

The intersection of sexual and criminal exploitation for children going missing in residential care: patterns; problems; and opportunities

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ABSTRACT

Background: Children in residential care face heightened risks of sexual and criminal exploitation. Going missing from care is often treated as a key indicator of vulnerability, yet it remains unclear whether these episodes reflect only risk or also ongoing patterns of exploitation-related harm.

Objective: This study examined how worker-identified sexual, criminal, and combined exploitation concerns intersect with missing episodes in residential care.

Participants and setting: Administrative data were drawn from four community service organisations participating in the Disrupting Child Exploitation project in Victoria, Australia. The dataset comprised 942 monthly records relating to 226 children and young people in residential care.

Methods: Each record captured worker-identified concerns about sexual and criminal exploitation, classification of exploitation evidence using a three-level safeguarding framework, numbers of missing nights, and counts of recorded care incidents. Quantitative analyses compared exploitation concern profiles and missing episodes across two nine-month reporting periods between 2023 and 2024.

Results: Statistically significant shifts were observed in exploitation concern profiles, with sexual exploitation concerns declining and criminal and combined concerns becoming prominent. Missing nights rose across all exploitation concern profiles, whereas recorded care incidents decreased.

Conclusions: Findings suggest that missing episodes may reflect not only vulnerability, but also cumulative and overlapping patterns of exploitation-related harm. These results offer an alternative interpretation of children going missing within residential care as part of sustained exploitation trajectories, rather than as isolated risk indicators.

1. Introduction

Despite residential care provided as a protective response for vulnerable children, it is frequently characterised by placement instability, limited continuity of relationships, and heightened exposure to harm. Residential care refers to staffed group-based placements for children who cannot safely remain with their families due to abuse, family violence or other circumstances (The Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, 2017). Across Western child welfare systems, residential care represents a small proportion of out-of-home care placements, reflecting policy preferences for family-based alternatives. By contrast, residential care remains more common in some European and Central Asian countries (UNICEF, 2024),

highlighting important cross-jurisdictional differences in care systems.

In Australia, approximately 10% of children and young people in out-of-home care are placed in residential settings, with most remaining in kinship or foster care (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare [AIHW], 2025). Residential care is typically used as a placement of last resort and is largely occupied by children and adolescents aged 10–17 years, reflecting the concentration of young people with complex needs and multiple placement breakdowns within this age group (Ainsworth & Hansen, 2005). In Victoria, the Australian site of this study, these placements are delivered through small community-based homes staffed around the clock and informed by therapeutic and trauma-informed approaches (McNamara & Wall, 2023).

Children living in these settings experience poorer outcomes across

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health, education, housing stability, and greater involvement with the criminal justice system (Engler et al., 2022; Holmes, 2021; New South Wales Department of Communities and Justice, 2020). They are also exposed to elevated risks of harmful sexual behaviour from peers and sexual exploitation. Evidence from Australia and the United Kingdom demonstrates that sexual and criminal exploitation frequently overlap in residential care contexts, intensifying vulnerability among this cohort (Coy et al., 2017; Jackson, 2014; McKibbin et al., 2022; The Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, 2017).

1.1. Sexual exploitation

Child sexual exploitation (CSE) is a form of child sexual abuse that “occurs when a child is manipulated or coerced to participate in a sexual activity in exchange for, or on the promise of, rewards including affection, attention, gifts, food, accommodation, clothing, drugs, alcohol, cigarettes, or money” (The Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, 2017, p 33). CSE can unfold through sustained processes of coercion and control rather than isolated incidents. Vulnerability factors include prior abuse, early exposure to sexual content, and unmet attachment, social and financial needs (Laird et al., 2020, 2023).

A recent meta-analysis by Fry et al. (2025) found that one in 12 children globally were victims of “online” sexual exploitation in the past year, with one in eight experiencing image-based abuse and online solicitation. A survey study by Finkelhor et al. (2024) identified a higher rate of online solicitation amongst US adolescents at 22.5%. An even greater rate of online solicitation was found in a study by Thorn (2025), which indicated 36% of adolescents and young people aged 13–20 years had been solicited online to send explicit imagery. In Australia, a survey of 1953 adolescents demonstrated that one in 10 had experienced sexual extortion, which occurs after they have been solicited and involves threats and blackmail so that they continue producing sexual material (Wolbers et al., 2025). While these figures may reflect both improved detection and increased exposure, they nevertheless underscore the scale and persistence of sexual exploitation risks.

Within residential out-of-home care, CSE is consistently associated with heightened vulnerability, placement instability and disrupted protective relationships (Child Exploitation Technical Centre Australia, 2020; Hallett, 2025; Malvaso et al., 2020; Roache & McSherry, 2021). Exploitation trajectories are rarely linear; rather, exploitation, system involvement and instability tend to co-occur and reinforce one another over time. Both adult- and peer-perpetrated exploitation are observed, shaped by power imbalances, coercive group dynamics and normalised problematic sexualised behaviours (Dierkhising et al., 2020; Hallett, 2025; Malvaso et al., 2020).

Research focusing on residential care environments further indicates that these settings may be actively targeted by adult perpetrators seeking access to highly vulnerable young people, while youth-perpetrated exploitation tends to occur within peer networks shaped by social pressure and relational coercion (Dierkhising et al., 2020; Hallett, 2025; Malvaso et al., 2020; Roache & McSherry, 2021). Vulnerability is further stratified by gender, age, and disability status, with girls, younger adolescents, and young people with neurodevelopmental or cognitive disabilities facing disproportionate risk (Hallett, 2025).

1.2. Criminal exploitation

Child criminal exploitation (CCE) refers to “the incitement, coercion, or manipulation of a child into criminal activity” (Baidawi et al., 2020, p. 2). CCE is increasingly recognised as a form of child abuse with serious developmental, psychological and social consequences (Mastropolo, 2013; Stone, 2018). Risk factors include prior abuse, placement instability, social disadvantage and neurodiversity (Baidawi et al., 2020, 2023; Maxwell, 2024).

