

# Families, Relationships and Societies

## From genograms to peer-group mapping: introducing peer relationships into social work assessment and intervention

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<b>Abstract:</b>	<p>Despite evidence that young people's peer relationships are associated with their experiences of abuse, child protection guidance directs social work practice to be primarily focused on the assessment of, and intervention with, families. Presenting data from two studies into the nature of, and safeguarding response to, peer-abuse in England this paper questions the familial parameters of child protection frameworks, and evidences the need to include peer group relationships within social work assessment. Drawing upon Bourdieu's sociological theory, a conceptual framework is used to evidence that familial focused practice fails to address the extra-familial social conditions in which peer-abuse manifests. Complimenting an international evidence base that promotes ecological responses to adolescent welfare and social service development, this paper suggests that advancing knowledge of peer group assessment and intervention should form a central part of the child protection research agenda.</p>	
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## Introduction

International research suggests that in some countries there is an association between the nature of young people's peer relationships and their exposure to, or involvement in, abuse (Barter, et al., 2009; Catch 22, 2013; Messerschmidt, 2012); findings are in keeping with evidence that during adolescence young people are more susceptible to the influence of their peers than pre-pubescent children or adults (Coleman, 2011; Gardner & Steinberg, 2005; Warr, 2002). Despite this evidence base, policy frameworks, legislation and service design in England and Wales, and many other Western countries, limit much child protection practice to the assessment of, and intervention with, families, as means of safeguarding young people from significant harm. Drawing together data from a study into cases of peer-abuse and an action research study to develop contextual interventions to peer-abuse, this paper lays the foundations for the inclusion of peer-relationships within child protection processes in England and Wales, and in other countries which promote individualised models of assessment and intervention.

Qualitative data on the value of peer-group mapping, the challenges of integrating these into current assessment frameworks, and the opportunity that such integration brings for evidencing a need for safeguarding interventions in extra-familial settings will be presented. Taken together, and in light of international literature of adolescent welfare, this data provides a foundation to discuss the conceptual and operational implications of accommodating peer-relationships within policy frameworks that have traditionally directed practice towards family intervention. Set against a backdrop of critiques into individualised models of public service development, this paper furthers discussions about the social elements of child protection and makes a case for further research into peer group assessment and intervention.

## Peer-influence and adolescent safety

Numerous studies have found an association between the dynamics of young people's peer groups and their experiences of abuse (Firmin, 2017, Forthcoming; Barter, et al., 2009; Connolly, 2016; Cossar, et al., 2013; Letourneau & Borduin, 2008; Warr, 2002). In some cases (Barter, et al., 2009; Catch 22, 2013; Warr, 2002) peers appear to have a stronger influence on young people's involvement in, and experiences of, abuse than their families. For example, a study into the role of families in facilitating gang membership found that:

Most of the young people and family members interviewed saw factors outside the family as having a greater influence on their gang association. Issues widely seen as more significant included growing up in a 'hostile' environment where gang membership, criminality and violence was normalised; negative experiences of school; the pull of peer subculture...and the search for identity, independence and respect.

(Catch 22, 2013:4)

Young men's peers can condone or normalise sexual violence through discourse (Holland, et al., 1998; Powell, 2010), group behaviours, and direct participation in group attacks (Corr, et al., 2012; Franklin, 2004). Studies into the involvement of young men in physical violence and offending behaviour more broadly has also evidenced an increased weight of peer influence during adolescence (Catch 22, 2013; Frosh, et al., 2002; Messerschmidt, 2012; Pitts, 2008; Warr, 2002). Peer violence is also associated with young people's intimate

relationships; a consequence of young people forming intimate relationships within friendship networks (Connolly, et al., 2000) and such relationships playing out in public domains (such as schools) as opposed to private contexts – such as a shared home. Studies into partner abuse and exploitation amongst young people in the UK have found that violence and aggression within peer groups is a stronger indicator that young men will abuse their partners than violence within their families (Barter, et al., 2009; Firmin, 2017, forthcoming). Corr et al (2012: 8-9) described the abuse of young men's partners as a 'collective endeavour' in which young men's peers suggested that they adopt controlling behaviours towards their partners and monitored the extent to which this was achieved.

