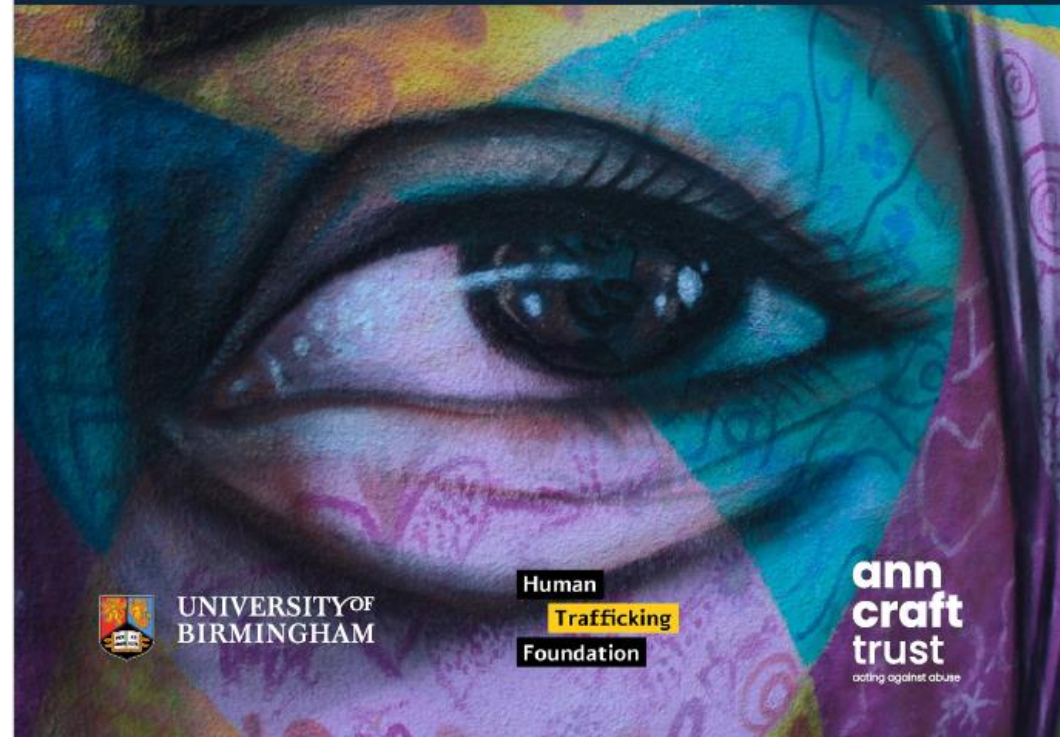
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A two-year study funded by the Nuffield Foundation

- Report and Easy Read Summary available at exploitationandci.org.uk

- Additional resources for practice will be made available at this site over the next three months

Our study objectives

1. To investigate and evidence connections between exploitation of adults and different forms of cognitive impairment in England, providing both a **comprehensive descriptive account** and an **insight** into potential **causative relationships**.

2. To understand what policy and practice responses currently exist

3. To explore with practitioners and people with lived-experience how current responses might be improved to enable more effective prevention, intervention and support

A word on definitions:

Cognitive impairment:

developmental and acquired impairments, including intellectual disability, dementia, brain injury, autistic spectrum disorders, ADHD, mental health disorders and substance misuse.

Exploitation:

unfairly manipulating someone for profit or personal gain, including financial, social or political advantage.

University of Nottingham
Rights Lab

Background research
- Scoping review of UK and international literature
- Quantitative analysis of Safeguarding Adults Collection data 2017-2022

Survey
Local authorities, Safeguarding Boards, Police SPOCS, NGOs
95 responses

SAR analysis
- Reviewing risk factors across Safeguarding Adult Reviews involving exploitation 2017-2022 (58 SARs covering 71 people)

