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OLLSCOIL NA  
GAILLIMHE  
UNIVERSITY  
OF GALWAY

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





# Contents

<b>Acknowledgements</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Context, Scope and Approach to this Research</b>	<b>3</b>
1. Background to this research	4
2. Scope of this Research	5
3. Research Team	5
4. Blue Teapot Theatre Company Research Collaboration	6
The making of MATECRIME a short film	6
5. Advisory Group	7
6. A Note on Terminology in this Report	8
7. Understanding Mate Crime and Related Forms of Exploitation	8
8. Research Ethics	9
9. Methodology	9
9.1 Inclusive and Participatory Research Design	9
9.2 Literature Review	10
9.3 National Survey	10
9.4 Key Informant Interviews	11
9.5 Focus Groups	11
9.6 Methodological Limitations	11
10. Structure of this Report	12
<b>Literature Review</b>	<b>13</b>
1. Introduction and Scope of Literature Review	14
2. Conceptual Foundations of Mate Crime	14
2.1 Emergence of the Concept of Mate Crime	14
2.2 Defining Mate Crime	15
2.3 Mate crime and Hate crime	16
3. Understanding Mate Crime: Types of Crime, Relationships and Lived Experience	18
4. Mate Crime and the Limits of Criminal Law	21
5. Applying the UN Disability Convention to Mate Crime: Rights, Protection and Legal Responses	22
5.1 An Overview of the CRPD	22
5.2 Ireland and the CRPD	23

5.3	The Right of Access to Justice Under International Human Rights Law	24
5.4	International Principles and Guidelines on Access to Justice for Persons with Disabilities	25
5.5	Article 16 CRPD: The Right to be Free from Exploitation, Violence and Abuse	26
5.6	Article 19 CRPD: Independent Living and Community Living	27
6.	<b>Understanding Mate Crime within Current Irish Law and Policy Context</b>	<b>28</b>
6.1	Literature on Access to Justice for Disabled People in Ireland	28
6.2	Victims of Crime, Disability & Irish Law & Policy	29
6.3	Mate Crime and Related Irish Literature on Violence Against Disabled People	33
6.4	Adult Safeguarding Reform in Ireland: The Law Reform Commission's Recommendations	36
6.5	From Law Reform to Legislation: Implementation of the Law Reform Commission's Recommendations	37
6.6	Access to Justice Beyond the Criminal Law: Civil Remedies for Exploitation and Abuse	39
7.	<b>Data Collection, Visibility and Structural Invisibility</b>	<b>40</b>
8.	<b>Gaps in the Literature and the Need for a New Framework for Mate Crime</b>	<b>42</b>
9.	<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>43</b>
	<b>Findings from the National Survey</b>	<b>45</b>
1.	<b>Introduction</b>	<b>46</b>
2.	<b>Survey Design and Scope</b>	<b>46</b>
3.	<b>Findings from the National Survey</b>	<b>47</b>
3.1	Profile of Respondents	47
3.2	Geographic Location of Respondents	48
3.3	Awareness of Mate Crime	49
3.4	Qualitative Analysis of Open-Ended Responses: Understanding of the Term "Mate Crime"	49
	Theme 1: Exploitation Under the Guise of Friendship	50
	Theme 2: Targeting and Perceived Vulnerability	51
	Theme 3: Range and Forms of Abuse	52
	Theme 4: Family Members and Close Relationships	53
	Theme 5: Limited Familiarity with the Term	54
	Theme 6: Experiences and Observations of Mate Crime	54
3.5	Experience or Witnessing of Disability Related Abuse	55
3.6	Types of Abuse Experienced or Witnessed	56
3.7	Qualitative Analysis of Open-Ended Responses: Experiences and Observations of Abuse	56

Theme 1: Financial Exploitation and Economic Control	57
Theme 2: Sexual Exploitation and Coercion	58
Theme 3: Coercive Control and Controlling Relationships	59
Theme 4: Institutional and Authority Based Abuse	60
Theme 5: Online Exploitation and Digital Targeting	61
Theme 6: Family Based and Abuse in the Family	62
<b>3.8 Perpetrators of Mate Crime</b>	<b>63</b>
<b>3.9 Qualitative Analysis of Open Ended Responses: Impact of Mate Crime</b>	<b>64</b>
Theme 1: Psychological Trauma and Mental Health Impact	64
Theme 2: Loss of Trust and Betrayal	65
Theme 3: Shame, Embarrassment and Damage to Self-Worth	65
Theme 4: Isolation and Increased Vulnerability	66
Theme 5: Loss of Autonomy and Wider System Impact	67
<b>3.10 Information and Ability to Recognise Abuse</b>	<b>68</b>
<b>3.11 Reporting Mate Crime to Gardaí</b>	<b>69</b>
<b>3.12 Barriers to Reporting</b>	<b>69</b>
<b>3.13 Qualitative Analysis of Open Ended Responses: Additional Reasons for Non Reporting</b>	<b>70</b>
Theme 1: Fear of Consequences and Retaliation	70
Theme 2: Emotional Attachment, Loyalty and Fear of Losing the Relationship	71
Theme 3: Lack of Awareness and Recognition	72
Theme 4: Shame, Embarrassment and Fear of Not Being Believed	73
Theme 5: Structural and Systemic Barriers	74
<b>3.14 Garda Awareness of Mate Crime</b>	<b>75</b>
<b>3.15 Engagement with Gardaí on Mate Crime Cases</b>	<b>75</b>
<b>3.16 Qualitative Analysis of Open-Ended Responses: Garda and Justice System Responses</b>	<b>76</b>
Theme 1: Inconsistency in Response	77
Theme 2: Positive Individual Engagement and Empathy	78
Theme 3: Barriers to Investigation and Prosecution	79
Theme 4: Disability Awareness and Stigma	80
Theme 5: Need for Prevention, Training and Inter-Agency Cooperation	81
<b>3.17 Qualitative Analysis of Open-Ended Responses: Good Examples of Garda and Justice System Responses</b>	<b>82</b>
Theme 1: Positive Engagement and Community Based Practice	82

Theme 2: Inconsistency and Variable Practice	83
Theme 3: Legal and Evidential Barriers	83
Theme 4: Disability Awareness, Credibility and Need for Further Training	84
<b>3.18 Garda Training on Disability Awareness and Mate Crime</b>	<b>84</b>
<b>3.19 Barriers to Seeking Help or Justice</b>	<b>85</b>
<b>3.20 Views on Criminalising Mate Crime</b>	<b>86</b>
<b>3.21 Qualitative Analysis of Open Ended Responses: Impact on Independent Living and Community Participation</b>	<b>87</b>
Theme 1: Loss of Confidence, Trust and Social Withdrawal	87
Theme 2: Increased Overprotection and Restriction of Independence	88
Theme 3: Structural Vulnerability and Lack of Accessible Information	89
Theme 4: Fear, Stress and Ongoing Vulnerability	90
<b>3.22 Qualitative Analysis of Open Ended Responses: Improvements in Policing and Community Safety</b>	<b>90</b>
Theme 1: Greater Disability Awareness and Training	91
Theme 2: Stronger Community Policing and Relationship Building	92
Theme 3: Inter Agency Coordination and Joint Working	93
Theme 4: Prevention, Education and Public Awareness	94
Theme 5: Victim Support and Specialist Roles	95
<b>3.23 Qualitative Analysis of Open Ended Responses: Improvements in Disability Services and Advocacy</b>	<b>95</b>
Theme 1: Education, Awareness and Accessible Information	96
Theme 2: Strengthening Advocacy and Independent Support	96
Theme 3: Capacity Building Without Increasing Restriction	97
Theme 4: Resourcing, Funding and Service Gaps	97
Theme 5: Safeguarding Reform and Collaboration with Gardaí	98
<b>3.24 Qualitative Analysis of Open Ended Responses: Legal and Policy Reform</b>	<b>98</b>
Theme 1: Legal Recognition and Criminalisation of Mate Crime	99
Theme 2: Safeguarding Legislation and Regulatory Reform	99
Theme 3: Training, Awareness and Statutory Obligations	100
Theme 4: Victim Support, Reporting Mechanisms and Access to Justice	100
<b>3.25 Support, Training and Resources to Prevent Mate Crime</b>	<b>101</b>
<b>3.26 Qualitative Analysis of Open Ended Responses: Final Reflections</b>	<b>102</b>
Theme 1: Human Rights, Equality and Structural Failure	103

Theme 2: Loneliness, Isolation and the Search for Connection	104
Theme 3: The Balance Between Protection and Restriction	105
Theme 4: The Personal Impact and Urgency of the Issue	105
<b>4. Conclusion</b>	<b>106</b>
<b>Findings from the Key Informant Interviews</b>	<b>108</b>
<b>1. Introduction</b>	<b>109</b>
<b>2. Theme 1: Recognition and Conceptualisation of Mate Crime</b>	<b>111</b>
<b>3. Theme 2: Forms and Dynamics of Exploitation</b>	<b>115</b>
3.1 Financial Exploitation	115
3.2 Manipulation and Grooming	116
3.3 Exploitation through Risky or Criminal Activities	117
<b>4. Theme 3: Social Isolation and Structural Vulnerability</b>	<b>118</b>
4.1 Constrained Social Networks and Limited Opportunities for Connection and Belonging	118
4.2 Loneliness, Emotional Need, and the Value of Friendship	118
4.3 Structural Barriers and Enduring Forms of Social Exclusion	119
<b>5. Theme 4: Barriers to Reporting and Access to Justice</b>	<b>120</b>
5.1 Emotional Barriers: Shame, Self-Blame and Fear of Judgement	120
5.2 Fear of Losing Independence and Increased Restrictions	121
5.3 Systemic and Procedural Barriers within the Justice System	121
5.4 Reliance on Third Parties and Limited Supported Reporting	122
<b>6. Theme 5: Safeguarding Systems and Institutional Responses</b>	<b>123</b>
<b>7. Theme 6: Training, Awareness and Self-Guarding</b>	<b>126</b>
<b>8. Conclusions</b>	<b>129</b>
<b>Findings from the Focus Groups</b>	<b>130</b>
<b>Overview of the Focus Groups</b>	<b>131</b>
<b>Thematic Analysis</b>	<b>132</b>
Theme 1: Common Experiences of Harassment and Exploitation	132
Theme 2: Friendship, Trust, and Betrayal	135
Theme 3: Normalising Harm, Silence, and the Difficulty of Naming Mate Crime	138
Theme 4: Fear, Safety, and Participation in the Community	141
Theme 5: Reporting, Response, and the Role of Gardaí, Staff, Family, and Advocacy	143
Theme 6: Independence, Risk, Prevention & Training	146
<b>Conclusions</b>	<b>149</b>

<b>Conclusions and Recommendations</b>	<b>151</b>
<b>1. Introduction</b>	<b>152</b>
<b>2. Defining Mate Crime</b>	<b>152</b>
<b>3. The Hidden and Under-Recognised Nature of Mate Crime</b>	<b>153</b>
<b>4. Patterns of Exploitation, Violence and Abuse</b>	<b>154</b>
<b>5. The Role of Social Isolation</b>	<b>154</b>
<b>6. Barriers to Reporting and Access to Justice</b>	<b>155</b>
<b>7. Challenges within the Criminal Justice System</b>	<b>155</b>
<b>8. Tensions Between Autonomy and Safeguarding</b>	<b>156</b>
<b>9. Gaps in Policy, Data, and Coordination</b>	<b>156</b>
<b>10. Law Reform</b>	<b>156</b>
<b>11. The Failure to Recognise Mate Crime within a Human Rights Framework</b>	<b>157</b>
<b>12. Recommendations for Policy and Practice</b>	<b>157</b>
Building on Existing Access to Justice Recommendations for Reform	158
Recognition and Data Collection on Mate Crime	158
Introduction of a Specific Criminal Offence of Mate Crime	158
Introduction of Safeguarding Legislation	159
Upholding Autonomy and Rights-Based Approaches	159
Strengthening Criminal Justice Responses	160
Awareness, Education and Prevention	161
Multi-Agency and Community-Based Responses	161
Supporting Independent Living and Inclusion in the Community	161
<b>12. Summary of Recommendations, Responsible Stakeholders, and Indicative Timeframes</b>	<b>162</b>
<b>13. Researcher’s Concluding Reflection on this Research Project</b>	<b>163</b>

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I would like to express our sincere thanks to our project partners, Blue Teapot Theatre Company and Corlann (formerly Brothers of Charity Services Ireland), for their collaboration and dedication throughout this project. Their creativity, insight, and commitment to inclusion have been invaluable in guiding the direction of this research, which we hope will be useful resources. I would also like to acknowledge the contribution of the members of the Project Advisory Group for this project. The Groups guidance, expertise, and generosity in contributing their time and knowledge is greatly appreciated. The Advisory Group also played an important role in providing formative feedback on the research design, supporting the dissemination of the national survey, and workshopping the final recommendations contained in Chapter 6.

### The Advisory Group Membership

Fiona Anderson, Legal Researcher and Expert by Experience in Mental Health and Disability Rights	Sophia Carey, Senior Manager, Policing and Community Safety Authority
Kieran Coppinger, Blue Teapot Theatre Company	Laura Dowling, National Advocacy Service
Breda Golden, National Head of Quality (Safeguarding, Training & Advocacy), Corlann	Sergeant Dermot Hardiman, Galway Community Policing Unit
Hillary Kavanagh, Blue Teapot Theatre Company	Charlene Kelly, Blue Teapot Theatre Company
Fiona McNulty, Research Assistant, University of Galway	Kelly Slattery, Community Safety Coordinator, Galway City Council
Petal Pilley, Director, Blue Teapot Theatre Company	Superintendent Finbarr Philpott, Galway County West Community, An Garda Síochána

Their perspectives of the Group's membership, which span lived experience, advocacy, policing, community safety, theatre and disability services greatly enriched the project's design and findings. I also wish to thank all those who generously shared their time and experiences with us. In particular, we are grateful to the disabled people who took part in interviews, focus groups, and survey and to those who shared their lived experiences of targeted abuse and exploitation.



Their generosity in sharing their insights greatly helped us in understanding mate crime and we have sought to present this knowledge clearly in this report. We acknowledge with thanks the many organisations, networks, and people who supported the national survey, helped to share information about the research, and facilitated the recruitment of participants. Their assistance made it possible to reach a wide range of voices and perspectives from across Ireland.

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**Dr Charles O'Mahony**

Associate Professor in Law

School of Law

University of Galway



# Context, Scope and Approach to this Research

# 1. Background to this research

Experiences of exploitation, violence and abuse against disabled people in community settings has received increasing attention in recent years, both in Ireland and internationally. While such experiences are often described in the literature as “mate crime”, referring to situations in which a person is befriended with the intention of exploitation, there is currently no formal recognition of this concept within Irish law or policy.

As a result, this type of crime remain largely invisible within official data, are inconsistently identified in practice, and are frequently addressed through fragmented safeguarding, criminal justice or responses within disability services. This research arises directly from earlier work undertaken by as part of a baseline study on access to justice for disabled people in Ireland, commissioned by the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission and published in 2024.<sup>1</sup>

That baseline study identified significant structural and practical barriers faced by disabled people in accessing both civil and criminal justice processes. Among the issues that emerged through the qualitative interviews conducted as part of that research was the experience of targeted exploitation within community settings, particularly affecting people with intellectual disabilities living independently or with limited supports. While this issue arose in key informant interviews, it was not possible within the scope of that study to explore it in greater detail. In response, a subsequent application was made to Research Ireland under the New Foundations scheme to examine this issue more closely. This strand of funding is delivered in partnership with, and supported by, the Policing and Community Safety Authority. This research project builds on that initial work by focusing specifically on mate crime, and by examining it through the lens of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). In doing so, this project seeks to address a significant gap in research here in Ireland.

What emerges from both the existing literature and the research undertaken as part of this study is that mate crime occurs in contexts where people may experience isolation, limited supports and barriers to participation in the community. Factors such as loneliness, barriers to social inclusion, limited access to accessible information, and societal attitudes towards disabled people contribute to conditions in which exploitation, violence, and abuse can occur and persist. The absence of a clearly defined legal or policy framework for identifying and responding to mate crime creates significant challenges for reporting, investigation and redress. Concerns regarding the prevalence and impact of such experiences have been raised by advocacy organisations, safeguarding services, practitioners and disabled people themselves. However, there remains a significant absence of data collection in this area, reflecting both definitional challenges and the lack of formal recognition of mate crime within existing crime categories.

1. 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), at page 81.

