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OLLSCOIL NA
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Living Independently and Free from Targeted Abuse (LIFT): *Understanding Mate Crime and the Experiences of Disabled People in Ireland*



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1. About the Research

The Living Independently & Free from Targeted Abuse (LIFT) Research Project explored the experiences of disabled people in Ireland who have experienced “mate crime” and targeted abuse. The research was funded through the **Research Ireland New Foundations** programme in partnership with the **Policing and Community Safety Authority**.

The project examined how disabled people experience exploitation, abuse, coercion, and manipulation within relationships framed as friendship, support, trust, or companionship. The research involved a **literature review**, **key informant interviews**, **focus groups**, and a **national survey** involving disabled people, advocacy organisations, family members, disability services, Gardaí, safeguarding professionals, and other key stakeholders.

The project also involved collaboration with Blue Teapot Theatre Company, who developed a fantastic short film titled **MATECRIME**. This short film was informed by the research findings and lived experiences shared during the project. The purpose of the film was to support awareness raising and public understanding of mate crime. The findings tell us that mate crime remains significantly under recognised and underreported in Ireland. Participants described experiences of financial exploitation, online scams, sexual exploitation, intimidation, coercion, “cuckooing” (where a person’s home is taken over by others), and abuse linked to loneliness and social isolation. The research also identified substantial barriers in recognising abuse, reporting concerns, and accessing justice.

This research is not about creating fear or discouraging people from living independently in their communities. Disabled people have the right to live, to form relationships, and to be included in their communities, and to do so safely. This research is grounded in a rights-based approach. Drawing on both the existing literature and the voices of people with lived experience, as well as those who support people to live in the community, it is concerned with how that right can be better protected and realised in practice.

2. What is Mate Crime?

There is currently no single agreed definition of mate crime in Ireland or elsewhere. However, the findings from this research suggest several common features that support the development of a practical working understanding.

Mate crime occurs where a person is befriended, manipulated, or exploited by someone who claims to be a friend but is motivated by control, exploitation, financial gain, sexual abuse, access to their housing, or other forms of harm. Participants described situations involving friendship, romantic relationships, peer relationships, neighbours, online relationships, and other forms of social connection. The research found that mate crime can include financial exploitation, coercion, intimidation, sexual exploitation, online abuse, “cuckooing” (taking over someone’s home), and misuse of trust or dependency. Participants repeatedly described situations where abuse developed gradually over time and where relationships initially appeared supportive or caring. This lack of awareness emerged as a major theme throughout the research. Participants explained that many people had never received information about coercion, exploitation, grooming, online scams, or abuse disguised as friendship.

3. Definition of Mate Crime

While mate crime can manifest in diverse and evolving ways, the findings of this research suggest a number of common features that support the development of a practical working definition.

Mate crime is when someone acts like your friend, but is really using you for money, a place to stay, or control. It often doesn't feel like a crime at first because it looks like friendship. There is no single, agreed definition of mate crime. It can take many different forms, including financial exploitation, sexual exploitation, coercion, and situations such as "cuckooing", where someone takes over a person's home. It can also include more subtle, forms of pressure or manipulation that build over time. Based on this research, people spoke not only about being used or exploited, but also about feeling unsafe in their communities. Some described incidents in public spaces, online, or in their neighbourhoods that made them feel targeted, isolated, or at risk. These experiences highlight that mate crime is about issues of safety, trust, and belonging.

This is not intended to constitute a definitive or exhaustive definition. Rather, it is offered as a practical working definition grounded in both the existing literature and the lived experiences and stakeholder accounts gathered throughout this research. It is hoped that articulating such a definition may assist people who may be experiencing mate crime, Gardaí, policymakers, safeguarding services, disability organisations, and other stakeholders in recognising and responding more effectively to forms of abuse that frequently remain hidden, normalised, or underreported.

4. Main Findings from the Research

The research has identified a pattern of exploitation that remains largely hidden from public view and insufficiently addressed within existing law and policy.

Importantly, the findings presented in this research highlight underreporting, the role of stigma and dependency, and the difficulty of recognising and responding to abuse that develops over time within relationships of trust and dependency. The findings point to the need for greater recognition of this form of crime and a more coordinated, rights-based response that reflects the lived experiences of those affected.