Interviews
- Interviews with 24 practitioners and 26 people with lived experience
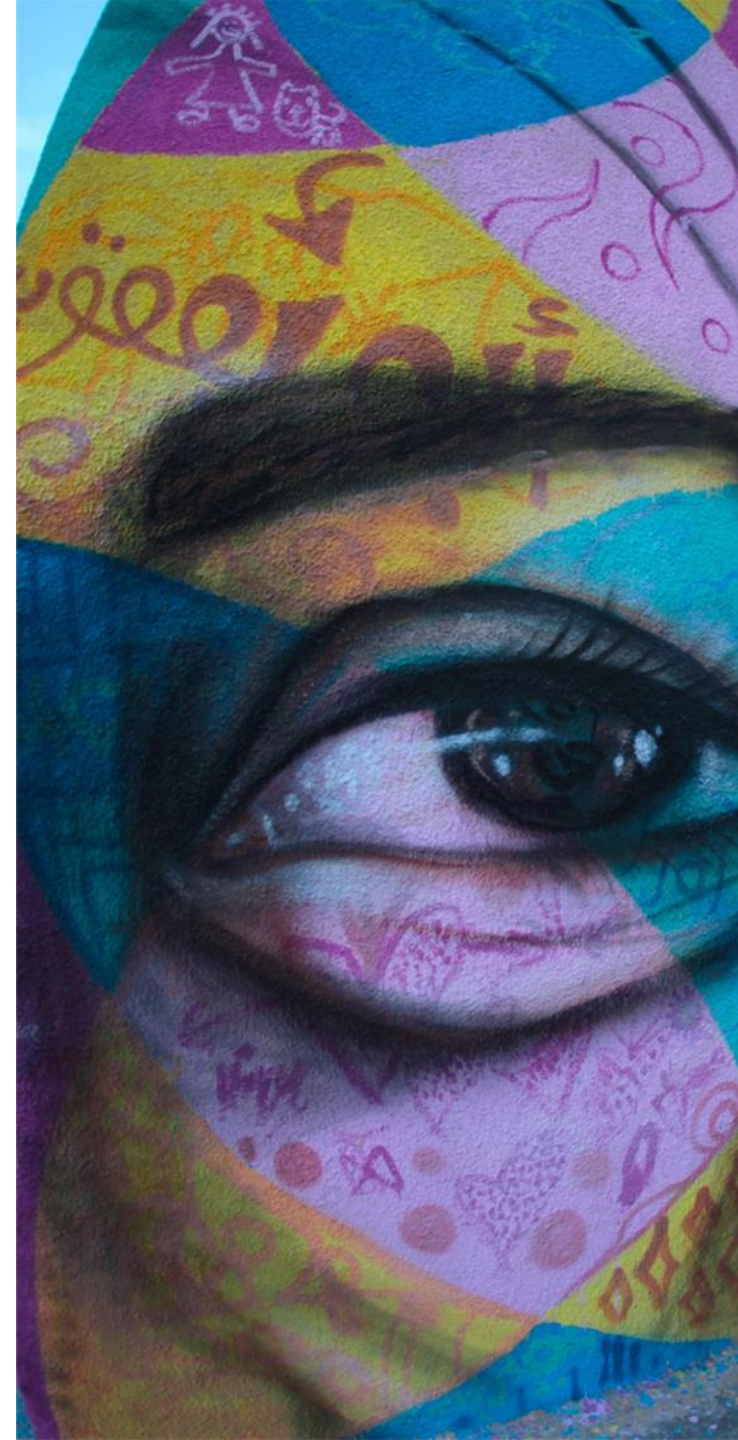
What was already known?

Previous academic studies:

- From an initial list of more than 6000 references, we found 20 studies directly relevant to our topic.
- Limited focus on **sexual**, **financial** and **criminal** exploitation.
- Most frequently discussing intellectual disabilities and mental health, but also including substance abuse, cognitive decline, dementia and autism.
- Overall showed that links between cognitive impairment and exploitation were present
- **Gaps** particularly around labour exploitation and wider forms e.g. 'mate crime'
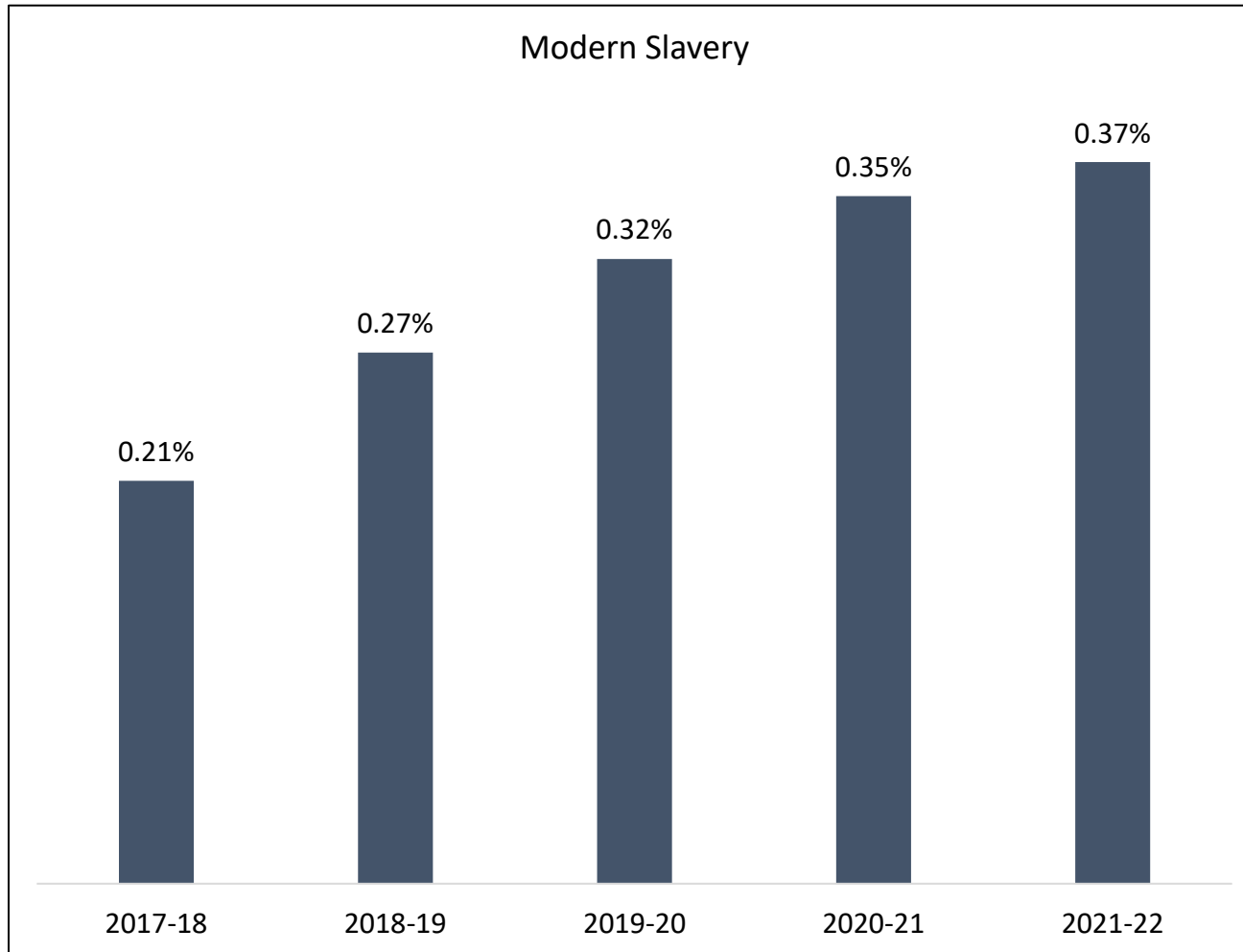- Tend to miss wider social issues including gender, age, ethnicity

Findings: evidence for connections between cognitive impairment and exploitation

National Datasets don't track this issue

- **Family Resources Survey** (FRS): Contains data on impairment types but nothing on exploitation
- **National Referral Mechanism Statistics** (NRM): Contain data on exploitation but don't publish disability or cognitive impairment
- **Crime Survey for England and Wales** (CSEW): Contains data on impairment and abuse but conflates abuse and exploitation
- **Safeguarding Adult Collection** (SAC): S42 data on abuse, neglect and exploitation, and statistics on different types of support need. Does not publish intersection!