## 2. Scope of this Research

This research was conducted in accordance with the scope of the funding application and focuses on experiences of mate crime and targeted exploitation of disabled people in community settings in Ireland. The study examines the nature and prevalence of such experiences, the contexts in which they arise, and the responses of criminal justice, safeguarding and support systems.

Particular attention is given to issues of recognition, reporting, investigation, access to remedies, and the impact of mate crime on people who experience it. The research does not provide a comprehensive examination of all forms of exploitation, violence and abuse experienced by disabled people, nor does it assess institutional safeguarding arrangements within residential disability services in a systematic way. While such contexts are referenced where relevant, the primary focus of the study is on community-based experiences, particularly among people living independently in the community.

In addition, the research does not examine hate crime in a comprehensive sense, although there is clear overlap between hate-motivated offences and targeted exploitation based on disability (see chapter 2). Similarly, while issues relating to mental health, capacity and consent arise throughout the analysis, the study does not provide a detailed doctrinal examination of capacity law or criminal responsibility frameworks. These issues are addressed insofar as they relate to the identification and response to mate crime. The research also does not seek to quantify the precise prevalence of mate crime at a national level. Given the absence of existing datasets and the underreporting of such experiences, the study instead adopts a qualitative and exploratory approach, aimed at identifying patterns, themes and systemic issues that arise across different sources of evidence.

## 3. Research Team

This research was undertaken as part of the project **Living Independently & Free from Targeted Abuse (LIFT): Understanding the Experiences of Disabled People**, funded by Research Ireland in partnership with the Policing and Community Safety Authority.

The project forms part of a broader programme of work examining access to justice and community safety for disabled people in Ireland. The research was led by Dr Charles O'Mahony, Associate Professor in Law at the University of Galway. Fiona McNulty was appointed as Research Assistant on the project and played a central role in the design and delivery of the empirical components of the study, including the development of research instruments, coordination of fieldwork, engagement with participants, and preliminary analysis of qualitative data.

The research team worked collaboratively with a range of stakeholders, including advocacy organisations, service providers, policing representatives and practitioners working across safeguarding and community support contexts. A participatory approach underpinned the design and implementation of the research, ensuring that the study remained grounded in lived experience and responsive to the realities of those most affected by mate crime.

## 4. Blue Teapot Theatre Company Research Collaboration

A key element of this research project is the collaboration with Blue Teapot Theatre Company, whose work formed an important component of the project. Blue Teapot Theatre Company is an award-winning theatre company founded in 1996 in Galway.

Originally established as a community arts initiative within the Brothers of Charity Services Galway (now named Corlann), Blue Teapot has evolved into an independent company recognised for its work in advancing inclusive theatre practices and amplifying the voices of people with intellectual disabilities. Members of Blue Teapot Theatre Company participated in the advisory group for this project, contributing to discussions on emerging findings across the research, including the focus groups, key informant interviews and national survey. This engagement informed the development of a short audio-visual piece exploring the theme of mate crime. This formed an important component of the research, reflecting an awareness that traditional report formats may not always be accessible or widely engaged with. The use of a creative, audio-visual output provides an alternative means of communicating the research findings and animating the lived experiences and issues identified, particularly for people with intellectual disabilities.

### The making of MATECRIME a short film

When Dr Charles O'Mahony, Associate Professor of Law, University of Galway approached me to scope out Blue Teapots interest in having a creative response to a research project he wanted to get off the ground on the topic of mate crime I had to ask him what the term meant. As he defined mate crime for me, I realised I had unfortunately met it in the lives of people I knew and witnessed its ruthless consequences.

We discussed the need for something that could carry the message of what a mate crime is, how it impacts a victim's life, and an output that could be used in a teaching setting. We settled on an offer that would be narrative driven that could (if any good) hit people in the gut with a visceral, emotional impact. We quickly ruled out a training video and chose the medium of a short film which could be disseminated with ease and achievable with combined resources.

As the research findings conducted by Dr Charles O'Mahony and the researcher assistant on the project Fiona McNulty became available, I took time to reflect on them before starting to plot the trajectory of a story arc. I knew it would be important to bring the audience on a journey with a likeable character full of life and positivity at the start of the film and contrast it with the impact of the mate crime which renders them traumatised, shrunken and afraid at the end. The victim's relationship with the perpetrator was critical to informing audiences about how subtle and sneaky a crime it can be, choices were made both on the page and in how scenes were directed to illustrate the confusion this type of crime causes.

Casting MATECRIME and getting the creative and technical crew was a joy because everyone said yes. We were blessed with the Fionn Rogers director of photography, Dara Devaney I.F.T.A award winning actor and Mags Linnane acclaimed production designer to name a few. Blue Teapot has a multi-talented team who thrive on creative challenges with extensive experience in theatre, producing and sound design but none of us had ever made a film before! I must give special mention to Blue Teapot ensemble actor Cormac Crawford who made his screen debut with MATECRIME and took on his first lead role – I think you will agree his performance is gut wrenching.

On occasion complex social and world issues can be met by art and in the alchemy of that encounter be distilled into forms that communicate truths with immediacy beyond words. We hope this film is one such encounter.

**Petal Pilley**

Artistic Director/CEO Blue Teapot Theatre Company

Writer/Director of MATECRIME



## 5. Advisory Group

An advisory group was established for this research in recognition of the importance of oversight, and strategic guidance for the project. The group brought together representatives from policing, advocacy organisations, disability services, and people with lived experience.

The role of the advisory group was to provide strategic direction, support methodological rigour, and ensure that the research remained grounded in lived experience and policy relevance. Members contributed to the development of the research questions and played a role in reviewing the survey instrument. Engagement with the advisory group was ongoing throughout the project, with members contributing to the development of research, participant recruitment, reflecting on emerging findings, and advising on their interpretation and practical implications. This helped to ensure that the findings and recommendations are grounded in practice and are directly relevant to stakeholders working in this area.

## 6. A Note on Terminology in this Report

For the purposes of this report, careful attention has been given to the terminology used to describe experiences of exploitation, violence, abuse and criminal behaviour, recognising that language in this area carries multiple and sometimes competing meanings across law, policy, and practice.

One of the most contested issues in disability law and policy concerns the definition of disability itself, and this report adopts the human rights-based approach reflected in the UN Disability Convention. The term “mate crime” is used throughout the report as a working concept to describe situations in which a person is befriended or otherwise engaged in a relationship and where exploitation emerges. However, it is acknowledged that this term is not formally recognised within Irish law and is not consistently understood across different sectors. Terms such as exploitation, violence, abuse, coercion and harm are used alongside mate crime to reflect the range of experiences described by participants. The report also adopts a rights-based approach to language, using the term “disabled people” or “persons with disabilities” while recognising that people and organisations may adopt different terminology.<sup>2</sup> We acknowledge that these terms can obscure important differences in lived experience, power relations and context, and may not reflect how people understand or describe their own situations or lives. Where possible, the report adopts consistent terminology for the purposes of analysis and coherence, while retaining participants’ language in quoted material in order to accurately reflect their lived and professional experience.

## 7. Understanding Mate Crime and Related Forms of Exploitation

A significant challenge encountered throughout this research relates to the absence of a clear and shared understanding of mate crime. While the concept is more established in other jurisdictions, it is not widely recognised in Ireland among practitioners, policymakers or the public.

As a result, similar behaviours may be understood and responded to in different ways, including as financial abuse, fraud, abuse of older people, coercive control, and safeguarding concerns etc. In practice, the experiences described by participants often involve overlapping forms of crime. These include financial exploitation, where people are pressured or manipulated into giving money or assets; “cuckooing”, where a person’s home is taken over by others; online exploitation and scams; and sexual exploitation or coercion within relationships framed as friendship or intimate relationships. These experiences may involve grooming, manipulation and dependency, rather than physical violence. The lack of a clear conceptual and legal framework has significant consequences. People may not recognise that they are being exploited, practitioners may struggle to categorise or respond to concerns, and key stakeholders in the criminal justice may find it difficult to identify offences or pursue prosecutions. This issue is further compounded by the fact that many incidents fall below traditional thresholds for criminality, particularly where apparent consent is present.

2. National Disability Authority, NDA Advice Paper on Disability Language and Terminology (June 2022).

## 8. Research Ethics

Ethical considerations were central to the design of this research. The project involved engagement with disabled people, including people who may have experienced exploitation, violence, abuse or trauma, and who may face barriers in accessing information, communication and support.

Ethical approval for the research was granted by the University of Galway Research Ethics Committee. The research was designed and implemented in line with best practice in participatory, trauma-informed and rights-based socio-legal research. The ethics process addressed key issues including informed consent, voluntariness of participation, confidentiality and anonymity, data protection, risk of distress, and the mitigation of potential harms associated with participation etc. Particular attention was given to ensuring that participation was accessible and that people were supported to engage on their own terms with the research or not engage at all. Data were collected in a manner that minimised the risk of identification, and findings are reported with this in mind. The research team remained attentive throughout the project to the ethical obligations to respect participants' autonomy and dignity, and to ensure that the research process itself did not reproduce or exacerbate existing trauma.

## 9. Methodology

This research adopted a mixed-methods, participatory and rights-based approach to examine experiences of mate crime in Ireland.

The methodology was designed to capture both the legal, and policy context in which mate crime occurs and the lived experiences of those affected, recognising that no single method could adequately account for its complexity. The research combined desk-based legal and policy analysis with qualitative and quantitative methods, and engagement with people with lived and professional experience. Each methodological strand sought to inform and reinforced the others with a view to strengthening the findings.

### 9.1 Inclusive and Participatory Research Design

An inclusive and participatory approach underpinned the design and implementation of this research. This reflected both the subject matter of the study and a broader commitment to ensuring that disabled people are not only the subjects of research but are meaningfully involved in how research is conducted and communicated. The research acknowledges the historical exclusion of disabled people from research and was designed to ensure that the voices of disabled people and Disabled Persons Organisations informed the research process, its conclusions and its recommendations as far as possible.<sup>3</sup> This approach was informed by a human rights-based understanding of participation, as reflected in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, and by principles of inclusive and accessible research practice.

3. See Mary Wickenden and Erika Lopez Franco, 'Chapter 24: Don't Leave Us Out: Disability Inclusive Participatory Research Why and How?' in Burns et al (eds), *The SAGE Handbook of Participatory Research and Inquiry* (SAGE, 2021).

Particular attention was given to ensuring that research methods were accessible to participants with a range of communication needs and levels of support. This included the use of clear and accessible language, flexibility in how participants engaged with the research, and the provision of opportunities to contribute through different formats. The involvement of stakeholders, including people with lived experience, advocacy organisations and practitioners, played an important role in shaping the research design. This contributed to the development of research tools that were relevant, accessible and grounded in real-world experience. The inclusion of a creative strand, developed in collaboration with Blue Teapot Theatre Company, further supported accessibility by enabling engagement with the research through alternative, non-text formats. This inclusive approach seeks to address potential power imbalances between researchers and participants, and to create a research environment in which participants felt comfortable sharing their experiences.

## 9.2 Literature Review

The literature review provided the conceptual and analytical foundation for the research. It examined scholarship on mate crime, disability-related exploitation, violence and abuse, safeguarding, and access to justice, alongside relevant Irish, and international legal and policy frameworks. Particular attention was given to the UK where the concept of mate crime has been more explicitly recognised, as well as to existing critiques. The literature review informed the development of the research instruments, including the national survey, focus group topic guides and key informant interviews.

## 9.3 National Survey

A national survey constituted a key component of this research project. It was designed to capture a broad range of experiences relating to exploitation, violence, abuse. The survey combined closed questions generating quantitative data with open-ended questions allowing respondents to describe their experiences in their own words. The survey was developed through an iterative process informed by the literature review and engagement with stakeholders. It was designed to be accessible and relevant to participants, including those with varying levels of literacy and support needs. The survey was distributed nationally through online platforms and stakeholder networks. An Easy Read version of the survey was developed to support accessibility and was disseminated through the advisory group, the project partner Corlann, and the researchers' own networks.

The deadline for completion of the survey was extended on a number of occasions in order to maximise participation, and a total of 44 responses were received. While this represents a modest sample size, it reflects some of the challenges associated with conducting research in this area, including barriers to accessibility, reliance on intermediary organisations for dissemination, and the sensitivity of the subject matter. It may also reflect broader issues of awareness and recognition of mate crime, as well as hesitancy in engaging with research on experiences of exploitation, violence and abuse. Quantitative data was analysed descriptively<sup>4</sup>, while qualitative responses were analysed thematically using Braun and Clarke's reflexive approach, enabling the identification of recurring themes.<sup>5</sup>

4. Alan Bryman, *Social Research Methods* (5th edn, Oxford University Press 2016) 329–351.

5. Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, *Thematic Analysis: A Practical Guide* (Sage 2021).

## 9.4 Key Informant Interviews

Key informant interviews were conducted with professionals and practitioners working across disability services, advocacy organisations, safeguarding teams, policing and the criminal justice system. Participants were selected through purposive sampling to capture a range of perspectives and institutional roles. The interviews explored issues relating to the identification and response to mate crime, governance and accountability arrangements, barriers to reporting and prosecution, and broader systemic challenges etc. Interviews were semi-structured, allowing for consistency across participants while providing flexibility to explore issues in greater depth as they emerged in the interviews. The interviews were recorded with consent, transcribed and analysed thematically.<sup>6</sup>

## 9.5 Focus Groups

Focus groups were conducted to explore experiences in greater depth and to provide a space for participants to reflect collectively on issues arising from the research. Four focus groups were conducted in total, three with people with lived experience of mate crime and one with people supporting people to live independently in the community, primarily from disability services. The use of focus groups formed one of the principal means through which the research sought to ensure that the voices of people with lived experience of mate crime were represented. It enabled participants to build on one another's experiences and to identify shared concerns and differences. Focus group guides were developed and informed by the literature review. Discussions explored themes including relationships, trust, exploitation, safety, reporting and access to support etc. The researchers sought to create a supportive environment, with clear ground rules on confidentiality and participation. In addition to the accessible information provided in advance, a short video explaining the concept of mate crime was shown at the outset of the focus groups to support understanding and engagement. This was well received by participants and helped to ensure a shared understanding of the issues being discussed, enabling more informed and meaningful participation in the focus group discussions. Again, the transcript of the focus groups were recorded with consent, transcribed and analysed thematically.<sup>7</sup>

## 9.6 Methodological Limitations

As with all participatory research, the findings should be interpreted with an awareness of their limitations. Participation in the survey was voluntary and self-selecting, which may result in some bias, particularly towards people who are more engaged or who have experienced mate crime. A total of 44 responses were received to the national survey, alongside four focus groups and 20 key informant interviews. The scope of the research was dictated by the relatively short timeframe within which this research project was conducted. The absence of a shared definition of mate crime and the lack of existing datasets present additional challenges for interpretation in the Irish context. However, the consistency of findings across the different methodological strands supports their validity. The combination of survey data, focus groups and key informant interviews enables analysis of patterns and systemic issues, even where precise quantification is not possible.

6. Ibid.

7. Ibid.

## 10. Structure of this Report

The structure of this report reflects the mixed-methods approach adopted in the research. It was decided to present the findings generated through the different methods of data collection in separate chapters. Chapters 3, 4 and 5 each draw on different methodological strands.

While this approach results in some overlap and repetition of the issues identified, it allows for a more transparent presentation of the data and supports the triangulation of findings across methods.

**The structure of the report is as follows.**

- **Chapter 1** provides the introduction and sets the context for the LIFT research project. It outlines the background to the research, the aims and objectives of the project, and its relevance within the broader framework of disability rights and access to justice in Ireland. It also sets out the methodology adopted for research. It explains the participatory and mixed-methods approach, including the national survey, focus groups, and key informant interviews, and reflects on the strengths and limitations of the research design.
- **Chapter 2** is the literature review. This chapter surveys the conceptual foundations of mate crime, situates the issue within relevant legal and policy frameworks, and considers how mate crime relates to wider questions of disability rights, safeguarding, exploitation, violence, abuse and access to justice. It also identifies the gaps in Irish literature, policy, and data in this area.
- **Chapter 3** sets out the findings from the national survey. It analyses the quantitative and qualitative responses to identify key patterns in participants' experiences of mate crime, including the nature of relationships, experiences of exploitation and harm, and issues relating to reporting and support etc.
- **Chapter 4** sets out the findings from the key informant interviews. It explores perspectives from professionals and practitioners working across disability services, advocacy, safeguarding and the criminal justice system, with particular attention to systemic issues, operational challenges, and gaps in current responses.
- **Chapter 5** sets out the findings from the focus groups. It provides a more in-depth exploration of lived experience, highlighting how participants understand and describe mate crime.
- **Chapter 6** draws the findings together and sets out the conclusions and recommendations of this research project. It identifies priority areas for reform, including the need for formal recognition of mate crime, improvements in data collection, strengthened safeguarding frameworks, and enhanced access to justice for disabled people etc.