4.1 The Hidden and Under-Recognised Nature of Mate Crime

A key finding of this research is that mate crime is under-recognised. Across key informant interviews, the national survey, and the focus groups there was a consistent view that what is currently visible represents only a fraction of what is actually occurring. The absence of reliable data, combined with a lack of shared terminology, means that many cases are not identified as a distinct form of exploitation. There is a fragmented understanding of mate crime, for example as financial abuse or a safeguarding concern, without recognising how people are targeted and exploited over time within relationships of trust.

4.2 Patterns of Exploitation, Violence and Abuse

The research highlights financial exploitation as the most commonly identified form of abuse. People may be manipulated into giving money, paying for goods or services, or allowing others access to their finances. In many cases, this occurs gradually, within relationships that are perceived by the person as important friendships or intimate relationships. Financial abuse is often normalised, particularly where there is an apparent element of consent. While financial abuse is the most visible, it is clear that other forms of crime are also present, including sexual exploitation, physical abuse, and coercion into criminal activity. The existing research also highlights that these forms of exploitation frequently overlap, with people experiencing multiple forms of exploitation simultaneously. These forms of abuse are often more hidden and may be even less likely to be identified, reported or acted upon. The evidence suggests that mate crime should be understood as a spectrum of exploitation, as opposed to a single type of offence.

4.3 Social Isolation

A defining feature of mate crime is that it happens within relationships that appear to be based on friendship, support, or intimacy. Many people affected by this form of exploitation experience loneliness, social isolation, or limited opportunities for meaningful relationships. Social isolation is a key risk factor that increases vulnerability to exploitation, particularly where people have unmet social and emotional needs. Perpetrators actively exploit these circumstances, presenting themselves as friends, partners, or supporters before gradually introducing control or manipulation. This process is often subtle and incremental, making it difficult for people to recognise that a crime is occurring. The emotional connection to the perpetrator can also make it difficult to disengage, or challenge even when concerns are raised by others.

4.4 Barriers to Reporting and Access to Justice

This research strongly suggests that mate crime is significantly underreported. People may not recognise their experiences as abuse or a crime, particularly where the person involved is seen as a friend, partner, or someone they trust like a family member. Where they do recognise it, they may feel shame, embarrassment, or fear of not being believed. There can also be concerns about the consequences of reporting, including the potential loss of independence, disruption of living arrangements, or involvement in complex and inaccessible legal processes. In many cases, reports are made by family members, staff, or professionals rather than by the person themselves, which raises important issues about voice and supported decision-making and the accessibility of the justice system for victims of mate crime. Communication barriers, inaccessible information, and a lack of trusted support further limit the ability of people to seek help.

4.5 Challenges within the Criminal Justice System

The findings point to significant challenges in how mate crime is understood and addressed within the criminal justice system. While there are examples of good practice, particularly within specialised units and among individual Gardaí with relevant experience, responses are often inconsistent. Experiences can vary widely depending on the individual Garda encountered, leading to uncertainty and, in some cases, a lack of confidence in the justice system.

Communication remains a key barrier, particularly for people who require alternative or augmentative forms of communication. There are also challenges in progressing cases, particularly where a person is seen to have consented, and this is taken to mean that no offence has occurred, resulting in no further action, even in situations where there are clear indicators of exploitation or coercion. Traditional legal concepts of consent do not always adequately capture situations involving exploitation, manipulation, dependency, or control. Current legal frameworks do not adequately capture the dynamics of coercion and manipulation, particularly in cases of financial exploitation. As a result, many cases do not progress to prosecution, reinforcing a perception that justice is difficult to achieve for disabled people.

4.6 Tensions Between Autonomy and Safeguarding

A recurring theme across the research is the tension between respecting autonomy and ensuring protection from crime. Professionals described how they frequently encounter situations where people choose to maintain relationships that are exploitative. While there is a strong commitment to upholding the right to make decisions, including unwise decisions, there is also a recognition that these decisions may be influenced by manipulation, coercion, or lack of understanding. This highlights the need for approaches that support autonomy, while also recognising the wider circumstances and relationships that limit a person's ability to make decisions for themselves.