- Quantitative evidence currently provides a 'fragmented' picture
  - SAC, plus safeguarding adult reviews (SARs) plus survey data from frontline practice
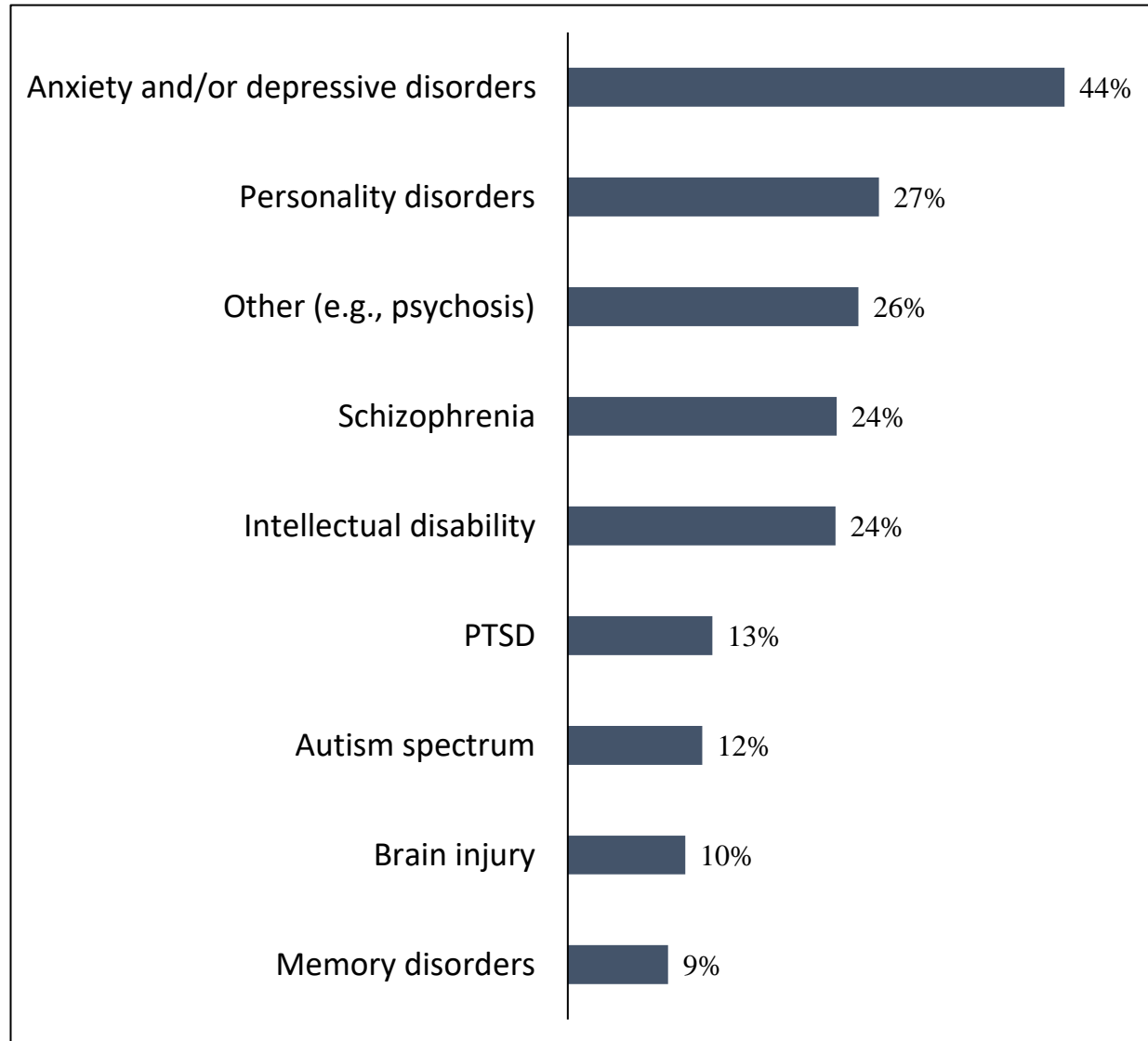
Key Insights from Safeguarding Adults Collection Data

Modern Slavery

Year	Percentage
2017-18	0.21%
2018-19	0.27%
2019-20	0.32%
2020-21	0.35%
2021-22	0.37%

- MS-related safeguarding enquiries are **rising** but still a tiny proportion of cases (n=245-545).

- Increasing safeguarding enquiries for adults **without previous known** support needs.

- Potential for **conflation** of recording between different forms of 'exploitation' and 'abuse'.