# Literature Review

# 1. Introduction and Scope of Literature Review

This literature review explores the problem of mate crime, a form of exploitation, and abuse carried out by people who purport to be friends of disabled people, through an interdisciplinary and rights-based lens.

The review draws upon a range of sources, including academic literature, grey literature from Ireland and internationally, in particular the UK as well as relevant law and policy. In particular, it considers how the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) informs and challenges prevailing understandings of mate crime. The review also engages with comparative developments in other jurisdictions to identify emerging legal and policy responses and to critically assess how these approaches uphold or undermine the rights of persons with disabilities. This literature review seeks to map the existing knowledge base and identify key gaps. This literature review seeks to provide a foundation for advancing inclusive and informed responses to mate crime in the Irish context.

## 2. Conceptual Foundations of Mate Crime

Before discussing the literature and definitions and debates about classification of mate crime, it is useful to consider how the concept of mate crime emerged.

Mate crime was not initially identified through formal legal or academic discourse, rather it emerged from practice with concerns arising from the lived experiences of disabled people and those who support them in the community.<sup>8</sup> This helps explain both the strengths and the limitations of the concept. On the one hand, it reflects an attempt to name a pattern of abuse that had been overlooked within existing frameworks.<sup>9</sup> On the other, its relatively recent and practice-led development helps to explain why there is no settled definition of mate crime, and why its relationship to related categories such as hate crime, and safeguarding continues to be debated.

### 2.1 Emergence of the Concept of Mate Crime

The precise origin of the term “mate crime” is not definitively established.<sup>10</sup> The term “mate crime” originated in the United Kingdom, primarily through the work of disability advocacy groups in the 2000s. It was popularised by the UK-based organisation ARC (Association for Real Change) during its “Safety Net” project, which ran from 2009.<sup>11</sup> The project aimed to raise awareness of abuse and exploitation experienced by people with learning disabilities by people they considered to be friends. Therefore, the term “mate” was used to describe this type of crime. The term has been used by people working with disabled people and advocates. As mentioned above research on mate crime emerged from lived experience, frontline experiences and efforts to better describe a pattern of abuse that was being overlooked or misclassified.

8. Roderick Andrew Landman, “A Counterfeit Friendship”: Mate Crime and People with Learning Disabilities’ (2014) 16(6) *Journal of Adult Protection* 355.

9. *Ibid.*

10. Ged Doherty, ‘Do mates hate? A framing of the theoretical position of mate crime and an assessment of its practical impact’ (2015) 17(5) *Journal of Adult Protection* 296.

11. Association for Real Change, *Real Change Challenge: Mate Crime – A Challenge for Providers* (ARC 2013).

The focus is on friendship or perceptions of trust. What makes mate crime distinct is that the offender is someone the victim often considers to be a friend, partner, or trusted person, who exploits their relationship.<sup>12</sup> Landman further notes that the term gained wider public attention through high-profile cases, such as the murder of Steven Hoskin, where the perpetrators were people the victim considered to be friends.<sup>13</sup> These cases illustrated recurring patterns of social isolation, grooming through friendship, and sustained exploitation over time. In this way, the concept of mate crime developed both from advocacy efforts and from attempts to make sense of lived experiences that did not fit neatly within existing legal or policy frameworks.

## 2.2 Defining Mate Crime

There is no agreed definition of mate crime. However, ARC provides a useful definition as follows:

“Mate Crime happens when someone ‘makes friends’ with a person and goes on to abuse or exploit that relationship. The founding intention of the relationship, from the point of view of the perpetrator, is likely to be criminal. The relationship is likely to be of some duration and, if unchecked, may lead to a pattern of repeat and worsening abuse.”<sup>14</sup>

ARC highlighted the importance of social care providers in recognising, preventing, and responding to mate crime, urging providers to foster genuine friendships, promote community inclusion, and support the development of self-esteem and assertiveness in those they support. ARC also identified the systemic failure of safeguarding and criminal justice processes, noting that victims often do not report abuse due to shame, fear of retribution, or concerns that no action will be taken. ARC recommended greater training, inter-agency cooperation, and proactive support mechanisms to prevent exploitation. ARC’s work identifies how structural and interpersonal dynamics intersect to facilitate abuse and calls for a reorientation of safeguarding practice around empowerment, visibility, and rights-based engagement.

12. Ibid, at page 9.

13. Roderick Andrew Landman, “A Counterfeit Friendship”: Mate Crime and People with Learning Disabilities’ (2014) 16(6) Journal of Adult Protection 355.

14. Association for Real Change, Real Change Challenge: Mate Crime – A Challenge for Providers (ARC 2013), at page 5.

## 2.3 Mate crime and Hate crime

ARC makes the observation that there is no legal definition of mate crime and that “[i]n many situations mate crime will be an example of disability hate crime”.<sup>15</sup> In their advocacy they have encouraged people with learning disabilities who are victims of mate crime to report it to the police a hate crime as “this tends to lead to a swifter and more effective response”.<sup>16</sup> The ARC Report essentially frames mate crime as a form of disability hate crime, though it notes the lack of legal recognition and the widespread underreporting of these types of incidents. It identifies multiple factors contributing to the vulnerability of people with learning disabilities, including social isolation, poverty, limited opportunities for meaningful relationships, and internalised stigma resulting from historical and societal attitudes towards disability.<sup>17</sup>

Pam Thomas draws an important distinction between disability hate crime and mate crime, highlighting how different forms of harm are often conflated within policy and practice.<sup>18</sup> Drawing on a dataset compiled by **Disability Now**, she notes that while incidents of violence, theft and abuse against disabled people are frequently categorised as “hate crime”, a significant proportion of these cases involve perpetrators who are known to the victim, including friends, relatives, or people sharing aspects of domestic life.<sup>19</sup> Thomas distinguishes between two broad patterns. First, hate crime is characterised by violence perpetrated by outsiders, where there is little or no relationship between the perpetrator and the disabled person. These incidents often involve opportunistic or targeted attacks, sometimes repeated over time, but without any meaningful interpersonal connection.<sup>20</sup> In contrast, mate crime involves harm perpetrated by insiders, where there is an existing relationship, often involving some degree of interdependence or shared domestic life.<sup>21</sup> In these situations, the relationship itself becomes the mechanism through which exploitation takes place.

Landman further develops this distinction by critically examining the limitations of hate crime frameworks in capturing the dynamics of mate crime.<sup>22</sup> He noted that prevailing definitions of hate crime, including those adopted in policy, tend to assume incidents involving hostility by strangers in public spaces, reinforcing a perception of hate crime as random, visible, and carried out by strangers.<sup>23</sup> However, mate crime typically occurs within familiar environments and is perpetrated by people known to the victim, often within relationships that appear supportive or reciprocal.<sup>24</sup>

15. Association for Real Change, *Real Change Challenge: Mate Crime – A Challenge for Providers* (ARC 2013).

16. *Ibid.*

17. *Ibid.*, page 9.

18. Pam Thomas, “‘Mate Crime’: Ridicule, Hostility and Targeted Attacks against Disabled People’ (2011) 26(1) *Disability & Society* 107, at page 107-108.

19. *Ibid.*

20. *Ibid.*, page 108.

21. *Ibid.*

22. Roderick Andrew Landman, “‘A Counterfeit Friendship’: Mate Crime and People with Learning Disabilities’ (2014) 16(6) *Journal of Adult Protection* 355, at pages 356- 357.

23. *Ibid.*

24. *Ibid.*

Importantly, Landman highlights that such relationships may involve what has been described as “counterfeit friendship”, where perpetrators establish and maintain relationships over time in order to facilitate exploitation.<sup>25</sup> This distinguishes mate crime from dominant understandings of hate crime and contributes to its invisibility within legal and policy frameworks, as the abuse develops gradually within relationships that appear genuine, making it difficult for victims and professionals to recognise it as criminal and leading to underreporting and misclassification.<sup>26</sup> While acknowledging that the term “mate crime” is not without its critics and lacks formal legal recognition, Landman notes that senior police officers have expressed discomfort with the terminology, viewing it as potentially confusing.<sup>27</sup> However, he emphasises that the term resonated strongly with people with learning disabilities, as it captured a form of abuse they recognised in their own lives.<sup>28</sup> This institutional unease is also reflected in current prosecutorial guidance in England and Wales. The Crown Prosecution Service defines mate crime as situations in which people with learning disabilities or mental health issues are “befriended” and subsequently exploited, but explicitly notes that it does not adopt the term as policy, on the basis that it may be confusing, particularly for people with learning disabilities.<sup>29</sup> This underscores the importance of naming this form of abuse, as the absence of a distinct conceptual label, these experiences risk being subsumed within broader categories of hate crime or abuse, and consequently remain overlooked by criminal justice and safeguarding systems.

Doherty similarly discusses mate crime within the broader field of disability hate crime, but also notes the conceptual tension involved in doing so.<sup>30</sup> He notes that mate crime shares the targeted character of hate crime, yet also exposes the limits of hate crime theory where the perpetrator is not a stranger but a person who presents as a friend.<sup>31</sup> This gives rise to what he describes as a paradox, namely how someone can be a friend to a person they hate.<sup>32</sup> In this respect, mate crime may involve grooming, friendship, or more complex dynamics of power and control that are not easily captured within dominant understandings of hate crime.<sup>33</sup> Doherty’s analysis is also important in drawing attention to the way in which disability is often framed through vulnerability, with the result that responses may prioritise protection over justice and further obscure the criminal nature of the abuse.<sup>34</sup>

The literature acknowledges that mate crime does not sit comfortably within existing categories of hate crime. While it may share features with both, its defining characteristic lies in the exploitation of relationships of trust, which can obscure the presence of abuse and complicate its recognition. This tension may contribute to the under-recognition of mate crime and raises broader questions about the capacity of existing legal frameworks to capture these forms of abuse.

25. Ibid.

26. Ibid.

27. Ibid.

28. Ibid.

29. Crown Prosecution Service, **Disability Hate Crime and Other Crimes Against Disabled People: Prosecution Guidance** (2022) <https://www.cps.gov.uk/prosecution-guidance/disability-hate-crime-and-other-crimes-against-disabled-people-prosecution> last accessed 5th of April 2026.

30. Ged Doherty, ‘Do mates hate? A framing of the theoretical position of mate crime and an assessment of its practical impact’ (2015) 17(5) **Journal of Adult Protection** 296.

31. Ibid, at pages 296-299.

32. Ibid, at page 298.

33. Ibid.

34. Ibid, at pages 299-300.

### 3. Understanding Mate Crime: Types of Crime, Relationships and Lived Experience

The literature on mate crime indicates that the abuse experienced by disabled people arises through overlapping and often cumulative forms of exploitation, typically occurring within relationships characterised by trust, dependency and friendship or perceived friendship.<sup>35</sup>

As mentioned above abuse is described as developing over time and may not be recognised as criminal behaviour by victims, professionals or the legal system.<sup>36</sup> The literature suggests that mate crime does not refer to a single type of offence, but rather to a broad spectrum of behaviour carried out within relationships of trust, including theft, financial exploitation, emotional abuse, sexual abuse, physical violence, harassment, humiliation, coercive behaviour and the takeover or misuse of a person's home or resources.<sup>37</sup> Some of the literature also gives examples of more serious cases, where exploitation, violence and abuse has resulted in very serious violence or homicide. This body of literature shows that mate crime is a complex form of exploitation, violence and abuse that can take different forms and often develops over time within different relationships.

Much of the research on mate crime has been undertaken by researchers based in the UK. However, emerging evidence from other jurisdictions shows that similar forms of exploitation, violence and abuse occur. Studies conducted in Sarawak, Malaysia are important in extending the mate crime literature beyond UK and Western perspectives.<sup>38</sup> A 2022 study identified financial and sexual abuse as particularly prevalent, while also indicating that mate crime encompasses a wider range of exploitative behaviour, including physical and emotional abuse.<sup>39</sup> Tharshini's 2025 study of people with intellectual disabilities in Sarawak, Malaysia, is also of note.<sup>40</sup> This study identified that abuse was most often perpetrated by friends known to the victim over a long period of time, and that women were significantly more likely to report emotional and sexual abuse, including shouting, swearing, unwanted touching, kissing and image-based crimes.<sup>41</sup> These studies show that the patterns of exploitative friendship, gendered abuse and sustained abuse identified in UK research are also found in other jurisdictions.

35. Pam Thomas, "'Mate Crime': Ridicule, Hostility and Targeted Attacks against Disabled People' (2011) 26(1) *Disability & Society* 107,

36. Pam Thomas, 'Hate Crime or Mate Crime? Disablist Hostility, Contempt and Ridicule' in Alan Roulstone and Hannah Mason-Bish (eds), **Disability, Hate Crime and Violence** (Routledge 2012), at pages 179-180.

37. Ged Doherty, 'Do mates hate? A framing of the theoretical position of mate crime and an assessment of its practical impact' (2015) 17(5) **Journal of Adult Protection** 296.

38. Sarawak is a Malaysian state on Borneo that stretches along the island's northwest coast.

39. Tharshini Sivabalan, Faizah Mas'ud and Dolly Paul Carlo, 'Mate Crime Victimization Against People with Disabilities: An Exploratory Study in Sarawak, Malaysia' (2022) 30(2) **Pertanika Journal of Social Sciences & Humanities** 501.

40. NK Tharshini, 'Mate Crime Victimization against Individuals with Intellectual Disability' (2025) 19(1) **Advances in Mental Health and Intellectual Disabilities** 23, at pages 296-298.

41. Ibid.

These forms of exploitation, violence and abuse are also evident in cases where a person's home is taken over, a problem often referred to as "cuckooing".<sup>42</sup> Cuckooing refers to situations where a disabled person's home is taken over by local perpetrators or organised criminal groups for the purposes of exploitation.<sup>43</sup> Macdonald et al in their research identify how mate crime can extend beyond acts of theft, assault or humiliation to include the occupation and use of a person's home, which can become a place of control, coercion and criminal activity.<sup>44</sup> This research highlights how social isolation, loneliness and inadequate support services create conditions in which this exploitation can take hold. Importantly, the researchers argue that cuckooing is not confined to county lines activity, but often occurs locally, perpetrated by local people who identify disabled people as easy targets and their homes as valuable resources to be exploited.<sup>45</sup> The authors also identify how austerity and cuts to adult disability services have weakened the services and supports available to disabled people, creating conditions in which exploitation like this can thrive.<sup>46</sup> This shows that mate crime can develop to include the takeover of a person's home, their finances and control of many aspects of their lives.

Research undertaken by the Rights Lab at the University of Nottingham provides important insight into the intersection between intellectual disability and exploitation.<sup>47</sup> The study highlights that exploitation frequently takes forms that fall outside traditional legal definitions, including cuckooing, mate crime and financial exploitation.<sup>48</sup> Again, these crimes include coercion, violence and deprivation of liberty.<sup>49</sup> The research also noted that vulnerability is rarely the result of a single factor, but rather arises through the interaction of intellectual disability with issues such as isolation, poverty, substance use and housing insecurity.<sup>50</sup> This research also identified gaps in formal support systems, particularly for people who do not meet thresholds for social care intervention, which reinforced concerns about reduced service provision, which in turn contributes to conditions in which exploitation can take hold.<sup>51</sup>

The literature also identifies how exploitation can be sustained through ongoing patterns of control. Thomas describes how control can be exercised over different aspects of a person's life, including finances, access to food, and free movement.<sup>52</sup> This focus on control is closely connected to how abuse becomes embedded within relationships or friendships.

42. The term cuckooing is used by analogy with the cuckoo bird. A cuckoo is known to take over the nests of other birds. This reflects how perpetrators move into and take control of a person's home for their own benefit.

43. Stephen J Macdonald, Catherine Donovan, John Clayton and Marc Husband, 'Becoming cuckooed: conceptualising the relationship between disability, home takeovers and criminal exploitation' (2024) 39(2) *Disability & Society* 485 and Stephen J Macdonald, John Clayton and Catherine Donovan, 'Disability, Mate Crime, and Cuckooing (Home Takeovers)' in Leah Burch and David Wilkin (eds), *Disability Hate Crime: Perspectives for Change* (1st edn, Routledge 2024).