Young women's peers have also been found to normalise or challenge abusive behaviours (Firmin, 2017, Forthcoming; Powell, 2010). An increasing identification of sexual exploitation across the UK has evidenced the ways in which peer relationships facilitate young women's experiences of abuse (Beckett, et al., 2013; Firmin, 2017 forthcoming). Qualitative evidence has also emerged of young women's involvement in violent offending following exposure to serious youth and gang-related violence amongst their peers (Catch 22, 2013; Firmin, 2017, forthcoming). The response of young women's peers to their experiences of abuse can serve to normalise that which is harmful and in doing-so prevent disclosure or help-seeking behaviours (Beckett, et al., 2013; Cossar, et al., 2013). Some studies, however, suggest that for young women exposure to family, as opposed to peer, violence is still more strongly associated with their perpetration of abuse against partners (Barter, et al., 2009; Hackett, 2014).

To an extent much of the above is in-keeping with wider research into adolescent development and group behaviour. While there is no universally held definition of 'adolescence', studies into this part of the life course are primarily focused on individuals who are developmentally entering into puberty and/or have started secondary school education (Coleman, 2011). During this time individuals spend increasing amounts of time forming relationships independently of their families while maintaining some sense of dependence – for example, still living with parents. While this implies some fluidity with regards to definition of adolescence for the purposes of this paper I am considering individuals who are above the age of criminal responsibility in England and Wales (aged 10 and over) but still defined as children (under-18) and therefore within the remit of child protection services.

Studies have found that, compared to those of pre-pubescent children and adults, adolescent behaviours are more strongly influenced by group norms – be they pro-or-anti social (Corsaro & Eder, 1990; Gardner & Steinberg, 2005; Warr, 2002). Young people's decision-making is also shaped by their peers to whom they are more likely to go to for advice on social matters than adults during adolescence.(Cossar, et al., 2013). The significance of peer relationships identified in these studies has been attributed to:

- A desire to belong to a social context in which one gains status;
- The need for group loyalty, demonstrated through an adherence to codes/norms/modes of behaviour;
- A fear of social exclusion from peer support at a time when it can be central to both a development of individual identity and a process of transitioning into adulthood.

It is important to note, however, that these trends are far from universal. Scholars (Coleman, 2011; Warr 2002) have identified that peer group influence varies across global and cultural contexts. While research from the US, UK and Australia have all evidenced associations between peer dynamics and young people experiences of violence and abuse (which outweigh familial norms), other European and non-Western countries report that the family remains the central influence of social norms amongst young people during adolescence. Furthermore, in cultural contexts where they do have influence peer relationships more commonly inform social norms rather than matters such as young people's choice of career and place of study. Finally, the influences of peer relationships are not insurmountable. Where parents/carers form strong attachments with young people during early childhood their relationship can be bolstered and drawn upon to push against negative peer influences. In the absence of strong familial ties negative peer influence is particularly problematic.

These caveats aside, research into young people's experiences of abuse demonstrates that, in-keeping with a broader evidence base on group behaviours, the nature of peer dynamics play a significant role in safeguarding the welfare of adolescents.

### Child protection and safeguarding legislation, guidance and assessment

Despite this international evidence base on the relationship between peer influence and adolescent welfare, the policy and practice frameworks to protect children from abuse in England and Wales remain largely focused on the assessment of, and intervention with, individual young people and their families. In England and Wales the child protection system is defined in the Children Act 1998 as one intended to safeguard children from 'significant harm' when either:

- a) the harm is caused by the child's parent or carer
- Or
- a) the parent or carer is unable to safeguard that child from the harm they are experiencing (does not have the capacity to protect)

Many social work and child welfare systems around the world are too framed within this individualised 'child protection' model, in which it is the duty of professionals to protect children from harm caused to them by their parents or carers (either directly or inadvertently due to lack of protection) (Connolly, 2016; Featherstone, et al., 2016; Finkelhor, 2014; Liebenberg, et al., 2015; Parton, 2014). Such an approach promotes assessing individual young people and their families, rather than identifying wider contextual factors that may impact a child and their family. The practical implications of this policy framework are evidenced in the: tools designed to aid child protection and early intervention practice; the messages within reviews of cases in which young people have encountered harm (SCRs); and in wider social work research. Consider children's social care assessments in England and Wales for example. The Common Assessment Framework (CAF) is a 'standardised approach for the assessment of children and their families, to facilitate the early identification of additional needs and to promote a coordinated service response' (Holmes, et al., 2012:7). It is divided into three sections: the child's developmental needs, parenting capacity and family and environmental factors. Although a reference to 'family and social relationships' – which could include in peer relationships – features in the section on child's developmental needs, and 'community resources', which again could feature extra-familial relationships, is listed in family and environmental factors, explicit consideration of peer relationships within

this assessment framework is largely absent. The weight of the assessment model is on the family environment and more specifically the capacity of the family to safeguard the child from significant harm, along with the role played by a child's own characteristics and behaviours.