In Australia, CCE disproportionately affects “crossover” children involved in both child protection and youth justice systems, particularly those in residential care (Baidawi et al., 2020, 2023). Within these trajectories, offending refers to alleged or proven offences committed by children themselves, often shaped by criminal exploitation, peer influence, and prior victimisation. Most offending within these trajectories is short-term and non-violent, although a small subgroup displays persistent patterns linked to prior victimisation and family violence. Importantly, the literature does not establish a direct causal pathway between CCE and offending; rather, these trajectories reflect overlapping experiences of exploitation, trauma and structural disadvantage that blur boundaries between victimisation and criminalisation. Despite this, young people affected by CCE are frequently treated as offenders rather than victims, with enduring impacts on education, employment and wellbeing (Shaw & Greenhow, 2020).

Internationally, CCE is increasingly framed as a child protection issue. In the United Kingdom, policy and advocacy have highlighted the criminalisation of exploited children in residential care (Howard League for Penal Reform, 2020). In Sweden, law enforcement agencies similarly acknowledge the recruitment of children by organised criminal networks, while welfare responses continue to prioritise social control over unconditional child-centred protection (Rennerkog, 2023; Swedish Police Authority, 2023).

1.3. Intersections between sexual and criminal exploitation

Increasingly, research recognises that sexual and criminal exploitation are not discrete experiences but frequently intersect within the same trajectories of coercion and control among children in residential care (Baidawi et al., 2020; Howard League for Penal Reform, 2020; Shaw & Greenhow, 2020). Sexual exploitation may function as a mechanism of dominance within criminal networks, while criminal activity may operate as both a coercion and survival strategy. Despite this conceptual recognition, institutional responses often treat these experiences separately, contributing to the denial of victimhood and the continued criminalisation of exploited children (Shaw & Greenhow, 2020).

Policy frameworks in the United Kingdom, Australia and Sweden increasingly promote integrated safeguarding approaches. For example, the United Kingdom Child Exploitation Disruption Toolkit emphasises multi-agency information sharing and problem profiling to address overlapping exploitation risks (Home Office, 2022). Nevertheless, substantial gaps remain in systematic data collection, professional training and empirical understanding of how exploitation, missing episodes and criminalisation intersect (Baidawi et al., 2020; Howard League for Penal Reform, 2020).

1.4. Going missing from care

“Missing” refers to situations in which a child’s whereabouts is unknown, while “absent” refers to cases in which a child’s location is known but they are away from care without permission (McDowall, 2018). Children may be at high levels of risk under both classifications (Commission for Children and Young People [CCYP], 2021). For example, a child’s location may be known to carers, yet that location may be the home of a known perpetrator of sexual exploitation, indicating imminent risk of harm. For ease of writing, we use the term “missing” as inclusive of “absent” throughout the paper.

Australian national police data across seven jurisdictions indicate that 54% of young people aged 13–17 reported as missing were in out-of-home care, accounting for 77% of all missing episodes in this age group (McFarlane, 2021). Inquiries further show that a small cohort of young people account for the highest frequency and duration of absences, with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people and girls disproportionately represented (Commission for Children and Young People [CCYP], 2021). Earlier work had already drawn attention to

these overlapping risks, with Jackson (2014) describing the convergence of going missing, sexual exploitation and other harms for children living in residential care. In Victoria, more than half of children in residential care were recorded as missing at least once in a single year, and many experienced multiple episodes (Commission for Children and Young People [CCYP], 2022).

Longitudinal studies in the United Kingdom demonstrate a clear association between going missing from out-of-home care and exposure to both criminal and sexual exploitation (Biehal & Wade, 1999, 2000). Young people who go missing are often drawn into criminal offending, sometimes as a form of survival and sometimes under coercion by peers or adults, blurring the boundaries between victimisation and perpetration (Babuta & Sidebottom, 2020; Bennett Dr et al., 2024). Similarly, in Australia, The Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse (2017) and the Victorian inquiry *Out of Sight* (Commission for Children and Young People [CCYP], 2021) identified strong correlations between missing episodes and both sexual and criminal exploitation. Qualitative accounts from practitioners have consequently led to missing episodes being incorporated as standard indicators within international risk assessment tools for sexual and criminal exploitation (Benavente et al., 2024).

Despite this, the question of whether missing episodes operate differently across sexual and criminal exploitation contexts, including cases in which both forms of exploitation co-occur, has received little empirical attention. It also remains unclear whether such episodes function merely as indicators of risk or reflect deeper, sustained patterns of exploitation-related harm. Recent evidence suggests that cases involving both sexual and criminal exploitation display the highest levels of severity and system entrenchment (Dierkhising et al., 2023), reinforcing the importance of examining these overlapping patterns in greater detail.

In this study, exploitation concern profiles refer to worker-identified records indicating sexual exploitation concerns, criminal exploitation concerns, or both. In the Victorian context, sexual exploitation concerns are recorded using a tiered classification system that reflects the strength and type of available evidence regarding exploitation, rather than gradations of risk. This framework informed the operationalisation of exploitation concern profiles in the present study. Missing episodes are examined as potential reflections of enduring patterns of coercion and control, consistent with broader dimensions of severity, persistence and duration.

By comparing sexual, criminal and combined exploitation concern profiles across two reporting periods, the study provides rare quantitative evidence about how missing episodes differentiate across overlapping exploitation trajectories within residential care, an area that remains under-explored in international research. To address this gap, the present study asks: *Among children in residential care, how do missing episodes across sexual, criminal and combined exploitation concern profiles reflect the severity and persistence of exploitation-related harm?*

2. Methods

2.1. Study design

This study analysed administrative records gathered through a Data Capture system developed as part of the Disrupting Child Sexual Exploitation (DICE) project. DICE is a multi-state Australian initiative led by three universities across three states, in collaboration with residential care providers, child protection agencies and police to strengthen prevention and disruption responses to child sexual exploitation. DICE combined training, multiagency forums and data collection initiatives to improve recognition of exploitation concerns and explore coordinated multi-agency responses (Hughes, 2024). The dataset reported in this study captured workers' concerns about sexual and criminal exploitation, missing episodes, and incident reporting, offering an opportunity to explore patterns across two reporting periods in

Victoria, Australia.