44. *Ibid*, at page 486.

45. *Ibid*, at pages 486-487.

46. *Ibid*, at page 486, 488, 500 and 503.

47. Grace Robinson, Alison Gardner, and Charlotte Gray, (2021) *Intersections between exploitation and cognitive impairment: An exploratory study in Nottingham, UK*. University of Nottingham: Rights Lab.

48. *Ibid*, at page 5.

49. *Ibid*, at pages 30-31.

50. *Ibid*, at page 40.

51. *Ibid*, at pages 9, and 41.

52. Pam Thomas, 'Hate Crime or Mate Crime? Disablist Hostility, Contempt and Ridicule' in Alan Roulstone and Hannah Mason-Bish (eds), *Disability, Hate Crime and Violence* (Routledge 2012), at pages 179-180.

A further dimension identified in the literature is the normalisation of abuse within relationships of care and dependency. The literature notes indicates that some disabled people may come to accept elements of violence or theft as part of receiving care, whether in domestic or institutional settings.<sup>53</sup> In some cases, people may defend the perpetrator, reflecting the complex dynamics at play and the difficulty in identifying such experiences as abuse.<sup>54</sup> These dynamics are further illustrated in research based on people's lived experience and this literature exploring person's lived experience provides important insight into the dynamics of mate crime. Forster and Pearson's study of autistic adults provides a useful insight into the lived experience of friendship, trust and exploitation by showing how mate crime operates for those most likely to be targeted.<sup>55</sup> Participants in this research described how friendship and social connection were valued.<sup>56</sup> They also described social interaction as tiring, difficult to interpret and requiring ongoing effort to manage neurotypical expectations.<sup>57</sup> These findings also help to clarify how mate crime differs from other forms of abuse. This study is also useful in distinguishing mate crime from bullying. Bullying was described as more direct and obvious, mate crime was seen as involving manipulation, deception and the abuse of trust by someone presenting as a friend.<sup>58</sup> This distinction is of note, as it indicates how friendship can obscure the recognition of abuse and delay responses that challenge it.

The literature also indicates that these forms of abuse often overlap with domestic violence and disability hate crime but continue to be treated as separate issues in legal and policy frameworks. McCarthy highlights the significant overlap between mate crime, disability hate crime and domestic violence, particularly in the context of women with intellectual disabilities.<sup>59</sup> McCarthy's argument is that that drawing rigid distinctions between domestic violence, hate crime and mate crime risks obscuring the underlying dynamics of abuse. She highlights that similar patterns of coercion, control and exploitation can arise across both public and private places, yet are treated differently depending on how they are classified.<sup>60</sup> She notes that abuse occurring within intimate relationships is often individualised or privatised, rather than recognised as part of patterns of abuse or violence.<sup>61</sup> On this basis she calls for a more integrated understanding of abuse that focuses on lived experiences and power relations, rather than formal legal categorisations.<sup>62</sup> This indicates the limitations of treating mate crime as a discrete category, rather than as part of a wider continuum of exploitation, violence and abuse.

53. Pam Thomas, 'Hate Crime or Mate Crime? Disablist Hostility, Contempt and Ridicule' in Alan Roulstone and Hannah Mason-Bish (eds), **Disability, Hate Crime and Violence** (Routledge 2012), at page 179.

54. Ibid.

55. Samantha Forster and Amy Pearson, "'Bullies tend to be obvious': autistic adults' perceptions of friendship and the concept of "mate crime" (2020) 35(7) **Disability & Society** 1103.

56. Ibid, at page 1117.

57. Ibid, at page 1107 and 1111.

58. Ibid, at page 1117.

59. Michelle McCarthy, 'What kind of abuse is him spitting in my food?': reflections on the similarities between disability hate crime, so-called 'mate' crime and domestic violence against women with intellectual disabilities' (2017) 32(4) **Disability & Society** 595.

60. Ibid, at page 559.

61. Ibid.

62. Ibid.

The literature on mate crime describes a range of abusive behaviours, including financial exploitation, coercive control, physical and sexual violence and the takeover of a person's home, often carried out by people known to the victim within relationships of trust and dependency. The literature also describes how this abuse often develops gradually, can become sustained over time and may be difficult to recognise as criminal behaviour for a multiplicity of reasons. A key tension in the literature is that these behaviours occur within relationships framed as friendship or care, and can involve serious forms of exploitation, violence and abuse. The literature also describes how mate crime overlaps with domestic violence and disability hate crime but remains relatively invisible. This creates challenges for recognition, reporting and response, particularly where exploitation, violence and abuse is normalised or accepted as part of a person's relationships or friendships.

## 4. Mate Crime and the Limits of Criminal Law

A key feature of mate crime, as identified by Thomas, is the complexity of the relationship from the perspective of the victim.<sup>63</sup> Disabled people may value the companionship offered by the perpetrator, even where the relationship is abusive.

This can result in people tolerating or rationalising harm in order to maintain a sense of belonging or relationship with others.<sup>64</sup> As a result, mate crime may be less likely to be reported, as victims may not identify their experiences as abuse, or may fear losing the relationship if they seek help.<sup>65</sup>

The dynamics of relationships raise challenges for the criminal law. Existing criminal offences focus on discrete incidents involving clearly identifiable criminal behaviours, such as violence, threats, or theft. However, mate crime often develops gradually, through patterns of behaviour that may not on the face of it appear criminal but nonetheless may involve exploitation, violence and abuse. As Landman notes, the exploitation is frequently embedded within relationships that appear consensual or reciprocal, making it difficult to distinguish between friendship and abuse.<sup>66</sup> The apparent presence of consent may complicate criminal justice responses to mate crime.

People may agree to share money, allow others into their homes, or maintain relationships that involve exploitation, violence and abuse because of their social isolation, dependency, and the importance of the relationship. As Doherty argues, there remains a need for clearer conceptual and empirical work to understand the nature, scope and significance of mate crime, including how it should be situated within existing legal frameworks and responses, and how effectively disabled people are currently protected from this form of abuse.<sup>67</sup>

63. Pam Thomas, "'Mate Crime': Ridicule, Hostility and Targeted Attacks against Disabled People' (2011) 26(1) *Disability & Society* 107, at page 108.

64. *Ibid.*

65. *Ibid.*

66. Roderick Andrew Landman, "'A Counterfeit Friendship': Mate Crime and People with Learning Disabilities' (2014) 16(6) *Journal of Adult Protection* 355, at page 361.

67. Ged Doherty, 'Do mates hate? A framing of the theoretical position of mate crime and an assessment of its practical impact' (2015) 17(5) *Journal of Adult Protection* 296, at page 303.

As such, mate crime does not sit comfortably within established legal categories such as hate crime or domestic violence. While it shares features with both, it does not align fully with either. Hate crime frameworks focus on hostility by strangers, while domestic abuse law centres on intimate or family relationships. As discussed above, mate crime can arise in relationships that fall outside these categories, but still involve sustained exploitation, violence and abuse over time. This creates a difficulty for the law and the criminal justice system in recognising and responding to this type of offending. Mate crime does not typically involve a single incident, but by patterns of behaviour, often involving elements of apparent consent and lacking clear evidential thresholds. As a result, it frequently falls between criminal law, safeguarding frameworks and potentially civil responses. This may contribute to its under-recognition and raises important questions about whether existing legal frameworks can respond effectively to mate crime.

## **5. Applying the UN Disability Convention to Mate Crime: Rights, Protection and Legal Responses**

To date the literature on mate crime has paid limited attention to the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities as a framework for understanding and responding to this problem.

While there is a growing body of research examining the nature and dynamics of mate crime, this work has not, to any significant extent, engaged with the CRPD as a basis for analysing law, policy or criminal justice responses. This is a notable gap as the CRPD provides a clear and structured framework for examining both access to justice (Article 13) and the right to be free from exploitation, violence and abuse (Article 16), which are central to the issues raised by mate crime. This is particularly relevant in the Irish context. Ireland has ratified the CRPD and is therefore required to ensure that its law and policy comply with the Convention. It is contended that reframing mate crime through the lens of the CRPD provides a basis for assessing the extent to which Ireland (and other jurisdictions) is meeting its obligations, and for identifying gaps in the current response to this form of crime.

### **5.1 An Overview of the CRPD**

The CRPD and its Optional Protocol were adopted on the 13th of December 2006, at the United Nations in New York. They were made available for signature on the 30th of March 2007. The CRPD was the first comprehensive human rights treaty of the 21st century and the first human rights convention that regional integration organisations (e.g. the European Union) could accede to. The Convention officially came into force on the 3rd of May 2008 and had been driving a worldwide law reform programme since, with State Parties seeking to bring their domestic law into compliance.

The CRPD represents the culmination of the disability rights movement which has challenged prejudicial and discriminatory perceptions of persons with disabilities. The CRPD effectively requires a paradigm shift from considering persons with disabilities as objects of charity to rights holders. The CRPD requires "... extending the benefits of 'the rule of law' to all and not just to some or indeed to most. Most importantly, it has to do with treating persons with disabilities as 'subjects' with full legal personhood as distinct from 'objects' to be managed and cared for".<sup>68</sup>

The rights contained in the CRPD, are set out in Articles 9-30, can be usefully understood, in broad terms, by grouping them into a number of overlapping clusters.<sup>69</sup> These include: (i) rights that protect the person; (ii) rights that restore autonomy, choice and independence; (iii) rights of access and participation; (iv) liberty rights; and (v) economic, social and cultural rights. Within this framework, Article 13, which concerns access to justice, falls within the category of rights of access and participation, while Article 16, which guarantees the right to be free from exploitation, violence and abuse, is best understood as part of the cluster of rights that protect the person. This framework provides a useful basis for examining how the CRPD can be applied to the issue of mate crime, particularly in relation to the right of access to justice and protection from exploitation, violence and abuse.

## 5.2 Ireland and the CRPD

Ireland signed the CRPD in 2007 and finally ratified it in 2018 the last Member State of the European Union to do so.

While ratification of the Optional Protocol to the Convention was initially deferred, it was later ratified in 2024.<sup>70</sup> Ireland follows the common law tradition of refraining from ratifying international treaties until it believes that its domestic laws are largely in line with the treaty's provisions. This practice has been used by the State to explain the delayed ratification of the CRPD and the decision not to ratify the OP. Under the Convention's reporting process, Ireland is required to report periodically to the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, an independent body of experts established under the CRPD to monitor its implementation by States Parties. The Committee examines State reports, engages in dialogue with governments, and issues concluding observations identifying areas of concern and recommendations for reform. Ireland is expected to come before the Committee for its first review in 2027. The Irish Government's submitted its initial Report to the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, published on the 10th of November 2021, by Minister of State with Special Responsibility for Disability.<sup>71</sup>

68. Gerard Quinn and Charles O'Mahony, 'Disability and Human Rights: A New Field in the United Nations' in *International Protection of Human Rights: A Textbook* (Åbo Akademi University Institute for Human Rights, Turku, 2012), at page 266.

69. *Ibid*, at page 282.

70. The protocol allows for complaints to be submitted directly to the CRPD Committee, which is a UN body of independent experts which monitors implementation of the CRPD by countries that have become party to it. A person can make a complaint alleging the violation of CRPD rights if the State has ratified the optional protocol.

71. "Initial Report under the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Ireland" Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2021.

### 5.3 The Right of Access to Justice Under International Human Rights Law

In the 2018 **Annual report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights and reports of the Office of the High Commissioner and the Secretary-General**, the significance of the right to access to justice under Article 13 of the CRPD was considered.<sup>72</sup> The report emphasised that access to justice represents a foundational component of the rule of law and serves as a fundamental right, essential for safeguarding and advancing all other human rights. This encompasses fair trial rights, including equitable access to and equality before the courts, as well as the pursuit and attainment of just and timely remedies for violations of rights. This is particularly relevant in the context of mate crime, where failures to recognise, report and respond to abuse can prevent disabled people from accessing effective remedies. The report also highlighted that access to justice holds critical importance for democratic governance, the rule of law, and addressing social and economic marginalisation.<sup>73</sup>

Notably, existing literature has consistently pointed out that persons with disabilities encounter substantial impediments when attempting to access justice within both the civil and criminal justice systems. These barriers “include denial of their legal standing and due process guarantees and the inaccessibility of the physical and communication environments during proceedings”.<sup>74</sup> These barriers are especially significant in the context of mate crime, where abuse often occurs within relationships of trust and may not be readily identified or treated as criminal behaviour. Furthermore, the report emphasised that national legislation frequently contains provisions that undermine the equal treatment of persons with disabilities before courts and other judicial bodies. The report also clarified the obligation to provide procedural accommodations under Article 13 of the CRPD. It noted that this requirement arises from civil and political rights, is grounded in the principle of non-discrimination, and is not subject to progressive realisation.<sup>75</sup> Therefore, failing to provide procedural accommodation when required by a specific person with a disability constitutes discrimination in relation to the right to access to justice. This has clear implications for mate crime, where disabled people may require tailored supports to participate effectively in reporting abuse, giving evidence and engaging with the criminal justice process.

72. Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, “Right to access to justice under article 13 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, Report of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights,” A/HRC/37/25, 27 December 2017.

73. *Ibid.*

74. *Ibid.*, at page 3.

75. *Ibid.*, at page 7.

The right of access to justice for persons with disabilities requires equal and effective participation at every stage and in all capacities within the justice system as a fundamental aspect of this right. This extends beyond traditional fair trial guarantees to include participation as witnesses, jurors and other actors within the justice system. It also requires States to ensure that information is accessible, that legal assistance is available, and that effective remedies are provided where rights are violated. These elements are particularly important in the context of mate crime, where gaps in recognition, reporting and support can limit access to justice. The report further highlighted the importance of training justice system personnel and collecting disaggregated data on human rights violations and access to justice, both of which are necessary to identify and address patterns of abuse affecting persons with disabilities.

## 5.4 International Principles and Guidelines on Access to Justice for Persons with Disabilities

The literature on Article 13 of the CRPD identifies that many States are still grappling with the challenge of implementing measures to give effect to Article 13.<sup>76</sup> To address the implementation gap the International Principles and Guidelines on Access to Justice for Persons with Disabilities, initiated by the Special Rapporteur on the rights of persons with disabilities, were published in 2020.<sup>77</sup> These principles provide a practical framework to assist States in ensuring equal access to justice for persons with disabilities, grounded in the CRPD and international human rights standards. They are widely regarded as international best practice and offer a structured approach to understanding State obligations in this area. In the context of mate crime, these principles are particularly important as they identify what is needed to enable recognition, reporting and effective responses to exploitation, violence and abuse within relationships of trust. The principles emphasise a number of core requirements.

These include recognition of legal capacity and the prohibition of exclusion from justice processes on the basis of disability (Principle 1); the need for accessible facilities, information and communication (Principles 2 and 4); and the provision of procedural accommodations to enable effective participation (Principle 3). They also stress the importance of access to legal assistance (Principle 6), the ability to report complaints and initiate proceedings and have them effectively investigated (Principle 8), and the availability of effective remedies (Principle 8). These elements are key in cases of mate crime, where barriers to communication, reporting and participation can prevent people from seeking help or pursuing legal remedies. The principles also highlight the role of monitoring mechanisms (Principle 9) and the need for training and awareness among those working within the justice system (Principle 10). These principles provide a useful framework for identifying gaps in current responses to mate crime and for assessing whether existing legal and policy structures are capable of delivering effective protection from mate crime and access to justice.

76. See for example Eliona Gjeca, Anna Lawson, Rannveig Traustadóttir, and James Gordon Rice, 'We Got Lucky with the Judge': Access to Justice for Disabled Women in Iceland (2023) Laws 12, 21.

77. United Nations Human Rights Special Procedures, 'International Principles and Guidelines on Access to Justice for Persons with Disabilities' (Geneva, August 2020).