The child and family assessments used within statutory child protection procedures in England and Wales continue with this same theme (Department for Education, 2015). In current statutory safeguarding guidance in England and Wales there are no references to peer relationships. Instead, the purpose of assessment is:

- 'to gather important information about a child and family;
- to analyse their needs and/or the nature and level of any risk and harm being suffered by the child;
- to decide whether the child is a child in need (section 17) and/or is suffering, or likely to suffer, significant harm (section 47); and
- to provide support to address those needs to improve the child's outcomes to make them safe' (Department for Education, 2015: 18-19)

A number of child protection scholars have critiqued the individualised nature of 'child protection' safeguarding systems (Featherstone, et al., 2016; Liebenberg, et al., 2015; Parton, 2014). In these studies the extent to which such systems inhibit the ability of practitioners in public services to recognise social context and social justice issues which impact upon the family environment have been duly noted. Political rhetoric which reinforces the message that safety and welfare are best provided by families, in isolation of the cultural, social and structural barriers that some face, have also been documented. These wider debates, while not directly concerned with peer group influence on families, and the young people they are seeking to safeguard, provide a broader critical foundation upon which the inclusion of peer relationships in child protection processes can be considered.

Critiques of individualised child protection systems have been further supported by advances in ecological theories that both communicate the process of human development and provide an analytical framework for testing the sufficiency of public services. Drawing upon the theoretical concepts of Bronfenbrenner, sociological scholars have argued that context should always be considered by practitioners when working with young people – from assessing their levels of resilience (Ungar, 2013) to the risk they pose to others (Letourneau and Borduin, 2008). Criminologists too have advocated approaches seek to change the contexts in which harm occurs, drawing upon situational crime theories to develop responses to street-based physical and sexual violence (Smallbone et al., 2011)

Despite these advances in research and practice which have evidenced the importance of ecological, systemic and contextual interventions, the legislative and policy framework for child protection in England and Wales, and many other Western countries, in which these practices are meant to evolve, remain focused on individual choices and family responsibility. The implications of a legislative and policy framework such as this are evident in the findings of serious case reviews. For example, practitioners have been found to have followed all safeguarding procedures when assessing two individual young men – even though they failed to bring those assessments together and devise a plan to address the peer relationship between these young men despite risk only ever escalating when they were together and with a third young person (in their peer network) (Johnson, 2013).

The legislative frameworks for child protection and the research evidence on peer-group influence during adolescence, therefore, appear mismatched. Despite an international evidence base on the association between peer-relationships and adolescent experiences of abuse and developments in ecological models of practice, the implications of this for child protection legislation and policy frameworks is presently under-applied. At a time of mounting debate about the welfare of adolescents amongst national and international bodies (House of Commons Education Committee, 2012; United Nations, 2015), calls for the creation of safe environments and community mobilisation to prevent violence (WHO, 2016), and arguments to reinvigorate the 'social' in social work (Hardy, 2016), the data presented in the remainder of this paper offers a timely foundation for advancing child protection policy frameworks to better serve young people.

### Methodology

Pierre Bourdieu's sociological theory (1992; 1990) has provided a helpful framework for illuminating the association between peer relationships and individual/familial experiences and for developing approaches to disrupt this association. According to Bourdieu individuals navigate a range of social fields, the boundaries of which are demarcated by their sphere of influence. Upon entering a field an individual brings with them four forms of capital (social, economic, cultural and symbolic) and utilises these and their feel for the rules (their habitus) to engage with the field, achieving social status through this process. His position has led scholars to argue that progress lies in a change in the social conditions in which individuals behave rather than a change in their behaviour/attitude within a persistent and unchanging social setting (McNay, 2004; Powell, 2010). Some Bourdieusian scholars have argued that the 'family' is also a field – governed by a range of institutions, norms and traditional practices (Atkinson, 2016). The rules that operate within the field of family relations, and the institutions which govern and monitor these, are distinct from those concerned with social fields.