Different cognitive or mental health conditions are documented in Safeguarding Adults Reviews (2017-2022)
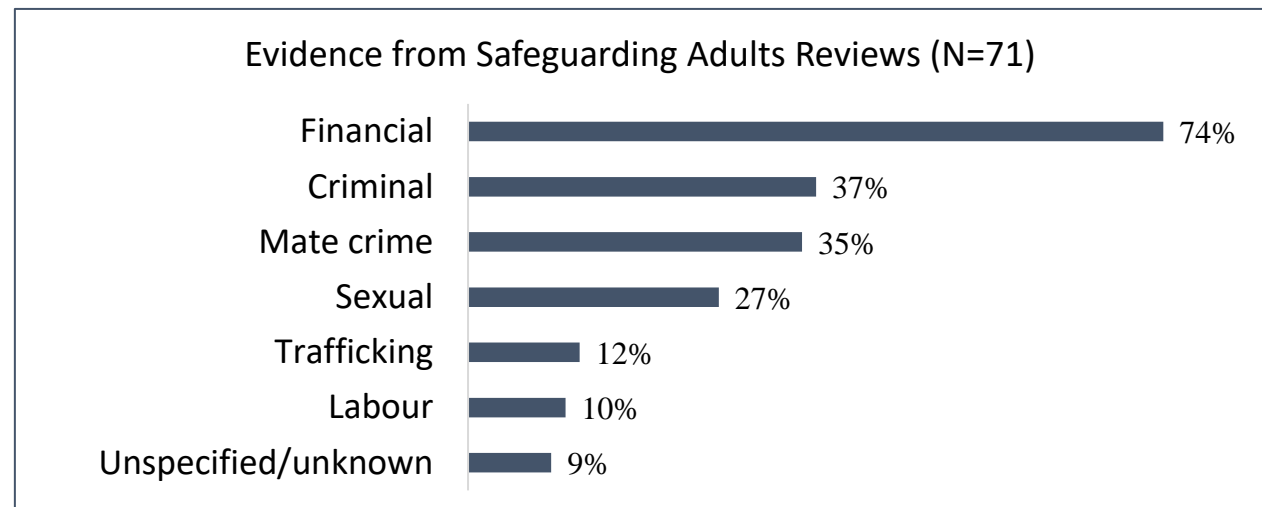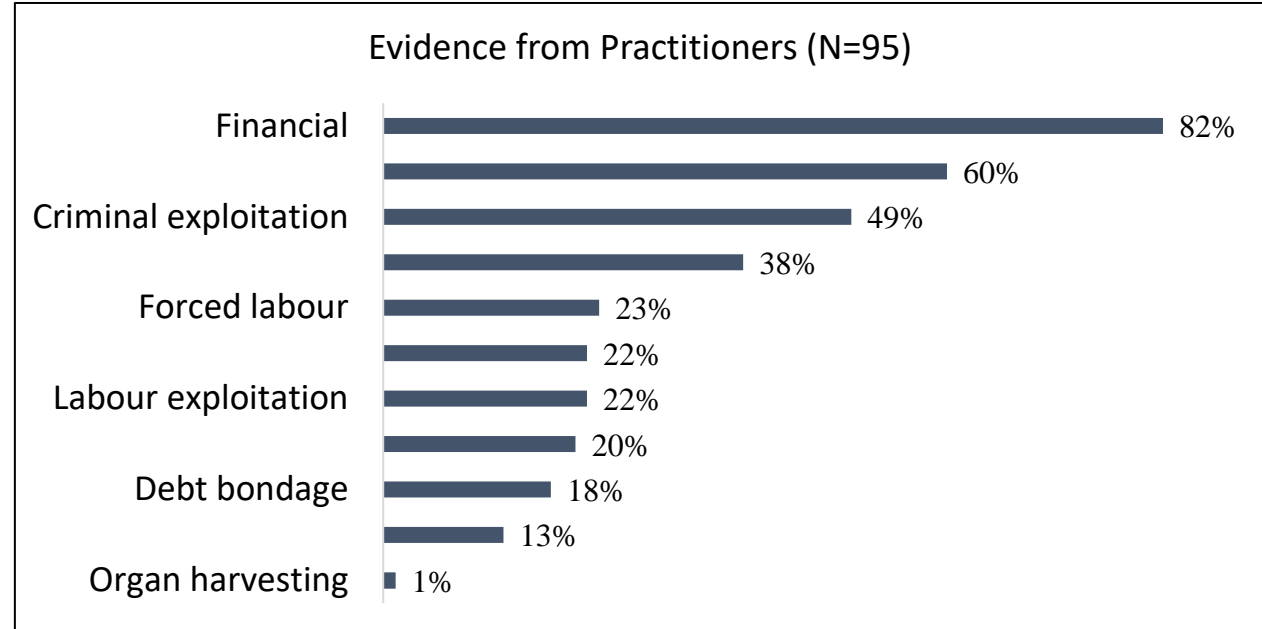

Of the 71 individuals identified in the 58 SARs featuring exploitation, 68 (96%) had a documented cognitive or mental health condition.