## 5.5 Article 16 CRPD: The Right to be Free from Exploitation, Violence and Abuse

In addition to Article 13 on access to justice, Article 16 of the CRPD is of particular relevance to the issue of mate crime. Article 16 requires States Parties to take all appropriate measures to protect persons with disabilities from all forms of exploitation, violence and abuse, including within the home and in relationships of trust.<sup>78</sup> This is especially significant in the context of mate crime, which is characterised by the targeting of people through relationships that are perceived as friendships but have elements of exploitation and abuse.<sup>79</sup> The emphasis in Article 16 on prevention, protection, and effective responses reflects the need for legal and policy frameworks that can recognise and respond to a broad spectrum of harm, including forms of exploitation that may arise within relationships of trust or dependency and may not involve overt physical violence.<sup>80</sup> It also requires the provision of accessible supports, safeguards, and monitoring mechanisms, as well as appropriate training for those working in the justice and social care systems.<sup>81</sup>

It is of note that Article 16 must be read in conjunction with the broader framework of the CRPD, which emphasises autonomy, legal capacity, and independent living. Therefore, Article 16 requires that responses to abuse do not undermine the rights of persons with disabilities.<sup>82</sup> As such Article 16 provides an important human rights framework for understanding mate crime as an individual experience of crime, but as a systemic issue requiring coordinated and rights-based responses. The emphasis in Article 16 on protection from “all forms of exploitation, violence and abuse” is reflected in the practice of the CRPD Committee, which has identified a wide spectrum of harm including psychological abuse, financial exploitation, neglect, and abuse occurring within caregiving and support relationships in its Concluding Observations to State Parties to the Convention.<sup>83</sup> These examples demonstrate that Article 16 is concerned with overt physical violence, but with forms of harm that may arise within relationships of trust or dependency and may not be immediately visible within traditional legal frameworks.<sup>84</sup>

78. United Nations, **Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities** (adopted 13<sup>th</sup> of December 2006, entered into force 3<sup>rd</sup> of May 2008) 2515 UNTS 3 (CRPD) art 16(1).

79. Roderick Andrew Landman, “A Counterfeit Friendship”: Mate Crime and People with Learning Disabilities’ (2014) 16(6) **Journal of Adult Protection** 355

80. CRPD art 16(2),(3), (5). See International Disability Alliance, **Compilation of CRPD Committee’s Concluding Observations: Article 16 (Freedom from Exploitation, Violence and Abuse)** (October 2022).

81. CRPD art 16(2), (3), (4); International Disability Alliance (n 3) 30–35, 46.

82. *Ibid.*

83. International Disability Alliance, **Compilation of CRPD Committee’s Concluding Observations: Article 16 (Freedom from Exploitation, Violence and Abuse)** (October 2022).

84. *Ibid.*

## 5.6 Article 19 CRPD: Independent Living and Community Living

Article 19 of the CRPD recognises the right of persons with disabilities to live independently and to be included in the community. It is a central provision of the CRPD, aimed at restoring autonomy, choice and independence for disabled people.<sup>85</sup> The obligation on States Parties is not just to avoid institutionalisation of disabled people, but to take positive steps to ensure that people can participate fully in community life, including through access to appropriate supports, services and social networks. Although Article 19 does not provide a precise definition of independent living, it is widely understood to reflect principles of autonomy, self-determination and inclusion, consistent with the human rights model of disability.<sup>86</sup> The Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities has made clear that institutionalisation constitutes a serious and systemic violation of this right.<sup>87</sup>

In the context of mate crime, Article 19 has particular relevance. The move towards community living and greater independence creates important opportunities for disabled people. However, as the literature demonstrates, living in the community may also expose people to exploitation within relationships of trust, particularly where adequate supports and safeguards are not in place. This represents a serious tension within the implementation of Article 19. The United Nations Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in its General Comment on Article 19 emphasised that support services must not only enable independent living but must also be structured to eliminate risks of exploitation, violence, and underscoring the intrinsic link between community living and effective safeguarding.

“It is of paramount significance to ensure that support services leave no space for potential abuse or exploitation of persons with disabilities or any violence against them (art. 16). Disability-, gender- and age-sensitive monitoring, legal remedies and relief must be available for all persons with disabilities who use services prescribed in article 19 and who may face abuse, violence and exploitation.”<sup>88</sup>

85. See Gerard Quinn and Charles O’Mahony, ‘Disability and Human Rights: A New Field in the United Nations’ in *International Protection of Human Rights: A Textbook* (Åbo Akademi University Institute for Human Rights, Turku, 2012), at page 288.

86. Anna Lawson and Angharad E Beckett, ‘The Social and Human Rights Models of Disability: Towards a Complementarity Thesis’ (2021) 25(2) *The International Journal of Human Rights* 348.

87. Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, **General Comment No 5 (2017) on Living Independently and Being Included in the Community** UN Doc CRPD/C/GC/5 (27 October 2017),

88. *Ibid*, at page 15.

## 6. Understanding Mate Crime within Current Irish Law and Policy Context

This section examines the Irish law and policy relevant to mate crime, with a particular focus on access to justice, safeguarding law, and civil remedies. It considers how existing structures recognise and respond to exploitation, violence and abuse, and identifies the gaps that arise where abuse develops gradually within relationships and may not be clearly identified or treated as criminal behaviour.

### 6.1 Literature on Access to Justice for Disabled People in Ireland

A substantial body of work on access to justice for persons with disabilities in Ireland has already been developed through the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission's baseline study on access to justice.<sup>89</sup> Given the scope and word constraints of the present literature review, it is not necessary to reproduce that analysis in full here. Instead, the findings of the baseline study should be read as an integral part of the broader evidence base underpinning this research. The significance of that work is further underscored at international level, where the UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, in its recently published List of Issues to Ireland in advance of its first reporting cycle in 2027, has specifically requested the State to respond to concerns raised in the baseline study.<sup>90</sup> Particularly relevant in the present context is the analysis in Chapter 2 of the baseline study, which examines the legal and policy framework governing access to justice in Ireland, including developments in hate crime legislation. The issues identified in that report, including barriers relating to legal capacity, communication, accessibility, procedural complexity, and the fragmentation of supports, are directly relevant to the experiences of people affected by mate crime. Accordingly, the analysis of access to justice in this report builds on, rather than duplicates, the findings of the IHREC baseline study, which should be understood as providing the framework for interpreting the justice-related barriers identified in this research.

The baseline study found that disabled people encounter persistent and systemic barriers in accessing justice, many of which are directly relevant to experiences of mate crime. Across the literature review<sup>91</sup> and qualitative findings<sup>92</sup>, the right of access to justice is restricted by structural inequalities, fragmented legal and policy frameworks, and a lack of alignment with the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. The participants in the qualitative research identified the denial of legal capacity as a barrier in accessing justice, despite the recent commencement of the Assisted Decision-Making (Capacity) Acts.<sup>93</sup> A recurring concern among participants is the persistent denial of legal capacity to disabled people, in particular for people with intellectual disability.<sup>94</sup>

89. 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, at chapter 2).

90. Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, *List of Issues in relation to the Initial Report of Ireland UN Doc CRPD/C/IRL/Q/1* (15 September 2025) (advance unedited version), at page 3.

91. 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, at chapter 2).

92. *Ibid.*, see chapter 3.

93. *Ibid.*, at pages 142-149.

94. *Ibid.*

This is significant in the context of mate crime, where exploitation, violence and abuse occurs within relationships of trust and dependency and may not be recognised as criminal conduct. The absence of comprehensive data<sup>95</sup>, limited research on lived experiences within the criminal justice system, and a fragmented evidence base<sup>96</sup> contribute to ineffective and inaccessible justice responses for disabled people who experience crime. The study identifies a range of interconnected barriers that prevent disabled people from effectively accessing justice. These include unmet legal needs, delays in legal proceedings, and difficulties in accessing legal representation and legal aid.<sup>97</sup> Communication and accessibility barriers, including the lack of appropriate supports and accommodations, limit meaningful participation in legal processes. There are also significant gaps in awareness, training, and understanding of disability across justice system actors, alongside a lack of independent advocacy supports. Systemic issues such as poor data collection, fragmented policy approaches, and insufficient integration of intersectional perspectives further compound these challenges. The qualitative findings emphasise that these barriers are cumulative and reinforcing, creating a justice system that is difficult to navigate and lacking accessibility. In the context of mate crime, these barriers may contribute to underreporting, misrecognition of exploitation, violence and abuse and hinder the progression of cases through the justice system.

## 6.2 Victims of Crime, Disability & Irish Law & Policy

This section considers the relevant law relating to victims of crime in Ireland. It considers the EU Victims' Rights Directive and the relevant Irish legislation, research on victims and recent law reform reviews and processes.

The EU Victims' Rights Directive came into force in November 2015 and introduced significant changes to the way victims of crime must be treated across the European Union. Effectively the Directive establishes a set of legally mandated rights for victims, and EU Member States, including Ireland. Member States are obligated to guarantee the availability of these rights. In Ireland, these rights were incorporated into law through the enactment of the Criminal Justice (Victims of Crime) Act, 2017. The other important piece of legislation is the Criminal Evidence Act 1992. The 1992 Act provides for important support measures for witnesses for certain offences under Part III of the Act. These support measures include; the use of live video link for vulnerable witnesses, the use of intermediaries, and the use of recorded testimony. In addition, victims have available to them the optional use of court accompaniment through victim support services, a Garda liaison officer, and use of the witness suite within the Criminal Courts of Justice.

95. Ibid, at pages 171-176.

96. Ibid, at chapter 2.

97. Ibid, at chapter 3.

The EU's Victims' Rights Directive establishes fundamental standards for the protection, assistance, and well-being of persons who are victims of criminal acts.<sup>98</sup> This directive signifies a significant milestone in advancing the rights of victims throughout the European Union, ensuring comprehensive support services, robust protection against further harm, and detailed regulations on how Member States are to achieve this.<sup>99</sup> The Directive highlights the importance of addressing decisions concerning a victim's civil claims within the context of criminal proceedings. The European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights has identified that the implementation of this directive in practice has proven to be a complex and challenging undertaking.<sup>100</sup> EU Member States, including Ireland, were obligated to incorporate its provisions into their legal systems by November 16, 2015.<sup>101</sup> Ireland faced infringement proceedings due to its failure to effectively communicate and implement the Directive, raising concerns about its commitment to upholding the rights of crime victims.<sup>102</sup>

To avoid further legal action, the Criminal Justice (Victims of Crime) Act 2017 was enacted and commenced in November 2017. The literature on the Criminal Justice (Victims of Crime) Act 2017 recognises that it represents a significant development in prioritising victims within the Irish criminal justice system, and its importance for persons with disabilities who experience crime.<sup>103</sup> The Act goes to great lengths to specify the legal rights of victims, offering several examples of these entitlements. These rights encompass the right to receive clear and easily comprehensible information about the criminal justice system and their role within it, the right to access information regarding available services and entitlements, and the right to receive a written acknowledgment of their complaint. Furthermore, victims have the right to stay informed about the progress of investigations and any court proceedings related to their case. They are entitled to be informed about the decision to prosecute or not prosecute the offense committed against them, with the additional right to request a review of that decision. Victims also have the right to be informed about the release, temporary release, or escape of persons serving prison sentences for offenses against them, as well as the right to interpretation and translation services when necessary to ensure effective communication during the criminal justice process. Importantly the 2017 Act requires that victims' individual needs be assessed, allowing for the consideration of specific protections or support measures tailored to their circumstances. The Department of Justice have updated and expanded version of the Victims Charter.<sup>104</sup> This revised Charter takes into account the provisions of the Criminal Justice (Victims of Crime) Act 2017.

98. Directive 2012/29/EU.

99. See European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 'Underpinning victims' rights: support services, reporting and protection' (2023), and Maria McDonald, "Guide for Lawyers to the Victims Directive & the Criminal Justice (Victims of Crime) Act 2017" (Irish Council for Civil Liberties, 2018).

100. Ibid.

101. Ibid.

102. See Maria McDonald, "Guide for Lawyers to the Victims Directive & the Criminal Justice (Victims of Crime) Act 2017" (Irish Council for Civil Liberties, 2018).

103. Ibid.

104. **Victims Charter** (Government of Ireland, 2020) <https://www.victimscharter.ie>

The literature has not sufficiently explored the impact of the 2017 Act on the rights of persons with disabilities. The international literature has identified that law that can effectively prevent and prosecute acts of violence against persons with disabilities, and in particular women with disabilities are inadequate throughout the world.<sup>105</sup> The Irish research reflects this and indicates that persons with disabilities face significant barriers in accessing justice. One of the most comprehensive examinations of rights of persons with disabilities was undertaken in 2013.<sup>106</sup> The research focused on the experiences of people with disabilities as victims of crime within the Irish criminal justice system. The report set out how the international evidence demonstrated that persons with disabilities face a heightened risk of crime victimisation, yet these crimes are significantly underreported and often do not lead to prosecution. There was a dearth of evidence about how the Irish criminal justice system responds persons disabled crime victims, which this research addressed. The research explored the barriers faced by persons with disabilities when reporting crimes, it compared legislative frameworks across different jurisdictions, analysed specific policies and practices within the criminal justice system, and identify potential reforms to improve the Irish system's response to victims of crimes with disabilities.

The research categorised barriers faced by crime victims with disabilities into three main types: structural, procedural, and attitudinal. The structural barriers result from a lack of communication and clarity among different institutions within the criminal justice system. The procedural barriers involve complex legal processes that often lack accessibility for persons with disabilities, such as reporting crimes and providing evidence. The attitudinal barriers encompassed assumptions made by a range of professionals within the criminal justice system about the capabilities of disabled individuals, impacting their credibility as witnesses. The researchers identified that while Ireland shares challenges with other common law jurisdictions, there were unique aspects of the Irish context. One key challenge identified was the absence of comprehensive data on crimes against persons with disabilities and their experiences with the criminal justice system. This data gap undermines the understanding of the issues faced by victims of crimes with disabilities. The research considered different parts of the statute book that impact the experiences of persons with disabilities within the criminal justice system, including criminal law, criminal procedures, anti-discrimination legislation, capacity to make decisions, and legislation safeguarding against abuse. The researchers concluded that inconsistencies and conflicts within these legal frameworks, particularly how they address disability, potentially hinders access to justice.

105. See Eliona Gjecaj, Anna Lawson, Rannveig Traustadóttir, and James Gordon Rice, 'We Got Lucky with the Judge': Access to Justice for Disabled Women in Iceland (2023) *Laws* 12, 21.

106. See Kilcommins S, Edwards C, O'Sullivan T, 'An International Review of Legal Provisions and Supports for People with Disabilities as Victims of Crime' (December 2013) Irish Council of Civil Liberties.

The law relating to vulnerable witnesses in the investigation and prosecution of sexual offences has undergone recent review. A Working Group was appointed to address concerns about the treatment of vulnerable witnesses in criminal proceedings for sexual offenses. The Minister for Justice and Equality tasked the Group with examining various aspects of the criminal justice process concerning vulnerable witnesses and suggesting ways to improve their treatment.<sup>107</sup> Following on from the Report the Minister for Justice launched a new programme at the University of Limerick aimed at training intermediaries to assist people who are victims of sexual abuse and children, when they provide testimony within the justice system.<sup>108</sup> This initiative seeks to equip professionals, typically with backgrounds in speech and language therapy or related fields, with the necessary skills to support witnesses who face communication challenges when presenting their evidence in court.

The Law Reform Commission in its 2026 Report **Compensating Victims of Crime** recommended significant reform of Ireland’s approach to supporting victims of crime, including the replacement of the existing Criminal Injuries Compensation Scheme with a new statutory framework based on fairness, accessibility, and trauma-informed practice.<sup>109</sup> The Report emphasises the need for a more victim-centred system that recognises the wide-ranging impact of crime, including psychological and emotional harm, and calls for procedures that are accessible, efficient, and responsive to the needs of vulnerable victims. The Commission also highlights the importance of specialist supports, improved communication, clearer information pathways, and reducing the risk of secondary victimisation within the justice process. In doing so, the Report reflects a broader shift within Irish criminal justice policy towards recognising the rights, dignity, and participation of victims. These recommendations align closely with the findings of this research project. Participants consistently highlighted barriers experienced by disabled people in accessing justice and support services, including inconsistent Garda responses, lack of disability awareness and specialist training, under-reporting, and limited access to advocacy and victim supports. Experiences of financial exploitation, coercive relationships, grooming, and targeted abuse described throughout this research also reflect the broader forms of harm and victimisation recognised within the Commission’s analysis. The emphasis within the Law Reform Commission Report on accessibility, specialist supports, and trauma-informed responses therefore provides an important policy context for the recommendations emerging from this research.

107. The Group included representatives from key agencies involved in the investigation, prosecution, and trial of sexual offenses, such as the Garda Síochána, the Director of Public Prosecutions, the Courts Service, and the Probation Service. The leading expert in this areas Tom O’Malley chaired the Group.