2.2. Participants and setting

In total, 1011 administrative data entries were submitted by four community service organisations providing residential care in two child protection areas in Southern Victoria. In this study, the terms “children” and “young people” refer to individuals under the age of 18, consistent with international definitions of childhood. Each entry was generated when a child or young person met one or more inclusion criteria: (1) child reported missing from placement; (2) child identified as at risk of sexual exploitation; (3) child identified as at risk of criminal exploitation based on organisational records and professional judgement; or (4) child linked to a reportable incident within the Client Incident Management System.

Records with missing information on both sexual and criminal exploitation concerns were excluded ($n = 69$; 6.8%), leaving a final analytic sample of 942 valid entries, corresponding to 226 unique children and young people. Because records were collected monthly, the same child could appear in multiple entries across different months, but only once per reporting month. For this reason, the analysis focused on records rather than individual trajectories.

2.3. Data source and procedure

The Data Capture Template was developed by the DICE research team to support consistent recording of indicators related to child sexual exploitation concerns (recorded as professional concern rather than confirmed legal determination), child criminal exploitation concerns, and missing episodes in residential care. Each row in the dataset represented a monthly administrative record associated with a child or young person, rather than a unique individual. As data were submitted monthly by organisations, the same child could appear in multiple records across reporting periods. Accordingly, the analytic unit of the study was the administrative record rather than the individual child. Each column captured structured indicators, including sexual exploitation concerns, criminal exploitation concerns, number of nights missing, Enhanced Response Model Tier classification (Tier 1–3; explained below), incidents recorded in the Client Incident Management System (Major and Non-Major, defined below), an organisational identifier, and a free-text comments field (see Fig. 1).

Children and young people were included when residential care staff identified them as missing, recorded concerns regarding sexual or criminal exploitation, or entered a reportable incident in Client Incident Management System. Identification was based on routine organisational monitoring, case records and professional judgement informed by child protection and policing frameworks. Concerns about sexual and criminal exploitation were recorded as Yes, No, or No data. Sexual exploitation concerns reflected indicators such as suspected grooming, exchange-based sexual activity, online or in-person exploitation, and documented disclosures. Criminal exploitation concerns reflected indicators including coercion into offending, association with criminal networks, and offences believed to benefit others. These designations reflected professional concern rather than confirmed legal findings.

The Enhanced Response Model is a Victorian framework used to assess and respond to child sexual exploitation. Tier 1 reflects confirmed evidence, such as when a young person discloses sexual exploitation and this is supported by police or child protection intelligence. Tier 2 reflects evidence of indicators requiring further investigation; for example, when a young person has repeated missing episodes linked to known exploitative peers or locations, returns with unexplained money or gifts, and shows behavioural changes consistent with grooming. Tier 3 involves emerging concerns where risk is suspected but evidence remains limited, such as when a young person begins to be more frequently absent from placement, appears withdrawn or distressed, and avoids discussing their whereabouts, without any disclosure or contextual links

Unique Clinet ID	CSE Concerns	CCE Concerns	Number of Nights Missing	Level of Evidence of Sexual Exploitation			Number of time recorded as missing/absent (Major and Non Major Incidents)	Additional Notes/ Comments
				Confirmed Evidence	Indicator Requiring further Investigation	Emerging Concerns (Active Monitoring)		
Example (ID -101)	Y N No Data	N	10	Y	N	N	2	

Fig. 1. Overview of the data capture template.

to exploitation (Department of Health and Human Services, 2017). Enhanced Response Model classifications were recorded as Yes, No, or No data, and were used to support the identification and interpretation of exploitation concern profiles, ensuring consistency with Victorian child protection practice.

Incidents recorded in the Client Incident Management System, the Victorian Government reporting system used by residential care providers to document reportable incidents involving children and young people in out-of-home care, were analysed as numerical counts. Major incidents denote higher levels of concern or risk of harm, involving permanent or long-term impairment, acute medical or mental health responses, or the allocation of significant additional resources. For example, a young person may require hospitalisation following serious self-harm, disclose sexual assault, or be relocated to a different placement due to immediate safety concerns. Non-Major incidents refer to harm that is not permanent or long-term and does not require resources beyond the existing care arrangement. For instance, a young person may become emotionally distressed following an argument with peers, leave the unit briefly, and return safely the same day with support provided within the existing care plan (Department of Families, Fairness and Housing, 2024). Although the Client Incident Management System includes missing client events, each record represents a discrete incident rather than its duration. The number of missing nights was recorded as the total number of nights absent during each reporting month. Organisations used pseudonymised identifiers to enable longitudinal linkage, and staff completed and submitted the template monthly.

Data were structured across two nine-month reporting periods: Period 1 (July 2023–March 2024) and Period 2 (April–December 2024). These periods aligned with a strengthened disruption response in two child protection areas in Southern Victoria. Hard disruption refers to exploitation responses conducted with law-enforcement which involve direct communication with perpetrators to immediately disrupt exploitive actions. Soft disruption refers to care-based and therapeutic safeguarding strategies that focused on resolving children's unmet needs and reducing long-term risk of exploitation (McKibbin et al., 2026). The present study did not evaluate these responses, but examined how sexual and criminal exploitation concerns intersect with missing episodes across the two periods.

2.4. Data preparation

All records were checked for completeness and consistency. Entries without any information about sexual or criminal exploitation concerns were excluded (n = 69; 6.8%). Variables with more than 50% missing values were not included in inferential testing, although descriptive summaries were retained to highlight patterns that might warrant further investigation.

In subsequent analyses focusing on exploitation risk profiles, records in which both sexual and criminal exploitation concerns were explicitly

recorded as absent were further excluded as part of an analytic subsetting strategy. These exclusions reflect the conceptual focus on records with identified exploitation-related concerns, rather than additional missing data at the measurement level, and were made to ensure that the analytic sample specifically reflected exploitation-related risk profiles rather than general residential care records.