Consider peer groups in this social framework. In different social fields a young person's peer group will provide them with different values of capital. If a young person is navigating a violent social field, for example – their local neighbourhood, then having a peer group that can protect them and ensure they are respected may be of high social capital. However, this form of social capital is likely to be of little to no relevance within the field of family relations.

Applying Bourdieu's theory to young people's experiences of abuse has led to the development of the concept of 'contextual safeguarding' (Firmin, 2017a). Produced from studies into peer-abuse, the concept proposes that professionals should explicitly factor peer-relationships, school contexts and public spaces into both child protection assessments and intervention plans when safeguarding young people from extra-familial abuse. Conceptually this model suggests that rather than assessing the ability of a family to safeguard a child from abuse within their peer group/school/local park etc. professionals should acknowledge the influence that these settings have on familial relationships, and the capacity of parents to be protective, and seek to disrupt/alter/intervene the social conditions of such peer groups, schools etc. A contextual safeguarding framework, therefore, uses Bourdieu to propose that intervention, guided by contextual assessment, should seek to change the extra-familial social conditions of abuse and not the individuals/families affected by them, complimenting other ecological and/or situational accounts of adolescence, welfare and safety referenced earlier in this paper (Liebenberg, et al., 2015; Smallbone et al., 2011)

Since 2013 this conceptual framework has been applied and developed through a research programme to consider the practical implications of contextualising responses to peer-abuse, using case review, practice observation and studies of particular social contexts in which young people encounter harm. Drawing upon data related to peer-group dynamics and intervention from two of the studies in this programme, this paper will present evidence on: the nature of peer group association to abuse; attempts by practitioners to incorporate this association into child protection assessment and intervention and the challenges in doing so; and the ways in which this process evidences a need for peer group interventions.

The first study was an in-depth qualitative analysis of nine peer-abuse cases in one police force area in England. 145 young people featured across the nine cases (9 complainants/victims, 76 suspects, 45 bystanders, 15 others associated to the case), resulting in investigations into three murders and six rapes. Case file material was accessed through police investigation files which contained child protection and youth offending assessments, school and voluntary sector reports and police and prosecution documents. Each document was reviewed, logged and the information, where relevant, was transferred onto a contextual case review template to ensure uniformity of data collection for each case. Templates were analysed in NVivo using a coding framework to identify the extent to which:

- Abusive incidents in each case were associated to the nature of a young person's familial, peer group, school or neighbourhood relationships/experiences
- The safeguarding response in each case engaged with the contextual dynamics of abuse

This process produced an overall case study for each of the nine investigations, which involved an account of each context (family, peer groups, schools and neighbourhood settings) featured in each case and the interventions levelled at them (Figure 1)

#### INSERT FIGURE 1

Overall, this process evidenced that risks faced by young people were largely located in their peer networks, and the schools and neighbourhood settings in which these relationships formed, while interventions to safeguard them largely targeted them as individuals and their families (Firmin, 2017a). This paper will draw specifically upon the data generated on the peer relationships in this study. 21 peer groups were associated to the nine cases, the nature of which were logged in tables in column 4 of Figure 1 for each case. The research team also used i2 chart technology to produce visual maps of the data collated in column 4 for each case. It is this data specifically which will be drawn upon for this paper.

The learning from Study 1 was used to inform an action research study to develop contextual responses to peer-abuse with 11 local multi-agency partnerships across England. This study (2), ran across three years and was divided into two stages. The first stage involved an audit of local practice in each site, comprising practitioner observation (in multi-agency meetings), a content analysis of all strategic documents related to peer-abuse, and focus groups with practitioners and young people who had experienced the site's approach to adolescent safeguarding. Data gathered through this process were analysed using a coding framework designed to identify the extent to which each site:

- Had developed a contextual and holistic understanding of all forms of peer-abuse
- Used approaches to assess and intervene with any contextual dynamics of risk

During the second stage of the study researchers drew upon the audit findings and co-created activities with practitioners in each site to strengthen the contextual nature of local practice. In total 18 activities were undertaken across the research sites, two of which aimed to incorporate peer-relationships into assessment.