108. See “Minister launches University of Limerick programme to train intermediaries for work in justice system” (May 4, 2022). Available at: <https://www.ul.ie/news/minister-launches-university-of-limerick-programme-to-train-intermediaries-for-work-in-justice>

109. Law Reform Commission, **Compensating Victims of Crime** (LRC 130, 2026).

## 6.3 Mate Crime and Related Irish Literature on Violence Against Disabled People

The Irish literature on mate crime remains limited, with no substantial body of research directly examining the phenomenon in a domestic context. Therefore, it is necessary to draw on related research on exploitation, violence, abuse and safeguarding to understand how similar dynamics arise in Ireland. While these sources do not explicitly conceptualise mate crime, they provide important insight into the forms of related crime or abuse experienced by disabled people, the contexts in which this crime or abuse occurs, and the limitations of existing legal and policy responses.

While mate crime is often discussed as a distinct phenomenon, many of its underlying dynamics, including dependency, unequal power relations, and the normalisation of exploitation within relationships of trust, are reflected in wider research on violence against disabled people. In this regard, the work of the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights is particularly instructive. In its recent report **Places of Care = Places of Safety?** highlights the pervasive and multifaceted nature of violence experienced by disabled people, including psychological abuse, financial exploitation and coercive forms of control, often occurring within relationships of dependency.<sup>110</sup> Although the report focuses on institutional settings, its findings are relevant to this research. They point to patterns of harm and vulnerability beyond institutional environments and into community life and underscore the extent to which such experiences are shaped by broader structural inequalities and gaps in protection.

In the Irish context, this broader picture is reflected in the literature on adult safeguarding, which identifies significant weaknesses in legal, policy and practice frameworks.<sup>111</sup> In particular, the absence of comprehensive safeguarding legislation and the continued reliance on reactive responses highlight the limited capacity of existing systems to prevent or respond effectively to abuse.<sup>112</sup> These gaps are especially relevant to mate crime, where harm may be normalised, cumulative and embedded in relationships, and as a result less likely to be recognised within safeguarding frameworks or criminal justice responses.

The controversy surrounding the Farrelly Commission further highlights limitations in how the Irish State responds to abuse and safeguarding failures involving disabled people.<sup>113</sup> As outlined in a recent report by Inclusion Ireland, the Farrelly Commission inquiry was widely criticised for being inaccessible, overly legalistic, and insufficiently grounded in human rights principles, with limited opportunities for meaningful participation by the woman with an intellectual disability who was at the centre of the Commission's work.<sup>114</sup> Grace was a woman with an intellectual disability who spent almost two decades in a foster placement where there were concerns that she experienced serious abuse, including physical and sexual abuse, which went unaddressed despite repeated engagement with State services. Grace's case highlights systemic failures in safeguarding and State oversight, spanning decades of missed opportunities to intervene, a lack of effective monitoring of her foster placement, and a broader failure to act on concerns raised about her welfare despite repeated engagement with state bodies.

110. European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, **Places of Care = Places of Safety? Violence against Persons with Disabilities in Institutions** (Publications Office of the European Union 2025).

111. Amanda Phelan, 'Adult Safeguarding in Ireland: A Critical Review of Context and Gaps' (2023) 25(3) *Journal of Adult Protection* 117.

112. *Ibid.*

113. Farrelly Commission of Investigation (Certain matters relative to a disability service in the South East and related matters) ("the Farrelly Commission"): **Final Report** (Department of Children, Disability and Equality, 15 April 2025).

114. Inclusion Ireland, **The Right to Justice and Participation: Lessons from the Farrelly Commission** (Inclusion Ireland 2025).

Inclusion Ireland's report also highlights how public inquiry processes can reproduce existing power imbalances, excluding those most affected and limiting access to meaningful accountability or redress.<sup>115</sup> In particular, it identifies the absence of accessible communication, advocacy supports, and trauma-informed approaches as significant barriers to participation in a justice process. These findings are relevant to this research project. They illustrate how systems intended to respond to abuse can fail to adequately recognise or address the experiences of disabled people, particularly where harm occurs within relationships of dependency or where people face barriers in articulating their experiences. The failures of the Farrelly Commission also speak to the need for rights-based, participatory, and inclusive approaches to justice, reflecting the concerns identified in this research regarding the invisibility of certain forms of abuse and the challenges people encounter when seeking support or redress.

In the absence of a developed academic literature, some insight into how these dynamics arise in Ireland can also be drawn from media reporting. While anecdotal in nature, these media reports point to patterns that are consistent with international understandings of mate crime. For example, a recent case reported in the Irish Times involved a young woman with Down syndrome who was targeted by a man who approached her in public and then directed and controlled her movements over a number of hours, coercing her into withdrawing money and purchasing a high-value goods.<sup>116</sup> The case was before the Dublin Circuit Criminal Court, which heard that the woman was targeted, directed and controlled and was unable to exercise her free will during the incident. Similar dynamics were reflected in other case reported in the media.<sup>117</sup>

Two teenage girls were charged with targeting people with intellectual disabilities in Dublin city centre and were made subject to bail conditions requiring them to stay away from people with intellectual disabilities. The case involved allegations of repeated theft from a young man with Down syndrome during encounters in public, again suggesting a pattern of deliberate targeting and exploitation of perceived vulnerability. These cases point to recurring features that are consistent with the international literature on mate crime, including targeting, manipulation, and financial exploitation. While these media reports cannot substitute for systematic research, they provide indicative evidence of how these dynamics arise and highlight the need for greater conceptual and empirical attention to mate crime within both research and policy.

115. Ibid.

116. Eimear Dodd, 'Man jailed for four years for forcing vulnerable woman to give him money and €1,300 phone' *The Irish Times* (12 March 2025).

117. Tom Tuite, 'Teen sisters must stay away from people with intellectual difficulties following theft claims' *BreakingNews.ie* (28 January 2025).

This gap is further reflected in Irish research on violence and hostility experienced by disabled people in the community and other settings. Edwards and Maxwell undertook a two-year qualitative study with disabled people living in a range of community settings in Ireland.<sup>118</sup> They explored how people experience and navigate fear, hostility and a sense of safety in their everyday lives. Based on interviews and engagement with participants across urban and rural contexts, their research identifies a wide spectrum of experiences, including verbal abuse, harassment, theft and intimidation, as well as the practical strategies people use to manage risk in public and private spaces. This study was particularly concerned with how these experiences are shaped by everyday encounters, relationships, environmental barriers and wider societal attitudes. While this work does not focus specifically on mate crime, it is relevant to this research project in two key respects. First, it indicates that harm experienced by disabled people is often ongoing, situational and embedded in everyday interactions, rather than limited to discrete or easily identifiable incidents.<sup>119</sup> Second, it highlights how experiences of hostility are closely tied to issues of trust, dependency and social vulnerability, which are central to mate crime.<sup>120</sup> Edwards and Maxwell's study provides important contextual insight into the broader conditions in which mate crime occurs, particularly in identifying how patterns of exploitation and harm can develop within different places and spaces.<sup>121</sup>

This body of research highlights a clear gap in the Irish context. While there is a growing recognition of violence, abuse and hostility experienced by disabled people, there is little explicit conceptualisation of mate crime as a distinct form of harm. As a result, experiences of exploitation that occur within relationships of trust may remain unrecognised, fragmented across different legal and policy frameworks, and inadequately addressed. This underscores the need for further research and for the development of a clearer conceptual and policy framework capable of capturing the different elements and cumulative nature of mate crime in Ireland.

118. Claire Edwards and Nicola Maxwell, 'Disability, Hostility and Everyday Geographies of Un/Safety' (2023) 24(1) *Social & Cultural Geography* 157.

119. *Ibid.*, at page 8.

120. *Ibid.*, at pages 8-9.

121. *Ibid.*, at pages 14-15.

## 6.4 Adult Safeguarding Reform in Ireland: The Law Reform Commission's Recommendations

The Law Reform Commission's **Report on a Regulatory Framework for Adult Safeguarding** represents the most comprehensive examination of abuse and exploitation of "at-risk adults" in Ireland. Across its four volumes, the Report identifies significant limitations in the capacity of existing legal frameworks to respond effectively to patterns of abuse.<sup>122</sup> The Commission's analysis is particularly relevant to this research project. A central finding of the Commission is that existing criminal law provisions, including offences such as theft, fraud, and assault, are not well suited to addressing the types of abuse experienced by many at-risk adults. As outlined in these offences tend to focus on discrete incidents and clearly identifiable acts, whereas abuse in the adult safeguarding context frequently involves patterns of coercion, manipulation, and dependency that unfold over time.<sup>123</sup> The Commission highlights the difficulty of prosecuting such cases, particularly where people may be unable or unwilling to give evidence, or where the conduct in question does not meet the threshold for criminal offences despite being clearly exploitative in nature.<sup>124</sup> This reflects a broader recognition that the law has struggled to capture forms of abuse that are embedded within relationships and that may appear, at least superficially, to be consensual.<sup>125</sup>

In response to these gaps, the Commission recommended the introduction of a suite of new criminal offences specifically tailored to the adult safeguarding context. These include offences of abuse, neglect or ill-treatment, exposure to risk of serious harm, and significantly, an expanded offence of coercive control that would apply beyond intimate partner relationships. Most relevant for the purposes of this research, however, is the proposed creation of a new offence of coercive exploitation, which is designed to address situations in which a person exercises control over another person's finances, property, or resources through manipulation, pressure, or undue influence.<sup>126</sup> The Commission explicitly acknowledges that existing offences such as theft or fraud are often inadequate in the context of coercive exploitation, particularly where there is no clear evidence of deception or where the victim appears to have consented to the transfer of money or assets etc.<sup>127</sup> The relevance of this analysis to mate crime is made explicit within the Report.<sup>128</sup> In its discussion of coercive exploitation, the Commission identifies practices such as "cuckooing" and "mate crime" as prominent examples of the types of behaviour that fall within this gap in the law.<sup>129</sup> As discussed earlier in this chapter these practices are characterised by the targeting of people perceived to be vulnerable, the establishment of relationships of trust or dependency, and the subsequent exploitation of those relationships for financial or other gain. Importantly, the Commission recognises that such behaviour may not involve overt violence or deception, but is nonetheless deeply harmful and often systematic in nature.<sup>130</sup> This recognition provides an important point of alignment with the emerging literature on mate crime, which similarly emphasises the relational and coercive dimensions of exploitation.

122. Law Reform Commission, *A Regulatory Framework for Adult Safeguarding* (LRC 124–2024, 2024).

123. *Ibid.*, vol 3, chapter 19.

124. *Ibid.*

125. *Ibid.*, vol 3, chapter 19, at page 220

126. *Ibid.*, vol 3, chapter 19, at pages 205-223.

127. *Ibid.*

128. *Ibid.*, vol 3, chapter 19, at pages 209-211, 215, 217, 220.

129. *Ibid.*

130. *Ibid.*

The Commission in its discussion acknowledges that such conduct may be difficult to categorise within existing legal definitions, as it often involves a combination of consent, influence, and control that does not fit neatly within established doctrinal boundaries of criminal law.<sup>131</sup> This is particularly significant in the context of mate crime, where the apparent presence of friendship or voluntary interaction can obscure the underlying dynamics of exploitation (see above). Therefore, the Commission's analysis provides a critical bridge between law reform and the lived realities of abuse captured in this research (see chapters 2,4 and 5 below). The proposed offence of coercive exploitation, together with the expansion of coercive control, reflects an emerging recognition within Irish law that abuse can develop over time within relationships and may not be captured by existing criminal offences. The Law Reform Commission's Report also highlights the challenges in translating this recognition of exploitation, violence and abuse into effective legal responses, particularly in relation to issues of consent, capacity, and the difficulty of meeting the criminal standard of proof beyond a reasonable doubt.

For the purposes of this research, the Law Reform Commission's work is significant in three main ways. First, it provides authoritative confirmation that existing legal frameworks do not adequately capture the forms of exploitation and abuse experienced by disabled people in the context of mate crime. Second, it explicitly recognises mate crime as a relevant problem within Irish safeguarding discourse, albeit on a largely anecdotal basis, thereby supporting the conceptual framing adopted in this research. Third, it offers a set of proposed legal reforms that align closely with the patterns of exploitation, violence and abuse identified in the data gathered for this project, particularly in relation to financial exploitation, coercion, and the blurring of consent and control. The Commission's Report reinforces the argument that mate crime forms part of a wider set of adult safeguarding issues and requires legal and policy responses.

## 6.5 From Law Reform to Legislation: Implementation of the Law Reform Commission's Recommendations

Government have accepted the recommendations from the Law Reform Commission and are in the process of developing a statutory framework for adult safeguarding. This is now a law reform priority with the proposed Health (Adult Safeguarding) Bill included in the Department of Health's legislative agenda, as set out in the Government Legislation Programme: Spring 2026.<sup>132</sup> The Government Legislation Programme indicates that the Bill is intended to underpin the national policy on adult safeguarding within the health and social care sector, which was published by the Department of Health in 2025.<sup>133</sup> The inclusion of this Bill within the legislative programme signals continued governmental engagement with the issues identified by the Law Reform Commission and reflects an emerging recognition of the need for a more coherent and comprehensive legal framework to address exploitation, violence, abuse and also neglect of at-risk adults. However, as the Bill remains in development, the extent to which it will address the range of crimes discussed in this research remains to be seen.

131. Ibid, at page 141.

132. Department of the Taoiseach, **Government Legislation Programme: Spring 2026** (Government of Ireland 2026) at page 22.

133. Department of Health, **National Policy Framework for Adult Safeguarding in the Health and Social Care Sector** (Department of Health 2025).

The development of the Health (Adult Safeguarding) Bill reflects acceptance of the Law Reform Commission's analysis and recommendations. It signals a growing policy consensus that existing legal frameworks are inadequate to capture patterns of exploitation that arise through relationships, dependency and coercion. However, transposing law reform recommendations into law reform is inherently challenging, given the constraints of legislative drafting, criminal law doctrine and broader policy considerations. A central tension identified in the Law Reform Commission's Report concerned the balance between respecting autonomy and recognising exploitation. At-risk adults retain the right to form relationships, make unwise decisions and exercise personal autonomy. However, the Commission highlights how these principles can "cloud" professional responses, particularly where capacity is present, but exploitation is nonetheless occurring.<sup>134</sup> The Commission noted that the relational nature of harm, combined with issues of consent, isolation and dependency, can render safeguarding and criminal justice interventions ineffective or indeed inapplicable.

The Law Reform Commission's proposal for a new offence of coercive exploitation represents a significant doctrinal development, its implications for legislative design in this area require closer scrutiny. The proposed offence seeks to capture patterns of controlling or coercive behaviour undertaken for the purpose of obtaining a benefit or advantage from an at-risk adult, including in circumstances where consent is present or where no tangible gain is ultimately realised. In doing so, it reflects an important shift towards recognising exploitation as a process that may develop over time through grooming, familiarity and undue influence, rather than as a discrete criminal act. However, the translation of this framework into workable criminal offence presents a number of challenges. Although the Commission explicitly identifies mate crime as falling within the scope of coercive exploitation, it does not propose its recognition as a distinct offence. Instead, mate crime is subsumed within a broader category of criminal conduct. While this approach has clear advantages from a law reform perspective, it risks obscuring the specific dynamics that characterise mate crime, including the centrality of social connection, and dependency and perceived friendship. As a result, there remains a question as to whether a generalised offence of coercive exploitation can adequately capture the different elements of mate crime.

Definitional difficulties will also arise in attempting to translate forms of exploitation that are evolving and embedded in personal relationships into the statutory language required for a criminal offence. Mate crime is not easily reducible to identifiable criminal conduct as it develops over time and can involve complex elements. This creates challenges with regards to evidence, as criminal law continues to rely on proof of intent, causation and harm in contexts where exploitation may be normalised, obscured or not recognised by victims of mate crime. In addition, significant tensions persist between the protection of people from exploitation, violence and abuse and the requirement to respect autonomy and legal capacity, particularly in light of Ireland's obligations under the CRPD (see above). The development of a safeguarding law that seeks to intervene in relationships where consent appears to be present may risk either failing to capture harmful conduct or going too far, by reinforcing paternalistic assumptions about vulnerability and incapacity in contravention of Article 12 of the CRPD.

134. Law Reform Commission, *A Regulatory Framework for Adult Safeguarding* (LRC 124–2024, 2024), vol 3, chapter 19, at pages 209–210.