2.5. Analytical strategy

Analyses compared outcomes across the two reporting periods to examine whether changes in practice were reflected in recorded indicators. Because the dataset consists of monthly administrative records rather than individual-level longitudinal trajectories, analyses were conducted at the record level rather than as within-subject comparisons. Descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations) were used to summarise the data. Chi-square tests of independence were applied to categorical variables, with Cramer's V or phi (φ) reported as effect sizes.

For continuous indicators, missing episode duration (number of missing nights) and administrative event frequency (recorded missing episode incidents), distributions were skewed and group sizes unequal. Accordingly, non-parametric Mann–Whitney U tests were employed instead of parametric alternatives, with effect sizes reported as $r = Z/\sqrt{N}$. This analytical approach ensured robust comparisons given the non-normal distributions and structure of the dataset. Analyses were conducted in SPSS version 29.0, and exact significance values are reported.

The risk-profile variable (sexual, criminal, dual concerns) was derived from the fields capturing sexual and criminal exploitation concerns. Missing nights and recorded incident counts (Major and non-Major) were analysed as count variables, enabling valid comparisons across the two reporting periods.

2.6. Ethical considerations

The study was approved by the University of Melbourne Human Research Ethics Committee (ID: 27624). In addition, all participating community service organisations formally authorised the use of their administrative records for the purposes of this study. All records were anonymised before submission to the research team, and the analysis was conducted at an aggregated level to preserve confidentiality. No identifying details about children, carers or staff were included. As the study involved secondary analysis of anonymised administrative data, individual consent or assent from children and young people was not required under the approved ethics protocol. The analysis was conducted at an aggregated level to preserve confidentiality and minimise any potential risk to participants.

3. Results

A total of 942 valid records were submitted across the two reporting periods. These correspond to 226 unique children, some of whom appear in multiple months within a period or across both periods. Accordingly, the dataset reflects organisational administrative coverage within selected service areas rather than the full residential care population in Victoria.

In Period 1, Organisation A contributed the largest proportion of records (44.7%, n = 207), followed by Organisation B (29.2%, n = 135), Organisation C (16.6%, n = 77), and Organisation D (9.5%, n = 44). In Period 2, Organisation A accounted for 32.6% of records (n = 156), Organisation B for 34.4% (n = 165), Organisation C for 19.4% (n = 93), and Organisation D for 13.6% (n = 65). Overall, 463 records were submitted in Period 1 and 479 records in Period 2 (Table 1).

Although the source organisation was recorded for each entry, analyses were conducted using aggregated data across organisations to preserve statistical power and ensure adequate cell sizes for less frequent outcomes. Organisation-level analyses were therefore not undertaken.

Results are presented by reporting period and exploitation concern profile to examine changes in recorded concerns, evidence classifications, and missing episodes over time.

3.1. Exploitation concerns

To capture an integrated view of exploitation-related concerns, a concern-profile variable was created, classifying records into sexual-only, criminal-only, and combined sexual and criminal concerns. Analyses were restricted to records in which at least one exploitation concern was recorded as present (N = 688). As shown in Fig. 2, the distribution of concern profiles differed between Period 1 and Period 2. Sexual-only concerns decreased between periods, whereas criminal-only and combined concerns increased.

3.2. Evidence classifications for sexual exploitation concerns

Analyses of evidence classifications were restricted to records that included sexual exploitation concerns (N = 436). Valid case numbers varied across evidence categories due to missing classification information. Fig. 3 shows that the proportion of records classified as having confirmed evidence of sexual exploitation did not differ significantly between periods. In contrast, records requiring further investigation and those under active monitoring increased significantly between Period 1 and Period 2. These classifications provide contextual information on how sexual exploitation concerns were being identified and monitored over time.

3.3. Missing episodes

Two complementary indicators were used to examine missing episodes in residential care: the number of nights young people were recorded as missing from placement, and the number of recorded incident events (Major and non-Major). Together, these indicators capture

Table 1
Organisational Distribution of Valid Administrative Records Submitted in Period 1 (1 July 2023–31 March 2024) and Period 2 (1 April 2024–31 December 2024).

Organisation	Period 1		Period 2	
	n	%	n	%
A	207	44.7	156	32.6
B	135	29.2	165	34.4
C	77	16.6	93	19.4
D	44	9.5	65	13.6
Total	463	100	479	100

Note: Percentages are based on valid cases (N = 942).

both the accumulation of time away from placement and the frequency of documented absences. As shown in Fig. 4, the mean number of missing nights increased significantly between Period 1 and Period 2.

In contrast, the mean number of recorded incident events (Major and non-Major) declined significantly between Period 1 and Period 2 (Fig. 5).

Together, these findings indicate opposing trends across the two indicators used to describe missing episodes, with increases in absence duration alongside declines in recorded administrative incident events.

3.4. Missing nights by concern profile

Missing nights were analysed separately from records with sexual exploitation concerns, criminal exploitation concerns, and combined concerns. Within the analytic subsample of records with exploitation concerns (N = 688), 27.5% (n = 189) were classified with sexual exploitation concerns, 36.6% (n = 252) with criminal exploitation concerns, and 35.9% (n = 247) with combined concerns.

Because some records did not include information on nights missing from placement, group sample sizes varied for this analysis. All statistical tests were conducted using available valid cases only. As shown in Fig. 6, the mean number of missing nights increased significantly across all three concern profiles between Period 1 and Period 2.

3.5. Recorded incident events by concern profile

Recorded incident events were examined by concern profile across periods. Within the analytic subsample of records with exploitation concerns (N = 688), analyses were restricted to records with valid recorded incident event data (n = 435; 63.2%).

As shown in Fig. 7, the mean number of recorded incident events declined for records with sexual exploitation concerns and criminal exploitation concerns, while a small increase was observed for records with combined concerns. Only the reduction among records with criminal exploitation concerns reached statistical significance.