- 66% have more than one condition, with more than half having mental health conditions, followed by intellectual disability (10%), while other co-occurring conditions are observed in much smaller samples.
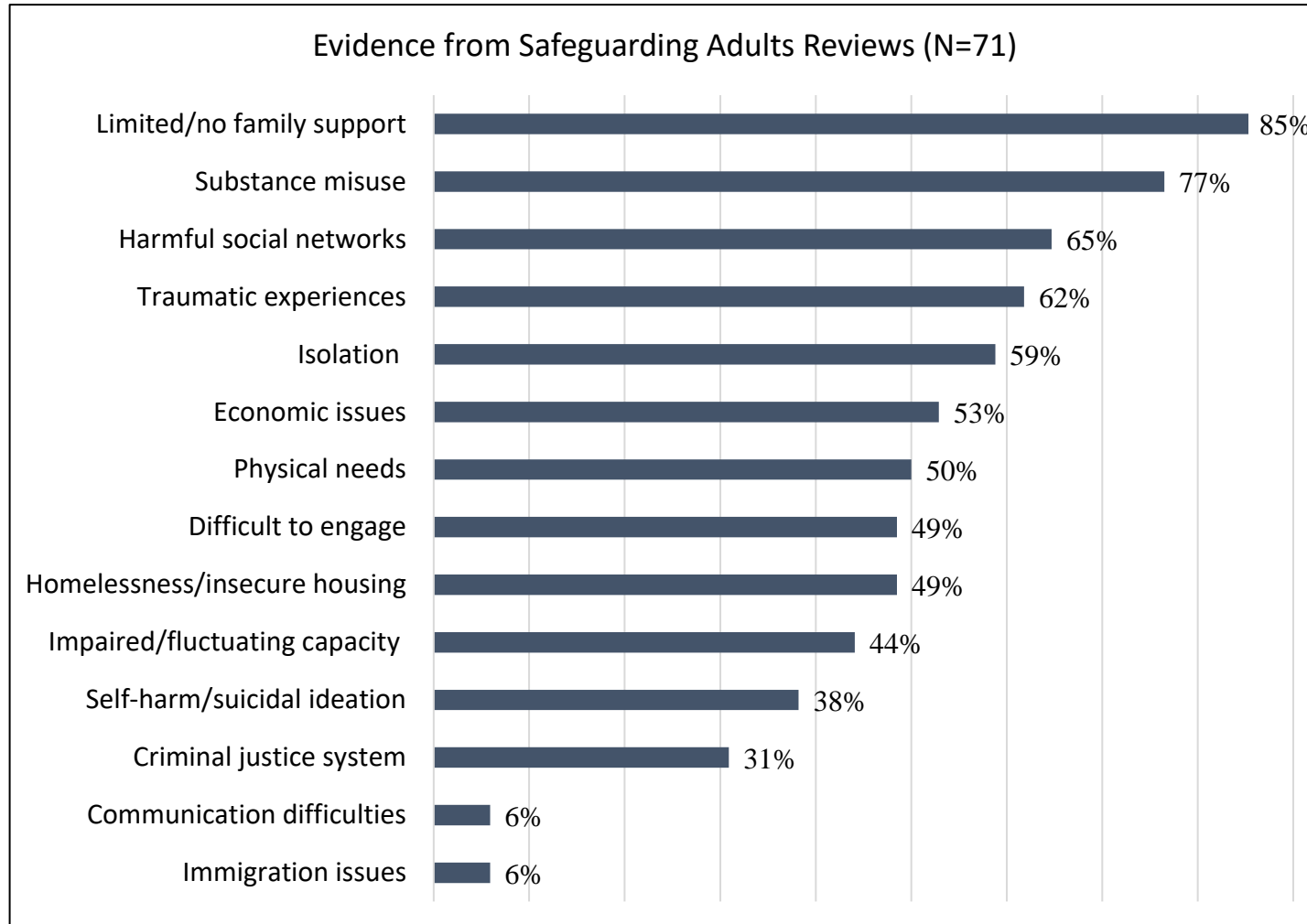
Evidencing exploitation among people with cognitive impairment

- A third of practitioners came across exploitation **at least once per week**, another third at least once a month.

- **84%** of practitioners felt that exploitation of people with cognitive impairment is under-reported.