These challenges also point to the limitations within criminal law itself. As this research has shown, mate crime arises as a result of social isolation, inequality and unmet support needs. Therefore, a legal framework that focuses primarily on individual culpability and incident-based offences may struggle to address the underlying conditions that enable mate crime to happen. These considerations suggest that, while the Commission’s proposals mark an important step in recognising previously overlooked forms of abuse experienced by disabled people, they may not be sufficient in themselves. Criminal law has an important role to play in responding to mate crime, but developing an offence that can operate effectively in practice presents significant challenges, particularly in capturing forms of abuse that are subtle, cumulative and embedded in people’s relationships. As a result, while a criminal law response is necessary, it will be insufficient on its own. Addressing mate crime will also require a more expansive approach that incorporates preventative, social and community-based responses.

## 6.6 Access to Justice Beyond the Criminal Law: Civil Remedies for Exploitation and Abuse

The recent review of the civil legal aid scheme in Ireland by the Civil Legal Aid Review Group is of particular relevance to this research given its focus on access to justice for marginalised groups and the structural barriers that arise in navigating the Irish legal system.<sup>135</sup> The review resulted in both a majority and a minority report, reflecting a divergence in views as to the reform needed.<sup>136</sup> While the majority report adopts a more cautious and resource-driven approach, the minority report provides a more ambitious and rights-based approach, with significantly greater attention to the experiences of marginalised groups, including persons with disabilities, in accessing justice. This distinction is important in the context of this research project, as it highlights differing understandings of how the Irish legal system should respond to disadvantage. The divergence between the majority and minority reports is also of note when viewed through the lens of mate crime, as it highlights how civil legal aid operates as a critical, and often overlooked, mechanism of protection in situations that may never reach the criminal justice system. The minority report’s recognition of “clustered injustice” is especially relevant in this context, emphasising that legal problems are often interconnected and concentrated among disadvantaged groups, including persons with disabilities.<sup>137</sup>

135. As mentioned above this chapter should be read in conjunction with the IHREC baseline study discussed above, which provides the broader analytical framework for access to justice in Ireland. While civil legal aid is examined in detail in that study, the Civil Legal Aid Review was published subsequently and is therefore included here as an important additional development.

136. Majority Report, Civil Legal Aid Review Group, **A Review of the Civil Legal Aid Scheme in Ireland** (Department of Justice 2025) and Minority Report, Eilís Barry, **A Review of the Civil Legal Aid Scheme in Ireland: Report and Recommendations of the Minority of the Review Group** (Department of Justice 2025).

137. Minority Report, Eilís Barry, **A Review of the Civil Legal Aid Scheme in Ireland: Report and Recommendations of the Minority of the Review Group** (Department of Justice 2025), at pages 2, 13-14, 17, 39, 42-43.

People experiencing mate crime frequently encounter overlapping legal issues, including housing insecurity, social welfare difficulties, and financial exploitation, which may reinforce dependency on perpetrators (see above). In such cases, the absence of accessible civil legal support can allow abusive dynamics to persist, as people lack the means to challenge exploitation or assert their rights outside of the criminal justice system. This is particularly evident in forms of relationship-based financial abuse, where a perpetrator may exert control over a person's income, benefits, or housing without necessarily engaging in conduct that is recognised or prosecuted as a criminal offence(s). The minority report's emphasis on early legal advice, advocacy, and targeted services is directly applicable to this research, particularly its recommendation for a "no wrong door" approach and the expansion of civil legal aid into areas affecting disadvantaged communities.<sup>138</sup> Access to timely legal advice may support people to respond to situations where trust has been exploited, for example where people feel pressured to hand over their money, allow others to stay in their home, or become increasingly dependent on someone who is taking advantage of them, and where advice is needed to set boundaries, regain control, or safely exit these relationships. The minority report also highlights the need for services that are accessible and responsive to the specific needs of persons with disabilities, including the development of specialised supports and engagement with Disabled Persons Organisations, including the need for a Disability Rights Law Centre.<sup>139</sup> In contrast, the majority report's more limited and resource-constrained approach, with its focus on prioritisation and mediation, risks failing to address the structural nature of these problems.<sup>140</sup>

## 7. Data Collection, Visibility and Structural Invisibility

The collection and analysis of equality data is recognised as essential to understanding the nature, scale and impact of discrimination and violence experienced by marginalised groups, including disabled people.

The literature emphasises that without robust and disaggregated data, it is not possible to identify patterns of harm, assess the effectiveness of legal and policy responses, or develop targeted interventions.<sup>141</sup> The European Handbook on Equality Data highlights the importance of data in enabling States to monitor equality outcomes and evaluate anti-discrimination measures across different areas.<sup>142</sup> However, it also points to significant inconsistencies across jurisdictions, including the absence of standardised methodologies and, in some cases, a reluctance to collect equality data at all. These challenges are reflected in the Irish context, where gaps in data collection continue to limit understanding of the lived experiences of disabled people, particularly in relation to access to justice and incidents of crime.

138. *Ibid.*, at pages xi, xvii, 24.

139. *Ibid.*, at page xv.

140. Majority Report, Civil Legal Aid Review Group, **A Review of the Civil Legal Aid Scheme in Ireland** (Department of Justice 2025).

141. See 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), at chapters 2 and 3.

142. European Commission, Directorate-General for Justice and Consumers and Timo Makkonen, **European Handbook on Equality Data – 2016 Revision** (Helen Stacey ed, Publications Office of the European Union 2016).

Within the international human rights framework, the importance of data collection is explicitly recognised in Article 31 of the UN Disability Convention, which requires States Parties to collect appropriate information, including statistical and research data, to enable the formulation and implementation of policies that give effect to the CRPD. This obligation is closely linked to Article 13 on access to justice and Article 16 on freedom from exploitation, violence and abuse. The CRPD requires that data collection must be conducted in a manner that respects privacy, confidentiality and data protection standards, while also ensuring that information is disaggregated and accessible so as to support accountability and informed public debate. The International Principles and Guidelines on Access to Justice for Persons with Disabilities further reinforce this obligation, emphasising the role of data in monitoring barriers to justice, informing reform, and supporting the development of inclusive legal systems.<sup>143</sup>

Despite these clear obligations, the literature consistently identifies a significant lack of comprehensive data concerning disabled people within the Irish justice system.<sup>144</sup> This includes limited information on the experiences of disabled people as victims of crime, as well as their participation in legal proceedings more broadly. As identified in the baseline study on access to justice in Ireland, this data gap presents a substantial barrier to understanding how legal frameworks operate in practice and whether they are effective in protecting the rights of disabled people.<sup>145</sup> In particular, the absence of disaggregated data makes it difficult to identify patterns of victimisation, to assess the accessibility of justice processes, or to evaluate the adequacy of existing supports and safeguards. These challenges are particularly acute in the context of mate crime. As outlined in the preceding sections, mate crime is often difficult to identify, as it typically occurs within relationships perceived as friendships and involves forms of exploitation that may be normalised or go unrecognised. At present, there is no specific offence of mate crime in Irish law, nor is there a clear framework through which such experiences can be systematically recorded. While individual incidents may be captured under existing offences such as theft, fraud, hate crime or assault, the context in which the harm occurs is not recorded. As a result, there is no reliable means of identifying or quantifying mate crime within official data. The combined effect of these gaps is that mate crime is under-researched but also obscured within existing systems of data collection. Incidents are dispersed across different legal categories, with no mechanism to capture the dynamics that define this form of harm. This fragmentation limits both research and policy development, as it prevents a coherent understanding of how these patterns of exploitation arise and how they might be addressed.

143. United Nations Human Rights Special Procedures, 'International Principles and Guidelines on Access to Justice for Persons with Disabilities' (Geneva, August 2020).

144. 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, at chapters 2 and 3).

145. *Ibid.*

Recent policy developments acknowledge some of these broader challenges. The National Equality Data Strategy 2026-2031 represents an important step towards improving the collection, standardisation and use of equality data across the public sector.<sup>146</sup> The Strategy recognises that disaggregated data is essential for identifying inequalities and informing effective policy responses, and it commits to addressing existing gaps through measures such as data audits, standardisation of definitions, and improved data linkage.<sup>147</sup> However, while these developments are welcome, they do not yet extend to the identification of specific forms of exploitation, violence and abuse such as mate crime. As such, the particular dynamics of this form of harm remain outside the scope of current data collection practices.

The literature highlights a clear and persistent gap. While there is increasing recognition of the importance of equality data in advancing the rights of disabled people, existing frameworks remain insufficient to capture the complexity of experiences such as mate crime. The absence of legal recognition, combined with limitations in data collection and classification, contributes to the continued invisibility of this form of harm within both research and policy. This underscores the need for more targeted approaches to data collection that can capture relational and context-specific forms of exploitation, and for the development of frameworks that enable these experiences to be identified, measured and addressed in a systematic way.

## **8. Gaps in the Literature and the Need for a New Framework for Mate Crime**

The literature has largely failed to engage with international human rights frameworks, in particular the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. This absence is striking given the clear relevance of several core provisions of the Convention (see above).

Article 16 requires States Parties to take all appropriate measures to protect persons with disabilities from all forms of exploitation, violence and abuse, including within relationships of trust and in domestic settings. Article 13 obliges States to ensure effective access to justice, including through the provision of procedural and age-appropriate accommodations. Article 19 affirms the right to live independently and be included in the community, including the right to form relationships and participate in social life on an equal basis with others.

146. Department of Children, Disability and Equality, *The National Equality Data Strategy 2026–2031* (Department of Children, Disability and Equality 2026).

147. *Ibid.*, at page 7.

These provisions in the CRPD highlight that the experiences described in the mate crime literature engage core human rights obligations. They also expose a serious tension and risk for disabled people who experience mate crime. The same conditions that Article 19 seeks to promote, including autonomy, independence and community inclusion, may create contexts in which exploitation can occur, particularly where appropriate supports and safeguards are not provided. This risk speaks to the need for responses that do not revert to paternalistic models of protection or service provision. The CRPD requires recognition of a person's legal capacity (Article 12) while at the same time ensuring that appropriate supports and safeguards are in place to protect against exploitation, violence and abuse. The absence of a CRPD-informed analysis has limited the development of appropriate legal and policy responses to mate crime. In particular, it has contributed to an over-reliance on hate crime frameworks, which do not sufficiently capture the cumulative, complex and relationship-based dynamics of mate crime.

In the Irish context, this limitation is especially pronounced. Hate crime legislation, even where expanded, remains focused on hostility-based offending and does not adequately capture exploitation occurring within relationships of trust, particularly where evidential thresholds relating to motivation are difficult to establish. The ongoing development of adult safeguarding legislation that directly addresses patterns of coercive or exploitative behaviour within relationships seems to best way forward to addressing mate crime. This approach would better reflect the realities identified in the literature, including the gradual nature of exploitation, the blurring of consent and coercion, and the central role of trust and dependency. It would also align more closely with the obligations set out in Article 16 of the Convention, which requires proactive, preventative and rights-based responses rather than reliance on reactive responses through the criminal justice.

## 9. Conclusion

This literature review has shown that mate crime remains under-theorised, under-recognised and poorly captured within existing law and policy. Although the concept emerged from advocacy and lived experience as a way of naming a form of abuse that had been overlooked, the literature continues to reflect uncertainty as to its definition, scope and classification within law.

However, it is clear from the literature that mate crime involves sustained forms of exploitation, violence and abuse carried out within relationships presented as friendship, care or trust, and that these dynamics are not adequately addressed through existing frameworks of hate crime, domestic violence or criminal law. This literature review has also identified that the problem of mate crime involves broader structural issues, including social isolation, dependency, inequality, barriers in accessing justice and the failure of law and policy to respond to forms of abuse that are cumulative, normalised and often lacking visibility.

A central contribution of this chapter has been to show the importance of applying the UN Disability Convention to the analysis of mate crime. The CRPD provides a useful framework for understanding the obligations of State Parties to protect disabled people from exploitation, violence and abuse under Article 16, ensure effective access to justice under Article 13 and to uphold autonomy, legal capacity and independent living under Articles 12 and 19. Read together, these provisions can challenge the inadequacy of responses that fail to recognise mate crime as a serious form of abuse or rely on paternalistic assumptions that undermine the rights of disabled people to live in the community. This chapter indicates that while pending developments in Irish adult safeguarding law reform are significant, they raise difficult questions about how exploitation of this kind can be translated into workable legal offences and effective remedies.

The literature review has further highlighted a number of important gaps in the existing literature and evidence base. There is very limited Irish research directly addressing mate crime. There is insufficient engagement with disability rights frameworks. There is a lack of disaggregated data capable of capturing the scale and nature of this form of abuse. These gaps are important because they contribute to the continued invisibility of mate crime within research, and responses from law and policy. For that reason, this chapter argues that mate crime requires a new framework that situates mate crime as a distinct form of exploitation, violence and abuse experienced by disabled people at the intersection of criminal law, safeguarding, access to justice and disability rights. This chapter provides the conceptual, legal and human rights foundation for the analysis that follows. It establishes that mate crime is an overlooked category of offending, and a problem that exposes deeper weaknesses in how law and policy understand abuse, autonomy, protection and justice in the lives of disabled people.



## Findings from the National Survey

## 1. Introduction

This chapter presents the findings from the national survey conducted as part of the LIFT project. The survey formed one strand of the project's mixed methods approach, complementing the literature review in Chapter 2, the focus groups with disabled people, and the key informant interviews discussed in Chapter 4 and 5.

The purpose of the survey was to gather insights from a broad range of stakeholders across Ireland regarding awareness, understanding and responses to mate crime. In particular, it sought to explore perceptions of the nature and scale of mate crime, barriers to reporting and access to justice, and the adequacy of current safeguarding, policing and policy responses etc.

A total of 44 responses were received. In line with the inclusive research design outlined in Chapter 1, the survey was made available in two formats. An online version available through Microsoft Forms, and an Easy Read version was developed to support accessibility for people with intellectual disabilities and others who benefit from simplified language and visual supports. Responses submitted in Easy Read format were returned in written form and subsequently entered into the dataset. All responses, regardless of format, were analysed together as a single dataset. This approach reflects the project's commitment to ensuring that accessible participation is an integral and equal part of the research process.

While the overall number of responses was modest, the survey nevertheless provides important indicative insights into current awareness levels and systemic challenges in the Irish context. The responses represent a cross section of stakeholders, including disabled people and self-advocates, service providers, advocacy organisations, and professionals working in justice and community safety settings. As an exploratory baseline study, the findings do not claim statistical representativeness. Rather, they provide a structured snapshot of current experiences, perceptions and gaps in understanding which inform the wider analysis in this report. Closed questions are summarised descriptively, while open text responses were analysed using thematic analysis in order to identify recurring patterns, concerns and recommendations.

When read alongside the focus group findings in Chapter 4 and the key informant interview findings in Chapter 5, the survey results deepen our understanding of how mate crime is perceived, experienced and responded to in Ireland. These strands of evidence inform and shape the conclusions and recommendations set out in Chapter 6.

## 2. Survey Design and Scope

The survey instrument was designed as a structured questionnaire combining closed and open ended questions in order to capture both quantitative and qualitative data. In total, the survey contained 26 substantive questions. The questions were organised to move from general to more specific issues.

They included background questions about the respondent’s role and location, questions assessing awareness and understanding of the term mate crime, and questions exploring lived experience or observed instances of exploitation. The survey also examined reporting behaviour, barriers to seeking help, perceptions of Garda and service responses, training and awareness, and views on possible legal and policy reform. Open text boxes were included throughout to allow respondents to elaborate on their experiences and to propose improvements.

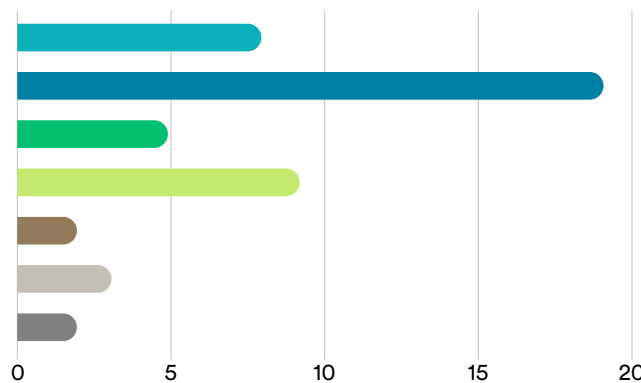
In terms of scope and recruitment, responses were gathered through dissemination across professional, advocacy and community networks. The research team relied significantly on established professional and sectoral networks to circulate the survey. While this approach limits the ability to claim representativeness, it reflects the exploratory and baseline nature of the study and enabled engagement with people who had relevant experience or insight. During recruitment, it became clear that while many potential respondents were unfamiliar with the specific term “mate crime”, they were often familiar with the underlying behaviours once the concept was explained. In many instances, people who initially expressed uncertainty about the term were able to provide concrete examples of exploitation, coercion or abuse carried out under the guise of friendship.