In one site (Site A) researchers worked with a group of professionals to co-create and pilot a 'peer information capture' (PIC) form. The PIC form was intended for use by social workers and youth offending team practitioners during their assessments. The PIC form captured information on whether a young person's peer relationships were protective or presented a risk to their safety, whether that young person was a leader or follower within that group and, if required, the names of any key peers to ascertain if they were also being worked with by the service (social work or youth offending). In another site (Site B) professionals had initiated a meeting process to discuss young people who were suspected of having sexually harmed a peer but where a criminal investigation was not proceeding (due to lack of evidence or withdrawal by the victim). Meetings were intended to identify opportunities to work with the young person to prevent their involvement in peer-abuse in the future. Researchers in the site observed two of these meetings and analysed the minutes of a further 15 to provide recommendations to the meeting chair about how to further contextualise both the meeting and the minuting process. Following this a new meeting structure and template for recording the discussion were created and piloted over a three-month period before being embedded into local processes. 25 completed meeting templates were then reviewed by the research team. Both pilots were designed to respond to the lack of consideration given to peer-groups during assessments featured in Study 1. Each pilot produced learning about the opportunities and challenges of incorporating information about peer-associations within child protection processes and evidenced a need for peer-group interventions.

Both studies received approval from the two-stage ethics process at the University of Bedfordshire. The first study also received ethical approval from the participating police force. In the second study a local safeguarding children board (a strategic, multi-agency group tasked with overseeing the local approach to safeguarding children and young people) provided governance and oversight of delivery in each site.

Broader findings and methodological detail of both studies have been published elsewhere (Firmin, 2017a, 2017b) however the data on peer groups from the two studies presented in this paper has not been:

- a) Analysed or published for the means of answering the questions/challenges posed by this paper
- b) Published together to provide new evidence on the inclusion of peer-relationships into child protection processes

As this paper uses data on peer-abuse and child protection practice in particular local sites, it is not necessarily reflective of practices in other parts of England or other countries when viewed in isolation. Data drawn from cases in Study 1 are about where things went wrong for children and a serious incident occurred – it is possible that problematic practices in these cases may not apply to less severe examples of abuse. Finally, in both studies it is possible that data was missing (not held in the case files from study 1 or not part of the observations featured in study 2) and is therefore not reflective of all practice undertaken to

safeguard young people in any given circumstance. In order to address these limitations the findings are discussed with reference to the wider international evidence base on peer-abuse and individualised child protection practices (outlined earlier in this paper).

## Findings

Drawn together, findings from the two studies evidence both the importance of considering peer relationships when assessing risks faced by young people and the challenge of integrating this knowledge into individualised child protection structures. Firstly, by exploring the association between peer relationships and young people's experiences of abuse, and mapping these using association charts, it is possible to identify the dynamics of risk faced by young people and potential protective social factors. Secondly, piloting methods to consider peer-relationships during child protection processes supports practitioners to recognise the association between their cases, intervene to address group dynamic and evidence the limitations of the wider policy framework in which such interventions sit. Finally both studies produce an evidence base for investment in contextual interventions and partnerships that move beyond viewing success in relation to changing individual behaviour.

### *Mapping peer associations to abusive incidents*

As outlined previously, child protection and broader safeguarding assessments in England and Wales are largely focused on the behaviour of individual children and their families. However all nine cases subjected to review in Study 1 identified factors within the peer relationships of either the young person who was abused or the young person/people who abused them which contributed to the murder or rape that was under investigation. In each case these peer relationships were more directly related to the incident under investigation than the nature of associated families, often shaping the abusive incident itself or the escalation towards it. Risk in each case, therefore, could not be sufficiently explored without consideration of associated peer groups. Focusing on two of the nine cases helps to illustrate this point.

In case (4) a young woman, 'Lorna', was sexually exploited by her peers for nine months, during which time she was physically, sexually and emotionally abused. Lorna also had peers who did not abuse her but who were abused alongside her or witnessed the abuse that she experienced. By not seeking help from professionals/adults to safeguard Lorna or themselves, these peers normalised Lorna's experiences and so also contributed to the risks that she faced.