4.7 Gaps in Policy, Data, and Coordination

The research identifies a number of systemic gaps that limit effective responses to mate crime. There is currently no comprehensive framework for collecting data on this form of exploitation, making it difficult to assess its scale or to develop evidence-based policy. This reflects a broader gap regarding the absence of disaggregated data on disability and crime. Awareness of mate crime remains low across many sectors, including within parts of the criminal justice system and among frontline services. Responses are often fragmented, with limited coordination between agencies. There are also challenges in respect of fragmented service provision and the absence of integrated safeguarding responses. This results in a situation where outcomes can depend heavily on who is dealing with the situation rather than on structured and consistent processes.

4.8 Law Reform

The findings of this research point to gaps in practice and also gaps in the legal and policy framework. A concern that arose repeatedly across interviews, focus groups and the national survey was that existing criminal offences do not always capture the nature of mate crime, particularly where exploitation takes place within relationships that appear, on the surface, to involve agreement or consent. In these situations, cases may not progress because the person is seen to have agreed to what happened, even where there are clear concerns about manipulation, pressure, or lack of understanding. This creates a significant gap between people's lived experiences of exploitation and the ability of the criminal law to respond effectively. The Law Reform Commission's recent work on safeguarding highlights the limitations of existing criminal offences in addressing patterns of coercion, dependency, and ongoing exploitation. The research also highlights the absence of a clear statutory framework for adult safeguarding in Ireland. While there are policies and procedures in place, responses are dependent on local practice and individual initiative, which can lead to inconsistency.

Professionals described navigating complex situations without a clear legal basis for intervention, particularly where there is a tension between respecting a person's autonomy and responding to concerns about exploitation. This reliance on policy rather than statute limits the effectiveness and consistency of safeguarding responses. This reflects the need for a more coherent and coordinated approach to safeguarding, grounded in law rather than policy and discretion alone.

5. Recommendations for Policy, and Practice

The recommendations arising from this research reflect the complex and multi-dimensional nature of mate crime. No single intervention, agency, or legal response can adequately address mate crime in isolation. Therefore, an effective response requires a layered and coordinated approach that combines law reform, strengthened criminal justice and safeguarding responses, prevention and community safety initiatives, and broader commitments to vindicating the rights of disabled people and ensuring independent living and inclusion in the community.

5.1 Building on Existing Access to Justice Recommendations for Reform

Addressing mate crime requires a multi-layered and coordinated response. Many of the barriers identified in this research, particularly in relation to access to justice, have already been examined in detail in the [Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission report](#) on access to justice for disabled people, and the recommendations set out in that report remain directly relevant and should be implemented in full.¹ This report builds on that work by identifying additional issues specific to mate crime, particularly in relation to legal recognition, safeguarding, and prevention.

5.2 Recognition and Data Collection on Mate Crime

A first priority is the formal recognition of mate crime within Irish policy and practice frameworks. Developing a shared understanding of mate crime would deliver more consistent identification, reporting, and support. There is a clear need to improve data collection, including the inclusion of disability within crime reporting systems and the development of dedicated research on prevalence and impact.

5.3 Introduction of a Specific Criminal Offence of Mate Crime

Consideration should be given to the introduction of a specific criminal offence of mate crime within Irish law. As this research has shown, existing criminal offences do not always capture situations where a person is targeted, befriended, and exploited over time, particularly where exploitation occurs within relationships characterised by trust, dependency, coercion, manipulation, or controlling behaviour, and where the person is seen to have agreed to what happened. A specific offence would provide clearer recognition of this form of exploitation and support more consistent responses across the criminal justice system, while ensuring that any legal response remains grounded in a rights-based approach consistent with the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

1. Dr Charles O'Mahony, Access to Justice: A Baseline Study of Article 13 of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission 2024). Available at: <https://www.ihrec.ie/app/uploads/2024/11/Access-to-Justice-A-Baseline-Study-of-Article-13-of-the-UN-Convention-on-the-Rights-of-Persons-with-Disabilities.pdf>

5.4 Introduction of Safeguarding Legislation

There is a clear need for the introduction of a statutory framework on adult safeguarding in Ireland. The Law Reform Commission's work on adult safeguarding highlighted the absence of a statutory framework limits the effectiveness and consistency of responses to abuse and exploitation, particularly in situations that may not meet the threshold for criminal offences but nevertheless involve clear patterns of exploitation. The recommendations of the Law Reform Commission are endorsed and should be progressed as a matter of priority, with the development of the statutory framework requiring meaningful consultation with disabled people and Disabled Persons' Organisations to ensure that the framework adopts a rights-based approach in line with the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

5.5 Upholding Autonomy and Rights-Based Approaches

At all stages, responses must be grounded in respect for autonomy and the principles of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. This includes supporting people to make informed decisions, including unwise decisions, while ensuring that they have access to appropriate supports and safeguards.