- In Safeguarding Adults Reviews, **62%** may have experienced more than one form of exploitation, especially financial & criminal exploitation

- **Physical abuse and self-neglect** are the most prominent types of abuse that often co-occur with exploitation

Evidence from Practitioners (N=95)

Category	Percentage
Financial	82%
	60%
Criminal exploitation	49%
	38%
Forced labour	23%
	22%
Labour exploitation	22%
	20%
Debt bondage	18%
	13%
Organ harvesting	1%

Evidence from Safeguarding Adults Reviews (N=71)

Category	Percentage
Financial	74%
Criminal	37%
Mate crime	35%
Sexual	27%
Trafficking	12%
Labour	10%
Unspecified/unknown	9%

Findings:
Identifying risks for exploitation

Prominent risk factors for exploitation

Evidence from Safeguarding Adults Reviews (N=71)

Risk factor	Percentage
Limited/no family support	85%
Substance misuse	77%
Harmful social networks	65%
Traumatic experiences	62%
Isolation	59%
Economic issues	53%
Physical needs	50%
Difficult to engage	49%
Homelessness/insecure housing	49%
Impaired/fluctuating capacity	44%
Self-harm/suicidal ideation	38%
Criminal justice system	31%
Communication difficulties	6%
Immigration issues	6%

- Interpersonal relationships:
  - Limited or no family support (85%)
  - harmful social networks (65%) and isolation (59%)
- Substance misuse (77%)
- Traumatic experiences (62%), including adverse childhood experiences
- About half of cases have economic issues, physical needs, homelessness and difficult to engage with services

Signs of exploitation: practitioner survey

- Deteriorating living conditions

- Changes in behavior

- Sudden changes in circumstances

- Increased supervision at appointments

- Gang involvement/criminal networks

- Abrupt introductions of new individuals into one's life

- Mental or physical health deterioration

- Presence of exploitative family members

- Lack of understanding regarding decision-making implications

- Requests for more food parcels

- Vulnerability stemming from protected characteristics

Risk and Resilience: Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA)

- QCA enables the identification of combinations of factors that may lead to the occurrence of a complex phenomenon, using statistical methods.

- We evaluated to what extent a combination of factors create resilience or risk for exploitation. These explanatory conditions include:

  - not being believed by professionals,

  - experiences of coercive control,

  - education/skills and

  - supportive social networks.

- Our analysis showed that the presence of coercive control, absence of strong education/skills and access to social networks, may contribute to the exploitation of people with cognitive impairments. We found that not being believed by services can also potentially contribute to this risk.

Findings: Qualitative Insights

Expanding on risk factors

- Practitioners relayed that most they encountered who had experienced exploitation had vulnerabilities
- Data sets suggested those with moderate disabilities and complex needs were most at risk
- Social networks and family support could be both harmful and protective
- Early life difficulties could be a risk factor – but these could also be overcome through good support later in life
- Lived experience interviewees were able to identify mistreatment, but felt they were not listened to

"I had a social worker, I spoke to the social worker about it, but they didn't believe me. But the way they were taking money off me got me into debt."

"I went home and there was an agency worker at the house and she didn't take me seriously so she didn't report it"

"My dad reported it there but nobody didn't believe me then"

"So I think it's the way people as I said it's the way people see your disabilities and they don't believe you because you've changed what you've said. Well in my case I change what I said because I can't remember."

"Just don't judge us because we have got a voice and they don't want to listen. It's like they don't want to listen to us."

Expanding on resilience factors

- Strong family and social support
- Assertiveness (lived experience interviewees were often able to identify mistreatment)
- Specialist support/ advocacy
- Mental health care

"I enjoy everything because they all help me, they like me. Sometimes they open the door sometimes they make me cups of tea, coffee, they talk to me. They're very good people and I just love it there" [on a day centre.]

"Sometimes, when I really get suffocated, I feel like I cannot breathe, I cannot tell something to somebody, then I feel like I need support. So although I know that I mean, I know everything, and I know what they will say, but still I feel like if I speak to someone, I feel a bit lighter."

Legal complexity and challenges

- Confusion around how wider forms of exploitation, such as aspects of criminal, financial and sexual exploitation, relate to the Modern Slavery Act 2015.

- Complexities of prosecuting under the Modern Slavery Act

- Domestic Abuse legislation is sometimes used where exploitation includes coercive control *but* only applicable in cases of exploitation within the family or intimate partnerships; exploitation between friends and within social networks is outside the scope.

- Alternatives such as closure orders to tackle 'cuckooing'.

Legislation and policy deployed may be reliant on the knowledge and area of the practitioner.

Identifying and acting on exploitation

- Academic and practitioner interviews found that exploitation and abuse were often conflated.

