



FROM THE FIELD

# MISSING CHILDREN AND CHILD EXPLOITATION

Conrad Townson  
Integrated Family and Youth Service (IFYS)



In June 2021 the Victorian Commission for Children and Young People released the findings of its inquiry into children and young people missing from care in a report - *Out of sight*.<sup>1</sup> The report draws attention to the strong correlation between significant numbers of children and young people going missing from care and harm they suffer through sexual and criminal exploitation. The report highlighted that the most significant causal factors for children going missing from care are a lack of perceived safety and positive human connection. The result of this is young people often seeking connection elsewhere, frequently leading to relationships that sexually or criminally exploit them.

This builds on an earlier report released in 2015 by the then Victorian Children’s Commissioner that determined approximately 40% of children reported as absent or missing from care experienced sexual exploitation.<sup>2</sup>

The findings are not unique to Victoria. A scoping study undertaken in 2019 by IFYS on the Sunshine Coast in Queensland found a similar correlation.<sup>3</sup> The study looked at data collected in relation to a cohort of young people between the ages of 11 and 19 living at home with family or in out of home care. It involved a total of 35 young people considered to be at risk of sexual exploitation

### **CHILD SEXUAL EXPLOITATION IS DEFINED AS:**

**“THE ABUSE OF A CHILD WHERE SOME FORM OF REMUNERATION IS INVOLVED WHEREBY THE PERPETRATORS BENEFIT – MONETARILY, SOCIALLY, POLITICALLY, ETC. EXPLOITATION CONSTITUTES A FORM OF COERCION AND VIOLENCE, DETRIMENTAL TO THE CHILD’S PHYSICAL AND MENTAL HEALTH, DEVELOPMENT, AND EDUCATION.”**

(United Nations, 2001)



within a community context (not online) across a three month period. 21 of the young people were found to be either at significant risk of, or actually involved in sexual exploitation, all of whom had a regular history of being reported missing to police.

The link between going missing and child sexual and criminal exploitation is not a new phenomenon. Research in the UK has long recognised that young people who go missing are often vulnerable to exploitation as a result of their own traumatic circumstances – history of abuse, emotional and physical neglect, breakdown in family or home relationships, domestic and family violence, etc. <sup>4</sup> Research also highlights that children in out of home care tend to be overrepresented in data due to the additional vulnerabilities found to be present in their situations – attachment deficit, lack of consistent care, etc - and the fact that authorities tend to be slow to act due to inconsistencies in how in absence or missing episode might be classified. <sup>5</sup>

The added vulnerability factors for children in residential care mean that this particular demographic are often targeted and groomed by perpetrators, both gang based and individual, because they are seen as an easy target. <sup>6</sup> The perpetrators will work to pull the young person away from any protective people in their life, often under the guise of being an understanding ‘boyfriend/girlfriend’ or adult. In gang related exploitation, it is not unusual for the young person to initially see a gang as a place of belonging. <sup>7</sup> Once control and dominance is established by the perpetrators, the young person may then be forced or manipulated into having sex with ‘friends’ of the perpetrators and/or will be used to carry out street related crimes, such as drug dealing or petty theft. <sup>8</sup>



For those agencies focused on addressing the issue of missing children and child exploitation the most widely accepted approach is to use a model known as ‘assertive outreach’.<sup>9</sup> This model takes a position of persistence where, after an episode of missing, practitioners from NGO’s will initially conduct a return home interview followed by consistent and regular attempts to engage and intervene with the young person. It relies on professionals making themselves readily available and accessible to the young person and frequently utilises multi-agency partnerships with police and statutory child protection agencies as a means of responding rapidly to the needs of the young person.

Once effective engagement has been established practitioners will seek to maintain regular contact with the young person through modes of communication accessible to the young person – text, phone, internet, etc. Practitioners will meet with the young person in their own environment or in locations where the young person feels most comfortable. The core aim of any work undertaken is to provide necessary support to encourage change and build resilience, to the extent that the young person is able to experience a sense of agency, leading to a greater feeling of self-worth and belonging. This particular practice model has seen agencies report a significant increase in safety and well-being in children and a reduction in episodes of missing by up to 41%.<sup>10</sup>

One of the most critical aspects to ensuring positive outcomes for young people who go missing is capacity building for frontline professionals through programmes of education and awareness. Case studies demonstrate that when professionals lack adequate training relating to community based child sexual and criminal exploitation, victims are less likely to receive the support they need which can have dire consequences for their long term well-being.<sup>11</sup>

## CHILD CRIMINAL EXPLOITATION OCCURS:

**“WHERE AN INDIVIDUAL OR GROUP TAKES ADVANTAGE OF AN IMBALANCE OF POWER TO COERCE, CONTROL, MANIPULATE OR DECEIVE A CHILD OR YOUNG PERSON UNDER THE AGE OF 18 INTO ANY CRIMINAL ACTIVITY:**

- IN EXCHANGE FOR SOMETHING THE VICTIM NEEDS
- FOR THE FINANCIAL OR OTHER ADVANTAGE OF THE PERPETRATOR OR FACILITATOR
- THROUGH VIOLENCE OR THREAT OF VIOLENCE”

(UK Home Office, 2019)



## REFERENCES

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