A similar relationship was identified in case (8) in which a young woman, 'Sheena', was murdered by her ex-boyfriend. Sheena's peers were not directly involved in her murder, however, her street-based peers did not encourage her to seek help when they witnessed her being assaulted, and in doing so reinforced a belief that professionals could not keep Sheena safe. Some of Sheena's -school-based peers urged her to seek support from her family. However these young people were not associated to the contexts in which Sheena encountered harm and so she expressed that they did not understand what it was like for her.

Given the importance of peer dynamics in these cases, an assessment of Sheena's and Lorna's family relationships, and the creation of a genogram<sup>1</sup> to illustrate these, would not have identified that they were at risk of significant harm. This is not to say that those relationships were wholly protective. Lorna, for example, was being raised by her grandmother due to early childhood experiences of neglect and suspected experiences of familial sexual abuse. However, these experiences did not cause the abuse she later experienced by her peers, and simply knowing about these factors (which they did) would not have helped practitioners identify the level and nature of the risk posed by her peer relationships.

As outlined earlier in this paper, peer association maps were built in place of genograms as part of the analysis of both case (4) and (8) in Study 1 (Figures 2 and 3).

FIGURES 2 and 3 here

Unlike a familial genogram, these peer association charts provided a clear indication of any risks and protective factors within Lorna's and Sheena's peer relationships. Lorna had made multiple disclosures about peers to professionals and reports provided by schools, sexual health services and the police also documented further information about the nature of these peer-relationships but these had not been drawn together and converted into a peer relationships map for consideration in assessment. Much of the information about Sheena's peers was gathered following her murder and therefore could not have been used in a preventative capacity. However, building this map would have alerted professionals to persisting risks amongst Sheena's peers following her death and the potential that others were at risk of being abused by, or abusing peers, in the absence of intervention. As it was, Sheena's murder was responded to as an isolated incident and provision was not put in place for her wider peer network.

#### *Designing opportunities for peer-group incorporation*

In applying the learning from this process, in Study (2) two research sites (referred to as site A and site B) sought to build information about peer relationships into their statutory assessment processes. During the audit of Site A researchers identified that practitioners were asking questions about peer relationships when assessing the risks that young people faced, but this occurred inconsistently, without strategic oversight and often without formal integration into statutory assessment processes. In order to build some structure and quality assurance into the process a peer information capture form (referenced earlier in this paper) was piloted. If children's social care or youth offending team workers received a referral for a young person who was considered to be at risk of being abused, or abusing others, in an extra-familial setting the questions on the form would be put to schools and the local youth service to build a picture of that young person's peer relationships. In gathering this information professionals would then be equipped to build peer association charts and consider risk in relation to peer relationships during assessments.

In Site B a contextual framework was piloted for holding and recording meetings about young people who were thought to have sexually harmed a peer. Prior to the pilot, peer relationships were discussed during meetings, but the breadth of discussion and the

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<sup>1</sup> A genogram is defined as 'a graphic representation of a family tree that displays detailed data on relationships among individuals' (GenoPro, 2016)

numbers of young people referenced made it challenging to manage concerns related to peer-association. Researchers recommended that discussions be recorded in a contextual template, which mapped information about protective and risk factors within young people's homes, peer groups, schools and neighbourhoods. It was also recommended that where multiple young people within the same peer group were of concern that a meeting be called to discuss the group, with a completed template and peer map, so that the assessment focused on the dynamics within that group.

During these pilots practitioners recognised the value of strategically collating information on peer relationships and formally including them in assessments – whether these were paper-based assessments (using a PIC form in Site A) or verbal assessments (through multi-agency discussion in Site B). However, while youth offending practitioners felt able to include information on peer relationships from PIC forms and multi-agency meetings within their assessment framework, for social workers this was a greater challenge. Within youth offending assessments in England and Wales there is a section to record information on peer relationships to shape judgements associated to risk. Within social work assessments the location for this information is less clear. The assessment is guided by the wider child protection system outlined earlier in this paper, and is largely concerned with family relationships. As social workers operate within this statutory legislative framework, questions were raised during both pilots about the ethics and legality of including the names of young people, who were not themselves subject to social work intervention, within a social care assessment process when peer group associations were logged. At present there is no provision for this within social work systems in England and Wales, creating a void of certainty related to data ownership and professional responsibility. Questions remain as to who in a professional network should hold responsibility for the data on a young person's peers and for overseeing the welfare of this wider group.