Across analyses, exploitation concern profiles shifted between periods, with increases in criminal-only and combined concerns, and a reduction in sexual-only concerns. Evidence classifications for sexual exploitation showed growth in categories reflecting ongoing monitoring and further investigation. Missing episodes increased across periods, both in total nights away from placement and across all concern profiles. In contrast, recorded incident events declined overall and showed mixed patterns across concern profiles. Together, these findings highlight divergent trends between missing episode duration and administrative incident recording within evolving exploitation concern trajectories.

4. Discussion

This study examined how missing episodes intersect with sexual, criminal, and combined exploitation concern profiles among children and young people living in residential care. By analysing administrative records across two reporting periods, the study contributes early quantitative evidence to an area that has been largely explored through qualitative or case-based research. In doing so, it offers new insight into how exploitation-related harm may unfold across overlapping trajectories within residential care, and how missing episodes may function not only as indicators of vulnerability, but also as potential reflections of severity, persistence and accumulated harm.

While not the primary focus of the study, a key contribution is the documentation of the relative prevalence of sexual, criminal, and combined exploitation concerns within residential care. Although these figures should be interpreted with caution, they provide rare quantitative insight into the distribution and overlap of exploitation concern profiles in an Australian residential care context. Consistent with emerging international literature, combined sexual and criminal exploitation concerns represented a substantial and increasing

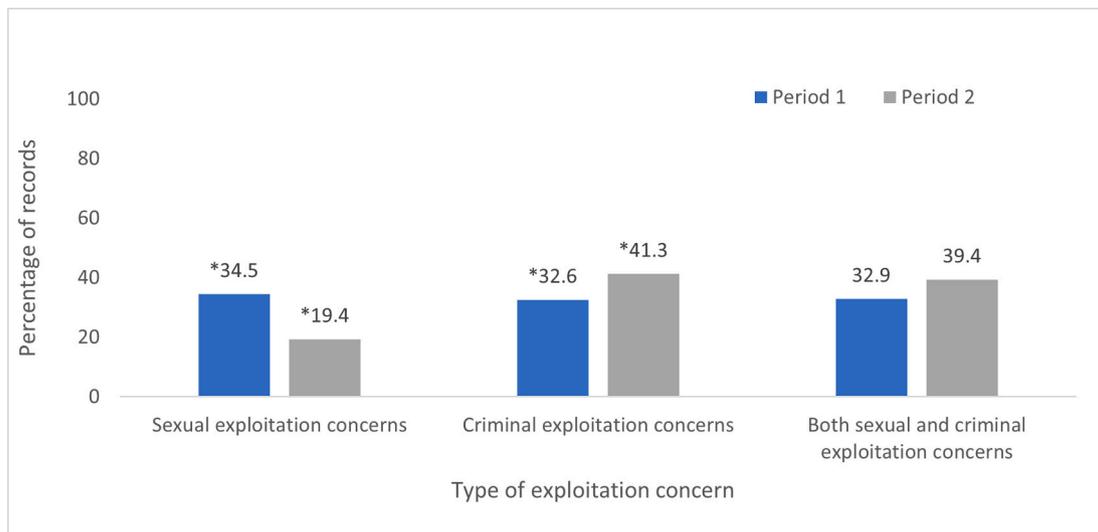


Fig. 2. Comparison of exploitation concerns between Period 1 (1 July 2023–31 March 2024) and Period 2 (1 April 2024–31 December 2024). *Note:* Records in which both concern variables were recorded as absent were excluded (n = 254; 26.9% of valid records). Percentages are based on valid records with at least one exploitation concern (N = 688), including 368 records in Period 1 and 320 in Period 2. The distribution of concern profiles differed significantly between periods, $\chi^2(2, N = 688) = 19.78, p < 0.001, \text{Cramer's } V = 0.17$. Period-specific counts were: sexual-only (Period 1 n = 127; Period 2 n = 62), criminal-only (Period 1 n = 120; Period 2 n = 132), and combined sexual and criminal concerns (Period 1 n = 121; Period 2 n = 126). Asterisks (*) indicate cells with statistically significant adjusted residuals ($p < 0.05$).

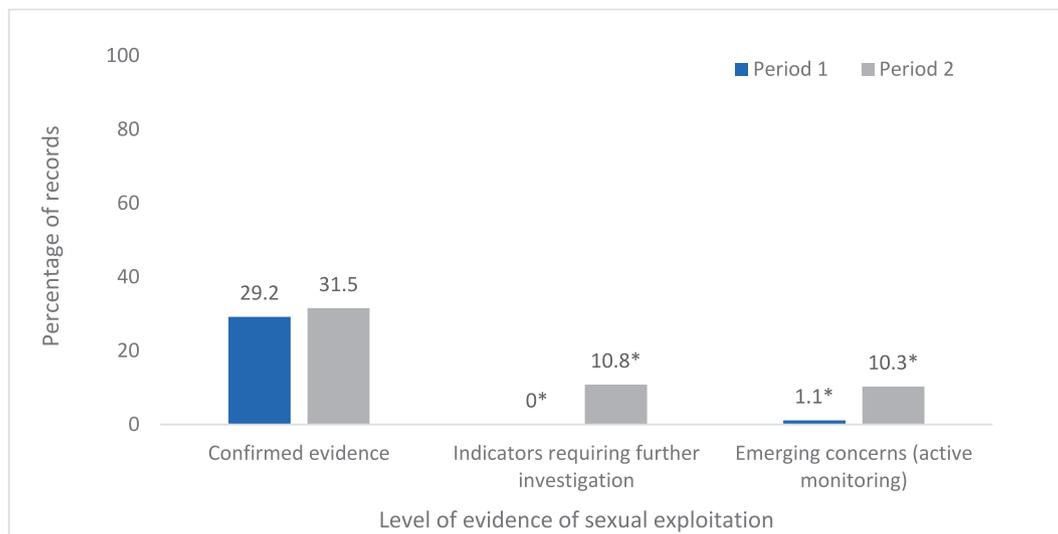


Fig. 3. Evidence classifications for sexual exploitation concerns across Period 1 (1 July 2023–31 March 2024) and Period 2 (1 April 2024–31 December 2024). *Note.* Percentages are based on records with sexual exploitation concerns only (N = 436). Records with criminal-only concerns were excluded. Valid case numbers varied across classification categories due to missing information. Records requiring further investigation increased significantly between periods, $\chi^2(1, N = 274) = 10.38, p = 0.001, \phi = 0.20$. Records under active monitoring also increased significantly, $\chi^2(1, N = 273) = 7.33, p = 0.007, \phi = 0.16$. Asterisks (*) indicate statistically significant differences between periods ($p < 0.05$).