- Less awareness of exploitation, and related mechanisms with adults, than with minors?

- Exploitation often co-existed with other forms of abuse

- This led to issues in service provision – for instance not knowing how or where to refer (*but*: dedicated multi agency processes were beneficial)

Access to services and support

- Cases may not be appropriate for NRM referral
- Thresholds of adult safeguarding referrals varied across areas
- May not be appropriate for domestic abuse services
- Lack of specialist multi-agency forum addressing exploitation and modern slavery
- Access to other support services, such as mental health, housing and substance use

Stigmatisation and victim blaming

- Those with complex needs could experience stigmatization

- Victim blaming language sometimes used

- There was sometimes an onus on victims rather than perpetrators

- Coercive control and its impact not always understood

Changing perceptions of 'personal choices' and impacts on response

"It is inevitable that agencies will see a case through the lens of their own professional expertise and responsibility. This was the case with Lee Irving for while his Learning Disability was known to agencies like the police he often presented as more troublesome than troubled, a nuisance offender, an abuser of alcohol and drugs who **chose a lifestyle** that laid him open to risk. The fact that he did not have the mental capacity to make such choices was not recognised by some of the professionals who had contact with him." (Newcastle, 2017)

"As already noted, the commentary from Housing on the case has noted that Howard was "reluctant" to abstain from alcohol use and that this limited the options available. His alcohol use was seen as "**behaviour of choice**." On what basis, including access to specialist advice, this judgement was reached remains unclear" (Isle of White, 2017)

"Negative cultures and blaming language can have a negative impact on victims making disclosures. There was some evidence of this in this case in describing Molly as a **working prostitute**" (Teeside 2022)

Capacity

- In SARs and professional interviews, the issue of mental capacity assessments was cited as a challenge

- SARs showed capacity assessments sometimes missed, DOLS and sectioning sometimes used inappropriately

- But capacity could also be a 'red herring', used as a gatekeeping mechanism to determine whether services should remain engaged where adults appeared to be 'choosing' situations of exploitation.

- Potential impact of coercion and control on choice not taken into account

What can help us in improving responses?

Summary headlines

- Key datasets are missing opportunities to collect and publish data on intersections

- People are often exploited in multiple ways and alongside other forms of abuse.

- Risks arise from conditions, but also their social effects. A key factor was the presence of a coercive and controlling relationship.

- Pathways for reporting and follow-up are often unclear.

- Dedicated multi-agency processes are needed to identify exploitation.

- There is confusion about offences, legal powers, and appropriate interventions.

- Exploitation may be interpreted as 'unwise life choices', but impacts of grooming and coercive control on 'capacity' and 'choice' are sometimes not recognised.

- Specialised support, empowerment and advocacy can help to prevent exploitation. Lived experience participants want to be heard, to have trust in support workers, to be believed.

Recommendations

1. Adapt existing data collection instruments to better understand potential intersections between cognitive impairments and exploitation. Examples include National Referral Mechanism data (Home Office) the Crime Survey for England and Wales (Office for National Statistics) and the Safeguarding Adults Collection (NHS Digital).

2. Guidance for local authorities on differentiating between exploitation and wider forms of abuse when recording safeguarding enquiries under section 42 of the Care Act 2014.

3. The NHS England Digital collate and publish Safeguarding Adults Collection data on the intersections between different types of support needs and different types of abuse / exploitation

4. Establish dedicated exploitation lead officers and processes to clarify pathways to reporting exploitation at local authority level

Recommendations

5. Improve funding and sustainability for local advocacy organisations and voluntary groups serving adults with learning disabilities and other types of cognitive impairment.

6. Develop accessible information for people with various forms of cognitive impairments and their carers who are at risk of exploitation, including support for reporting experiences.

7. Evidence-based training for local safeguarding practitioners on coercive control, capacity and 'choice'.

8. That the Home Office and other central government departments undertake a full review of intervention powers and measures in relation to exploitation of adults, with the aim of creating a more coherent framework.

9. That governments in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland review the findings of this research and potential implications for identification and responses to exploitation within their jurisdiction.

Additional tools in development

- Short film 'what is exploitation', put together by CASBA advocacy
- Slide deck with key points from the research
- A guide on capacity assessment in a context of potential exploitation
- Overview of legal instruments and intervention tools
- Information materials by / for people with lived experience, including leaflets and a podcast

Questions?
Comments?
Ideas for practice resources?
Suggestions for further research?

Thank you!

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