#### *Building an evidence base for peer intervention*

In addition to drawing attention to the limitations of current child protection frameworks, attempts to expressly consider the relationship between peer groups and young people's experiences of abuse provides an evidence base for developing peer intervention. Safeguarding guidance clearly states that the assessment process should guide decisions about interventions (HM Government, 2015:19). While the same guidance currently suggests that an assessment of the child and family alone should shape the intervention, engaging in peer-mapping exercises outlined above provides a directive evidence base for the development of peer interventions.

Returning to the examples of Sheena and Lorna from Study 1, the interventions used in each case were not designed to disrupt/change the harmful peer-relationships that they experienced or bolster those that were protective. In the case of Sheena, as some of her female peers were being sexually exploited, if one of their assessments had included a peer association chart it is possible that Sheena may have become visible to workers as a potential recipient for support prior to her murder. More generally, if Sheena's peers had been provided with universal or school-based support to identify abusive relationships and avenues for disclosure then it is possible that their reaction to Sheena's experiences may have encouraged more help-seeking behaviours.

Lorna had disclosed details of her peer network to professionals so should a map have been built those who were leading the abusive behaviours could have been identified and a proactive plan for multi-agency intervention could have been coordinated by social workers. Lorna's peers were in education (and so could have been targeted through that service) and some of her peer relationships were formed within a school environment. A number of the peers who were abusing Lorna also had contact with the police and youth offending service, due to drug-related offending, providing another route for intervention. As it was, all of the intervention coordinated by social workers in response to this case targeted Lorna. She was offered mentoring, counselling and eventually was taken into care and relocated to another local authority to remove her from the risks posed by her peers. The nature of her peer relationships, however, was not disrupted through these interventions and Lorna remained vulnerable to exploitation despite this work.

In Study 2, having built an understanding of peer relationships in Sites A and B, the workers who participated in the second study were incentivised to identify opportunities to disrupt/reshape abusive peer relationships. In Site A, the youth offending service have reported to researchers that they have initiated multi-agency meetings to discuss connected young people who are open to their service. In one example, a meeting was held to develop an intervention plan for four associated young people who were all at risk of engaging in abusive behaviours. During the meeting practitioners mapped the familial, school and neighbourhood contexts associated to these peer relationships and identified routes for intervention via the youth service and the youth offending team (who were working individually with these young people). However the legislative questions posed about the inclusion of peer relationships in child protection assessment has limited the ability of social workers to also engage in these activities. In Site B, using a contextual framework to identify risks associated to young people who were sexually harming peers also enabled practitioners to identify contextual interventions. For example, if the majority of the risks that the peer group encountered were in their local neighbourhood but all interventions offered thus far were with their families then there was an evidenced mismatch in practitioner attempts to reduce risk. In these instances meetings identified the need to engage community groups, community safety officers and detached youth workers in building intervention plans to support and work alongside the peer groups for whom they had concerns. The process provided social workers with an evidence-base to pursue partnerships with these community-based organisations as the route required to intervene beyond the families to whom they had been allocated.

### Discussion and recommendations

The findings presented in this paper illustrate the importance of, opportunities to, and challenges of, including peer relationships within child protection processes despite the current legislative landscape. Guided by statutory guidance, when assessments are restricted to evidence about family relationships and interventions target those relationships as a means of safeguarding a young person, it is the capacity of a parent to protect a child which is under scrutiny. By including peer relationships in assessments social care practitioners are able to acknowledge that parents/carers are unlikely to have the capacity to safeguard their child from the risks posed by peers and seek partnerships with schools, community groups and neighbourhood organisations who are better placed to do so.

This is not to say that familial relationships have no bearing on the nature of young people's friendships. Extensive research has evidenced the significance of family attachments and the quality of these relationships in providing young people with a roadmap for forming other relationships in their lives (i.e. Coleman, 2011). However, when young people are engaged in, or affected by, risk within extra-familial settings, family assessments will not provide an account of the social conditions associated to the issues of concern, and family intervention will not change the social conditions in which those issues arise. The capacity to change the social conditions of abusive contexts is generated through the engagement of the social actors who inform the nature of those extra-familial spaces – and these are rarely the parents in cases of peer-abuse.