proportion of records over time, reinforcing arguments that exploitation experiences rarely occur in isolation (Baidawi et al., 2020; Coy et al., 2017; Dierkhising et al., 2023). These findings support conceptual models that view exploitation as embedded within broader trajectories of coercion, control and structural vulnerability, rather than as discrete or single-issue phenomena.

Importantly, missing nights increased across all concern profiles, including sexual-only, criminal-only, and combined concerns. This pattern is consistent with the possibility that missing episodes may reflect sustained vulnerability over time, rather than isolated moments of risk. In contrast, recorded incident events declined over time. This divergence may partly reflect reduced opportunities for staff observation and documentation when young people are missing for extended

periods, alongside potential shifts in recording thresholds. Together, these opposing patterns highlight the limitations of relying on single administrative indicators to assess harm. While recorded incident events may be shaped by organisational reporting practices, accumulated nights away from placement capture a distinct dimension of vulnerability, more closely aligned with duration and persistence.

These findings invite a more cautious and layered interpretation of administrative data. Changes in recorded exploitation concerns or incident classifications cannot be assumed to represent genuine changes in prevalence. Instead, they may reflect shifts in organisational focus, training, reporting guidance, or thresholds for classification. As noted in previous research, administrative data are shaped not only by children's experiences, but also by professional judgement, institutional priorities

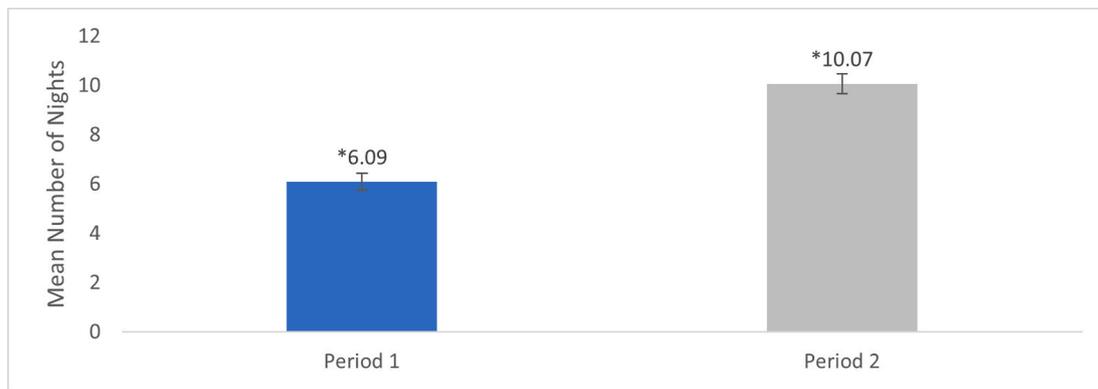


Fig. 4. Average number of nights missing from placement by Period 1 (1 July 2023–31 March 2024) and Period 2 (1 April 2024–31 December 2024). *Note:* Analysis restricted to records with valid data on nights missing from placement ($n = 754$; 80.0% of the total sample, $N = 942$). The mean number of missing nights increased from 6.09 ($SD = 6.98$, $n = 414$) in Period 1 to 10.07 ($SD = 7.32$, $n = 340$) in Period 2. This difference was statistically significant (Mann–Whitney $U = 43,617.5$, $Z = -9.02$, $p < 0.001$, $r = 0.33$). Error bars represent ± 1 standard error of the mean (SEM). Asterisks (*) indicate statistically significant differences between periods ($p < 0.05$).

