

Multi-agency data sharing within the context of child sexual exploitation

This project will explore multi-agency data sharing between police and their partners within the context of child sexual exploitation (CSE), using behavioural systems mapping.

Key details

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Police region	North West
Collaboration and partnership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dr Freya O'Brien, Liverpool John Moores University (corresponding researcher) Contact the researcher • Dr Andy Myhill, College of Policing • Julia Wire, College of Policing • Laura Vega, College of Policing
Level of research	Professional/work based
Project start date	May 2026
Date due for completion	July 2027

Research context

A recent audit on group-based sexual exploitation suggests that agencies (including the police) need to improve data sharing to identify, safeguard and support young people at risk of child sexual exploitation (CSE) and who go missing repeatedly (Home Office, 2025). Broader multi-agency working literature has highlighted how ineffective data sharing can involve:

- inconsistent and sporadic information being shared across agencies (Wade, 2015)

- the gathering and sharing of incomplete information (Waring and others, 2023)
- not sharing vital information needed to effectively safeguard victims (Ofsted, 2013)

Professionals' psychological and physical capabilities needed to share knowledge can influence data sharing (Home Office, 2025), and external factors can limit the opportunity for effective data sharing, for example:

- how the number of governmental departments responsible for responding to CSE can mean information is spread across national and local systems (Home Office, 2025)
- how the lack of synthesis and systematic analysis of police and partner datasets can make data sharing difficult (Missing People, 2022)
- how archaic and incompatible IT structures can limit the ability of police and partner agencies to share information and data (Waring and others, 2023)
- how cultures of adultification can limit risk perception (Home Office, 2025)

Further, motivations behind data-sharing can influence practice. For example, fear of breaching data protection laws (Waring and others, 2023) or ambivalence around disclosing data and information given in confidence can limit data and information-sharing (Telford and Wrekin Council, 2025).

There is a paucity of empirical evidence exploring 'what works' within data sharing, particularly within the context of CSE or how data sharing intersects with issues related to equality, diversity and inclusion. Behavioural systems mapping via the Behavioural Change Wheel (BCW) (Michie, van Stralen and West, 2011) offers a systematic approach to understanding the complex issue of data sharing and a way to identify areas for behaviour change, as well as offering a method to develop tailored interventions to improve data sharing.

Research methodology

Using the COM-B model within the Behavioural Change Wheel (BCW), effective and ineffective data and information-sharing and influences on these behaviours will be defined and identified via a scoping review, and interviews and observations with participating forces and their partners. Behavioural systems maps will be co-developed with participants via workshops and surveys to explore how influences and feedback loops shape (in)effective data and information-sharing. The BCW will then be used to scope interventions to improve data and information-sharing.

Research participation

Participants will be professionals working within the context of CSE and/or missing investigations from police forces and partner agencies.

References

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