5.6 Strengthening Criminal Justice Responses

While examples of good practice were identified within specialist Garda responses, including through Divisional Protective Services Units, community policing initiatives, and specialist interviewing approaches, participants in this research also described significant inconsistency in experiences of reporting and engagement with the criminal justice system. The response of the criminal justice system should therefore be strengthened through consistent training on disability, communication, trauma-informed practice, and the dynamics of coercive and controlling exploitation, together with clear and consistent approaches to guide responses to suspected mate crime across Garda divisions and improve the quality, accessibility, and consistency of first contact and initial reporting experiences for disabled people engaging with the criminal justice system.

Greater awareness and consistent implementation of obligations under the Criminal Justice (Victims of Crime) Act 2017 are also required, particularly regarding the assessment of vulnerability, and the appropriate use of specialist Garda interviewers, communication supports, and special measures during criminal investigations and proceedings.

5.7 Awareness, Education and Prevention

Awareness and education must also play a key role in prevention. Disabled people should be supported to recognise exploitative situations and to understand their rights, with information provided in accessible and meaningful formats. There is also a need to build awareness among families, professionals, and the wider community, recognising that prevention is closely linked to social inclusion and community safety. This should be supported through sustained and recurrent funding for peer-led community safety initiatives and training programmes, which empower disabled people to share experiences, build awareness, and develop the knowledge and confidence to keep themselves safe in their communities.

The establishment of Local Community Safety Partnerships under the Policing, Security and Community Safety Act 2024, alongside the development of the National Strategy for Improving Community Safety, provides an important opportunity to build awareness and understanding of mate crime within community safety planning at both local and national level. These structures should be supported to recognise and respond to the experiences of disabled people who experience or are at risk of mate crime.

5.8 Multi-Agency and Community-Based Responses

A coordinated, multi-agency approach is essential. Collaboration between Gardaí, disability services, social workers, safeguarding professionals, financial institutions, and community organisations is needed to respond effectively to the complexity of these situations. Community safety partnerships provide an important opportunity to embed this coordination, but it is essential that disabled people and their representative organisations are actively involved in these structures.

5.9 Supporting Independent Living and Inclusion in the Community

Finally, particular attention should be given to people living independently or with limited support, as this group appears to be at heightened risk. Targeted outreach, community-based supports, and tailored safeguarding measures are needed to ensure that independence is supported in a way that is both meaningful and safe.

6. The Full Research Report

For further detail, analysis, methodology, participant quotations, legal and policy discussion, and thematic findings, readers are encouraged to consult the full LIFT Research Project report. The full report provides substantially more detailed discussion of the research findings. **Chapter 1** provides the introduction and sets the context for the LIFT research project. **Chapter 2** is the literature review. **Chapter 3** sets out the findings from the national survey. **Chapter 4** sets out the findings from the key informant interviews. **Chapter 5** sets out the findings from the focus groups. **Chapter 6** draws the findings together and sets out the conclusions and recommendations of this research project in more detail. The full report is available from the School of Law's Crime, Punishment and Rights Research Cluster website.²

7. Researcher's Concluding Reflection on this Research Project

Mate crime challenges traditional ways of thinking about vulnerability, consent, and protection. It sits at the intersection of criminal justice, social care, and human rights, and cannot be addressed through any single system alone. The findings of this research make clear that a shift is needed from reactive responses to proactive, preventative, and rights-based approaches. This requires changes in law, policy and practice, but also a broader societal commitment to recognising and addressing the conditions that allow exploitation, violence and abuse to occur. Ensuring that disabled people can live independently, form relationships, and participate fully in their communities must go hand in hand with law reform.

2. Available here: <https://www.universityofgalway.ie/business-public-policy-law/school-of-law/research/researchclusters/crimepunishmentandrights/>



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