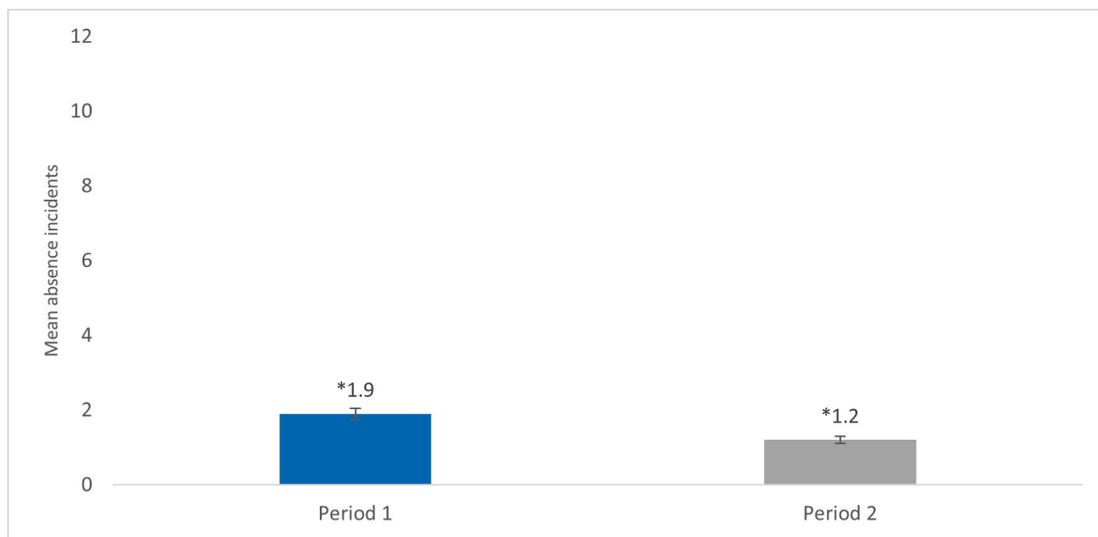


Fig. 5. Mean recorded incident events across Period 1 (1 July 2023–31 March 2024) and Period 2 (1 April 2024–31 December 2024). *Note:* Analysis restricted to records with valid absence-incident data ($n = 575$; 61.0% of the total sample, $N = 942$). The mean number of recorded incident events decreased from 1.90 ($SD = 1.99$, $n = 158$) in Period 1 to 1.20 ($SD = 1.77$, $n = 417$) in Period 2. This difference was statistically significant (Mann–Whitney $U = 22,545.5$, $Z = -6.14$, $p < 0.001$, $r = 0.26$). Error bars represent ± 1 standard error of the mean (SEM). Asterisks (*) indicate statistically significant differences between periods ($p < 0.05$).

and system constraints (Baidawi et al., 2020; Benavente et al., 2024).

The observed reduction in recorded sexual exploitation concerns, alongside increasing missing nights, may therefore reflect reduced opportunities for staff observation, changes in recording practices, or evolving interpretations of risk, rather than reductions in harm itself. This analytic focus prioritises examination of exploitation-related trajectories and does not aim to provide comparative estimates with records in which no exploitation concerns were identified.

Residential care organisations sit at the centre of these dynamics. They are responsible not only for responding to exploitation risks, but also for recognising, documenting and communicating them across systems. The patterns observed in this study therefore reflect both young people's lived experiences and the experiences that are administratively recorded within organisational contexts, rather than providing direct insight into those experiences themselves. This highlights the importance of viewing administrative data not as neutral representations of reality, but as socially and institutionally situated records, shaped by organisational recording practices and decision-making tools (Gillingham, 2011; Shaw et al., 2022). Strengthening consistency, clarity and shared understanding in recording practices is therefore not

merely a technical task, but a core safeguarding responsibility.

From a theoretical perspective, the findings support frameworks that conceptualise exploitation as a process rather than an event. Missing episodes are consistent with broader conceptualisations of exploitation as part of ongoing trajectories of coercion and control, akin to models that emphasise severity, persistence and cumulative harm (Dierkhising et al., 2023; Howard League for Penal Reform, 2020). At the same time, these trajectories are shaped by young people's unmet material, relational and emotional needs, which play a central role in vulnerability to both missing episodes and sexual exploitation within care contexts (Hallett, 2025; Harris et al., 2025). Taken together, these findings suggest that missing episodes sit at the intersection of exploitation dynamics and unmet needs within residential care. The particularly high levels of missing nights among records with combined concerns reinforce the need to view overlapping exploitation as a marker of heightened vulnerability and system entrenchment, rather than as an additive combination of separate risks.

These findings have important implications for practice and policy. First, they suggest that missing episodes should be interpreted alongside exploitation concerns, rather than as standalone indicators. Second, they

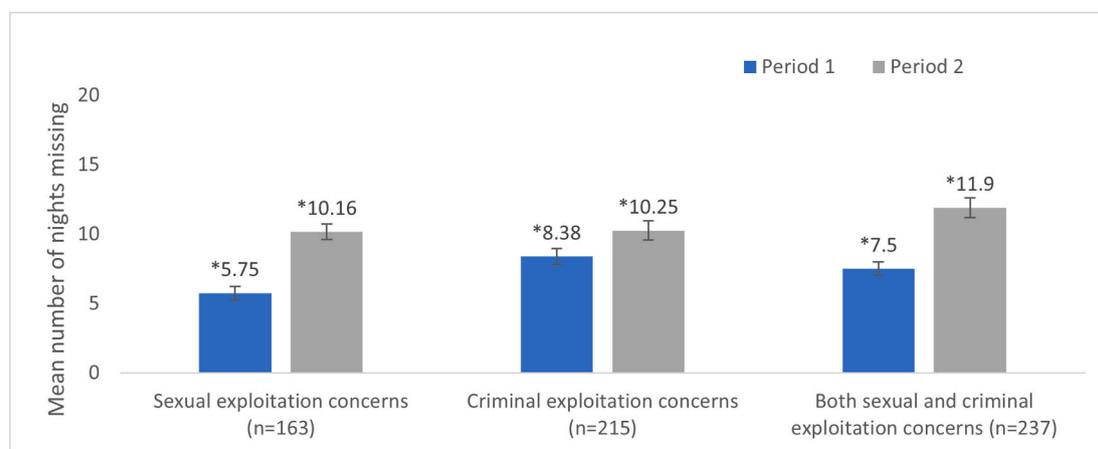


Fig. 6. Mean number of nights missing from placement across exploitation concern groups and periods. *Note:* Analysis restricted to records with exploitation concerns ($N = 688$). Among records with sexual exploitation concerns, the mean number of missing nights increased from 5.75 ($SD = 6.72$) in Period 1 to 10.16 ($SD = 6.70$) in Period 2 (Mann–Whitney $U = 1654$, $Z = -4.77$, $p < 0.001$, $r = 0.37$). For records with criminal exploitation concerns, the mean increased from 8.38 ($SD = 7.80$) to 10.25 ($SD = 6.39$) ($U = 4585$, $Z = -2.62$, $p = 0.009$, $r = 0.11$). Records with combined concerns showed an increase from 7.50 ($SD = 7.10$) to 11.90 ($SD = 8.43$) ($U = 5047.5$, $Z = -3.74$, $p < 0.001$, $r = 0.15$). Error bars represent ± 1 standard error of the mean (SEM). Asterisks (*) indicate statistically significant differences between periods ($p < 0.05$).