However the current legislative and policy landscape which provides the framework for child protection practice in the UK is yet to recognise the above limitations of family-focused intervention and does not enable an extension of safeguarding assessment to consider peer relationships. Despite an awareness of and commitment to address risk of significant harm within peer groups, ethical and legal questions arise when social workers attempt to incorporate this information into assessments. Furthermore, social workers are unlikely to hold information about young people's peer relationships unless young people decide to provide this information to practitioners, and are unlikely to engage with peers as part of approved social work intervention.

As peer relationships are formed and develop within schools, public spaces (such as parks or transport hubs), youth clubs and sports clubs etc. then the peers, adults and professionals within these spaces are more strategically positioned to influence peer dynamics. Despite also often working within individualistic frameworks (Liebenberg, et al., 2015), other public service providers, such as youth offending team practitioners, community safety officers and educationalists (including pastoral care and nurses within schools) appear to have greater access to information about extra-familial risk. They are also less restricted by the family-focused lens of child protection legislation that governs social work practice. However, as peer-abuse presents a risk of significant harm to young people the response to it should arguably be held within child protection processes and with the oversight of social workers.

Applying this logic to current social work structures is a conceptual and practical challenge. The parameters set within legislation and statutory guidance in England and Wales locate the risk of, and protection from, significant harm within the familial environment. The development of models such as 'team around the child' or 'one family one plan' are guided by this wider framework – and promote multi-agency working around individuals and families. There is no provision at present to build teams around peer-networks – despite many individual teams around children all working with young people who are connected to, and informing, one another. Further research is required to build methodologies and an evidence base for co-working connected cases in child protection systems and for developing child protection conferences and plans for young people who are connected through friendships or shared extra-familial contexts of risk. The data presented in this paper offers early examples of such work but more studies are required in order to advance the direction of national or international policy. Knowledge is also required into approaches that include peer group interventions, such as detached group engagement and bystander initiatives, within child protection plans. There are a number of services with expertise in engaging young people within social groups – such as detached youth workers and pastoral staff in education. Further exploration of the approaches taken by services that work with

young people as they socialise and build peer relationships would provide a firmer foundation for offering interventions to a social work model that assesses the nature of peer relationships.

This paper is intended to create debate as well as identify a potential area of development for child protection policy and guidance. Arguably peer-relations are not, and should not become, a domain of concern for social work. The institutions and structures which govern the field of the family include social work, and are distinct from the social fields in which peer relationships form. The questions raised about the ethics and legality of including children's names on social work assessment who are peers of open cases but are not themselves under children's social care is a practical expression of this debate. It may be that rather than extend social work practices to peer-relations, the contextual potential of services – such as education and youth work - who already engage with peer groups need to be maximised and more explicitly integrated into the child protection agenda. The issues being discussed in this paper, however, are ones which pose a significant risk to children. It is for this reason that social work and child protection processes more broadly have been under scrutiny.

The arguments built in this paper largely draw upon policy, legislation and practice within England and Wales, but compliment an international evidence base on the association between peer-relationships and adolescent vulnerability as well as critiques of individualised, as opposed to contextual, public service systems in many Western countries. At a time when calls have been made for child protection research to generate evidence on creating safe environments and community mobilisation, this paper is applicable to any social context in which the influence of peers can outweigh that of parents. If the evidence base on adolescent welfare in any given country suggests that peer relationships are associated to young people's experiences of abuse, it is critical to ascertain whether the child protection system in that country accommodates peer-relationships. If it does then an evidence base on the ways in which this is achieved is much needed. If not then the knowledge gaps surfaced by this paper that exist in England are also likely to be pertinent there. In the interim there is a national need for further evidence on approaches to peer-mapping during assessment and on the options for peer group intervention. With a more substantial evidence base the parameters in existing policy and guidance can be challenged, and a move from family genograms to peer-group mapping as part of child protection assessment and intervention will be enabled.

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Figure 1 Case Study Table Template

Case description					
	Individual characteristics	Home/Familial characteristics	Peer characteristics	School characteristics	Neighbourhood characteristics
Criminality					
Abuse					
Resilience					
Safety/Protection					
Harmful norms					
Target of interventions					

Figure 1 Case study table template