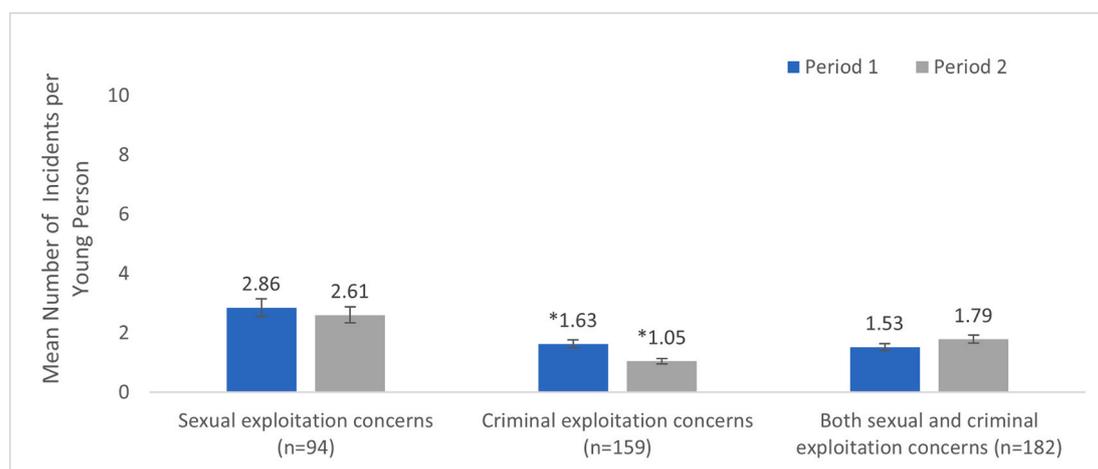


Fig. 7. Mean number of administratively recorded incidents by exploitation concern groups and period. *Note:* For records with sexual exploitation concerns, the mean declined from 2.86 incidents ($SD = 3.03$, $n = 111$) in Period 1 to 2.61 incidents ($SD = 3.56$, $n = 108$) in Period 2; this difference was not statistically significant. For records with criminal exploitation concerns, the mean decreased from 1.63 incidents ($SD = 1.65$, $n = 146$) to 1.05 incidents ($SD = 0.91$, $n = 142$) (Mann–Whitney $U = 1847.5$, $Z = -2.39$, $p = 0.017$, $r = 0.13$). For records with combined concerns, the mean increased from 1.53 incidents ($SD = 1.02$, $n = 111$) to 1.79 incidents ($SD = 1.49$, $n = 109$); this difference was not statistically significant. Error bars represent ± 1 standard error of the mean (SEM). Asterisks (*) indicate statistically significant differences between periods ($p < 0.05$).

highlight the need for organisational systems that can capture both frequency and duration of missing episodes, as these dimensions appear to reflect different aspects of harm. Third, they support the value of tailored responses that recognise the distinct profiles and needs of young people experiencing sexual, criminal, or combined exploitation. Prevention and disruption strategies are likely to be most effective when they are responsive to these differing trajectories, rather than relying on uniform approaches.

4.1. Limitations and future directions

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, changes in reporting practices and child protection processes across the two periods may have influenced observed patterns and limit causal interpretation. Variation in how exploitation concerns and missing episodes were recorded across organisations further complicates direct comparison over time. Second, the

use of aggregated administrative records restricted the ability to examine individual trajectories, transitions, or changes in circumstances across time. Although records could be linked longitudinally within organisations, anonymisation procedures prevented linkage across organisations. As a result, the unique record count may include duplication for young people who moved between organisations, reflecting a structural limitation of administrative safeguarding data, rather than an error in data management. Third, administrative data are not neutral records of young people's experiences, but are generated through professional judgement and organisational priorities. While this provides valuable system-level insight, it also means that recorded patterns cannot be interpreted as direct indicators of prevalence or incidence of exploitation-related harm.

Future research could prioritise strengthening the reliability and consistency of administrative recording practices and integrating quantitative analyses with qualitative accounts of young people's lived experiences. Longitudinal designs that follow individual children across

services and over time would provide deeper insight into how missing episodes intersect with evolving exploitation risks. Comparative research across jurisdictions would further clarify how organisational systems shape recorded patterns of harm.

Overall, this study demonstrates that missing episodes offer more than a simple signal of risk. When examined alongside exploitation concern profiles, they provide a window into the persistence, accumulation, and depth of exploitation-related harm within residential care. By reframing missing episodes as part of sustained exploitation trajectories, this study advances understanding of vulnerability and supports the development of more responsive, coordinated and trauma-informed safeguarding systems for children and young people in residential care.

5. Conclusion

Our study provides early quantitative evidence about how missing episodes intersect with sexual, criminal, and combined exploitation concern profiles among children and young people in residential care. While recorded exploitation concerns shifted across reporting periods, missing nights increased consistently across all profiles, highlighting that patterns of absence capture important dimensions of vulnerability that are not fully reflected in recorded concern classifications alone. Together, these findings support the view of exploitation as a persistent and cumulative process rather than a series of isolated events. They also demonstrate that administrative data reflect not only young people's experiences, but also organisational practices and recording contexts, underscoring the need for cautious and layered interpretation of apparent trends.

By integrating exploitation concern profiles with patterns of missing episodes, this study clarifies how exploitation-related vulnerability is shaped by cumulative exposure over time and by the systems responsible for documenting risk. For practice and policy, the findings highlight the importance of interpreting missing episodes alongside exploitation concerns, and of developing recording systems that capture both the frequency and duration of absence. They also point to the need for coordinated, trauma-informed responses across child protection, youth justice and policing systems. Children experiencing overlapping sexual and criminal exploitation are particularly vulnerable to fragmented statutory responses, which can compound rather than alleviate harm. Consistent recognition of these young people as victims of exploitation is essential for effective safeguarding. For research, the study underscores the value of combining administrative data with longitudinal and qualitative approaches to better understand how exploitation trajectories unfold within residential care.

Overall, this study demonstrates that missing episodes are not merely signals of immediate risk, but key indicators of sustained vulnerability. When examined alongside exploitation concern profiles, they offer critical insight into the persistence, accumulation, and depth of exploitation-related harm, supporting the development of more integrated, trauma-informed and genuinely child-centred safeguarding approaches for children and young people in residential care.

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Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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