### 3. Findings from the National Survey

The findings from the national survey are presented below in the order in which the questions appeared in the survey. This approach allows for transparency in reporting while also enabling thematic patterns to emerge across the dataset.

#### 3.1 Profile of Respondents

##### 1. Which of the following best describes you?

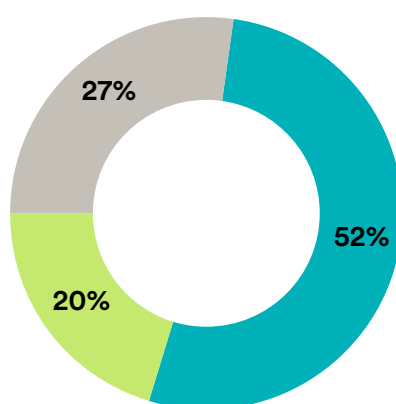


● I am a disabled person	8
● I work for a possibility service provide	19
● I work for a Disabled Persons Organisation (DPO) or Non-Governmental Organisation	5
● I work in the justice system (Gardai or other justice agency)	9
● I am a research, policymaker, or legal professional	2
● I am a family member or provide support for a disabled person	3
● Other	2

Respondents were asked to indicate which category or categories best described them, with the option to select more than one response. The largest group, 19 respondents, identified as working for a disability service provider. Nine respondents indicated that they worked within the justice system, including An Garda Síochána or another justice agency. Eight respondents identified as disabled persons. Five respondents reported working for a Disabled Persons Organisation or Non-Governmental Organisation. Three respondents identified as family members or as providing support to a disabled person. Two respondents described themselves as researchers, policymakers or legal professionals, and a further two selected the ‘other’ category. As respondents were permitted to select multiple options, these figures reflect the range of roles represented within the survey rather than discrete or mutually exclusive groups.

### 3.2 Geographic Location of Respondents

#### 2. Where are you based?

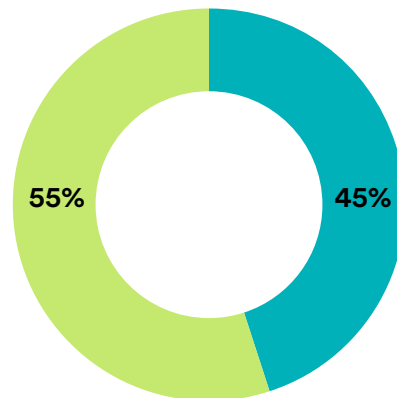


● Urban area (town or city)	23
● Suburban area	9
● Rural area	12

Respondents were also asked where they were based. Just over half of the respondents, 23 in total, indicated that they were based in an urban area, defined as a town or city. Nine respondents were based in a suburban area, and 12 respondents indicated that they were based in a rural area. This spread suggests that the survey captured perspectives from across different geographical settings, including urban, suburban and rural communities.

### 3.3 Awareness of Mate Crime

#### 3. Have you heard of the term “mate crime” before?



● Yes	20
● No	24
● Don't know	0

Respondents were asked whether they had heard of the term “mate crime” prior to completing the survey. Twenty respondents indicated that they were familiar with the term, while 24 respondents reported that they had not previously heard it. None of the respondents selected “don’t know.” These figures suggest that awareness of the terminology itself remains relatively limited, even among a cohort that includes disability service providers, justice professionals and advocacy organisations. This finding is significant, particularly given that many respondents, as will be seen below, were nevertheless able to identify and describe behaviours consistent with mate crime once the concept was explained.

### 3.4 Qualitative Analysis of Open-Ended Responses: Understanding of the Term “Mate Crime”

Respondents were invited to describe, in their own words, what they understood the term “mate crime” to mean. While individual responses often touched on more than one issue, five principal themes were identified across the dataset. Mate crime was described as exploitation within a relationship that appears to be genuine. Respondents repeatedly referred to trust, targeting of perceived vulnerability, the wide range of abusive behaviours involved, and the fact that these harms often arise within close or family relationships.

## Theme 1: Exploitation Under the Guise of Friendship

The most consistently articulated theme was that mate crime involves exploitation masked as friendship. Respondents repeatedly emphasised the deliberate construction of a relationship for the purpose of harm. Central to this theme was the betrayal of trust and the manipulation of perceived closeness. The defining characteristic identified by many respondents was that the abuse occurs within what the victim perceives to be a real and trusting relationship.

“Befriending a person and taking advantage of them in an abusive way.”

### Respondent 2

“Exploitation under the guise of friendship.”

### Respondent 14

“When someone makes friends with a vulnerable person in order to use them.”

### Respondent 33

Several responses explicitly referred to grooming-like dynamics, describing how perpetrators build trust gradually before exploiting it. Others highlighted the emotional dimension, noting how this form of abuse can undermine a person’s confidence and sense of themselves. This theme reflects what many respondents identified as the defining feature of mate crime, namely the deliberate manipulation of a relationship as the means through which exploitation is carried out.

## Theme 2: Targeting and Perceived Vulnerability

A second strong theme concerned the targeting of perceived vulnerability. Many respondents explicitly referenced disability, mental health conditions, cognitive impairment, or social isolation as factors that perpetrators exploit. The language of “vulnerable person” appeared frequently, suggesting that respondents understand mate crime as involving an imbalance of power arising from marginalisation or dependency.

“A person who befriends a vulnerable person with a view to taking advantage or exploiting them.”

**Respondent 22**

“When someone uses the guise of friendship to exploit someone with a disability.”

**Respondent 20**

“Befriending a vulnerable person with the intention to exploit or abuse them.”

**Respondent 8**

While “vulnerability” was often framed in individual terms, some responses implicitly reflected broader structural disadvantage, such as limited support networks or fear of losing companionship. The repeated association between disability and targeting underscores how mate crime is perceived as embedded within wider patterns of social exclusion.

### Theme 3: Range and Forms of Abuse

Respondents described mate crime as encompassing a broad spectrum of abusive behaviours. Financial exploitation was frequently referenced, including theft, coercion, extortion and misuse of resources. However, respondents also identified sexual abuse, physical violence, emotional manipulation, coercion, bullying, online exploitation, and pressure to engage in criminal activity. The range of behaviours identified indicates that respondents view mate crime as a pattern of exploitative behaviour that can manifest in multiple forms.

“[P]eople pretending to be your friend online and encouraging you to commit crimes or extort money from you.”

#### Respondent 21

“[S]omebody a person knows and trusts taking advantage of their disability either through financial, verbal, physical, emotional, sexual abuse. a lot of the time the person is close to the disabled person.”

#### Respondent 23

“Take their money, pressure them into doing things they don’t want to do but feel they will lose their ‘friend’ if they don’t.”

#### Respondent 33

Some responses highlighted how victims may feel compelled to comply out of fear of losing the friendship or social connection. Others noted that abuse can escalate over time if unchecked. The breadth of behaviours described reinforces the complexity of mate crime and its overlap with other forms of exploitation.

## Theme 4: Family Members and Close Relationships

Although mate crime is often framed as involving non-family “friends”, several respondents extended the concept to include siblings, partners, carers and other close contacts. This theme suggests that in practice, respondents do not necessarily draw a sharp boundary between friendship-based exploitation and abuse within family or intimate relationships.

| “Abuse committed by a family member/partner.”

### Respondent 6

| It means that people close to me, family members in my case, use my mental health disability to control and abuse me... They smear my name to family and friends. They break into my home and steal my belongings”.

### Respondent 11

One particularly detailed response described alleged ongoing abuse by siblings, including manipulation of authorities and reputational harm. The inclusion of family dynamics complicates the conceptual framing of mate crime and suggests possible overlap with domestic abuse, coercive control, and safeguarding concerns. It underlines how these harms arise within intimate, close and trusted relationships.

## Theme 5: Limited Familiarity with the Term

A final theme concerned limited awareness of the terminology itself. A number of respondents stated that they had never heard the term prior to the survey. One respondent initially assumed it was a typographical error when they read information on the survey initially. Others indicated uncertainty about its meaning but were able to infer its significance from context.

| “I thought it was a typo initially...”

**Respondent 3**

| “I didn’t know this term before the survey.”

**Respondent 24**

| “Never heard of it before but am aware of crime and mates.”

**Respondent 43**

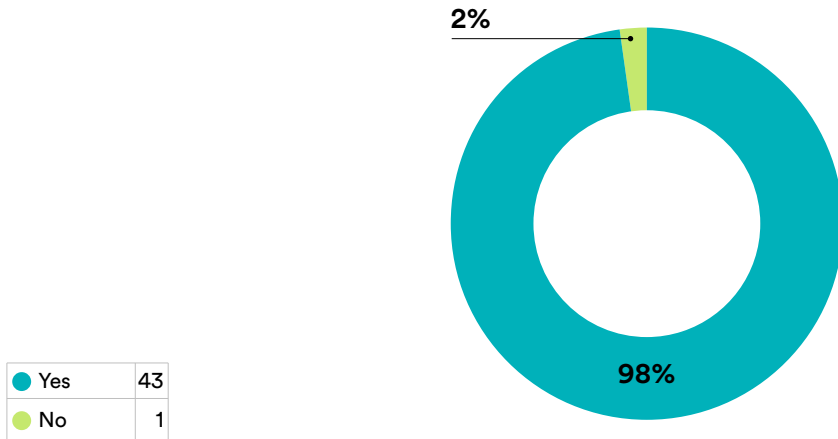
Importantly, even among those unfamiliar with the term, many were able to articulate a coherent definition once prompted. This suggests that while the term “mate crime” may not yet be widely known in Irish discourse, awareness of the underlying behaviours is more developed. This finding has implications for awareness raising and policy development, as it indicates that the issue may be recognised in practice even where it is not consistently named.

## Theme 6: Experiences and Observations of Mate Crime

Building on the discussion of how respondents understand the term mate crime, the analysis now considers their direct experiences and observations. This includes accounts of lived experience, cases encountered in professional or personal contexts, the forms of exploitation reported, and the settings in which these incidents occur.

### 3.5 Experience or Witnessing of Disability Related Abuse

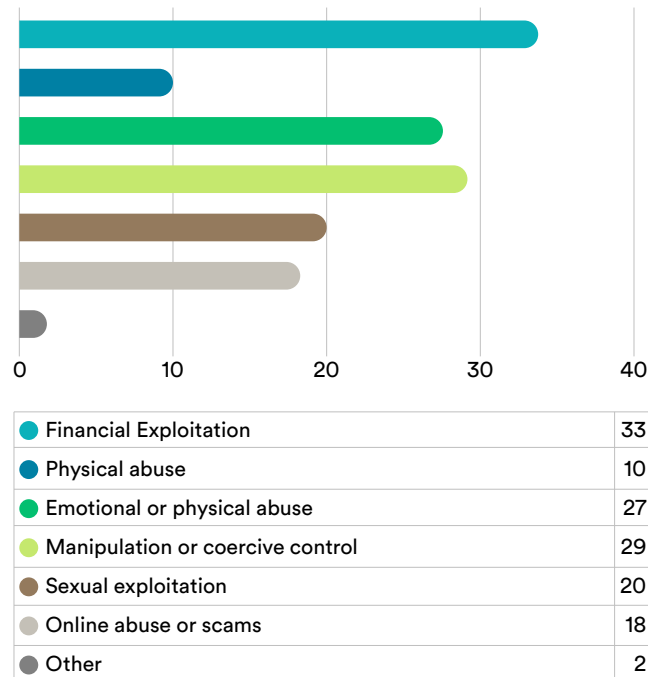
4. Have you ever personally experienced or witnessed crime or abuse against a disabled person that you believe may have been due to their disability?



Respondents were asked whether they had personally experienced or witnessed crime or abuse against a disabled person that they believed may have been linked to disability. An overwhelming majority of respondents, 43 out of 44, answered in the affirmative. Only one respondent indicated that they had not experienced or witnessed such conduct. This near-unanimous response is striking and suggests that disability-related abuse, including conduct consistent with mate crime, is widely recognised across the sample. Given the diverse roles represented among respondents, including disabled persons, service providers and justice professionals, this finding indicates that such incidents are not isolated.

### 3.6 Types of Abuse Experienced or Witnessed

#### 5. If yes, what type of abuse did you experience or witness?



Respondents who indicated that they had experienced or witnessed disability-related abuse were asked to identify the type of abuse involved, with the option to select more than one category. Financial exploitation was the most frequently reported form, identified by 33 respondents. Manipulation or coercive control was selected by 29 respondents, and 27 respondents reported emotional or psychological abuse. Sexual exploitation was identified by 20 respondents, while 18 respondents reported online abuse or scams. Physical abuse was reported by 10 respondents, and two respondents selected the “other” category.

As multiple responses were permitted, these figures reflect the range of crimes experienced or observed. The data indicates that financial exploitation and coercive or manipulative behaviours are particularly prevalent within respondents’ accounts. The significant number of responses identifying emotional abuse and sexual exploitation further indicate the seriousness and multi-dimensional nature of the harms described.

### 3.7 Qualitative Analysis of Open-Ended Responses: Experiences and Observations of Abuse

Thirty two out of the 44 total respondents provided a response to the following open ended question: “Please feel free to elaborate on the abuse you experienced or witnessed.” This question was included to allow respondents to explain, in their own words, what had happened. While the earlier question identified categories of abuse, this question sought to understand the circumstances, the relationships involved, and how the abuse unfolded. Although the accounts differed in length and detail, clear patterns emerged across the dataset. Five clear themes ran through the responses.

## Theme 1: Financial Exploitation and Economic Control

Financial exploitation emerged as one of the most prevalent and consistently described forms of abuse. Respondents referred to money being taken, coerced loans, targeting people on the days they got their disability payment, online scams, pressurised transactions, and misuse of personal financial information. In several accounts, perpetrators positioned themselves as companions or partners while accessing or depleting the disabled person's income.

“My daughters peer group use her for money.  
One has even stolen her bank details to make online purchases.”

### Respondent 18

“I worked in homeless services I had a client who had an Intellectual Disability and every Wednesday he was preyed upon when he went to collect his disability allowance. His so called friends would invite him to drink with them and got him to purchase all the alcohol and once he was drunk would take whatever money he had left and convince him the following day that he had spent it all himself. Then they would ignore him until the next Wednesday rolled around.”

### Respondent 33

“Father took my disability allowance when I was young.”

### Respondent 33

Some responses highlighted repeated small scale exploitation, such as minor loans never repaid, while others described sustained financial control and abuse. These accounts show how financial exploitation can become embedded in relationships over time, particularly where a disabled person relies on a fixed and predictable income such as the weekly disability allowance payment. Where income is limited and paid on a regular basis, it can make a person an easy and repeat target, especially if others are aware of when payments are made.

## Theme 2: Sexual Exploitation and Coercion

Sexual exploitation was another significant theme. Respondents described coercive sexual relationships, grooming, pressure within intimate contexts, and abuse perpetrated by family members, partners, peers and support figures. Several accounts reflected long term or childhood abuse, while others described manipulation within adult relationships.

| “My cousin sexually assaulted me when I was 22.”

### Respondent 11

| “A man who was supporting another person I used to go out with started a secret relationship, the man took advantage, he knew I was vulnerable, I wasn’t able to stand up for myself and I was a victim of sexual abuse. I took action too late, I wouldn’t like other people to be affected by what happened to me, and would like to prevent that.”

### Respondent 42

| “Experienced myself and I know of friends that were abused... There were times when there was intimate situations that on reflection, I wasn’t comfortable with, and felt pressurised... the person was also controlling and shouting at me. Nowadays there is safeguarding, doing the safeguarding course is helpful so’ people know their rights. It’s helpful for people to have accessible information to know the different kinds of abuse.”

### Respondent 41

These accounts often intersected with emotional manipulation and power imbalance. In some instances, respondents described not fully understanding the nature of the relationship at the time.

### Theme 3: Coercive Control and Controlling Relationships

A strong pattern across responses involved coercive control within relationships. Respondents described partners, carers, or family members controlling communication, restricting movement, dictating decisions, and isolating the person from others. Some accounts explicitly described what would now be recognised as coercive control.

“Controlled every aspect of my life, made me give them money and pay for everything, physically, sexually and emotionally abused me and more.”

#### Respondent 13

“Coercive control – a boyfriend of a person with a disability controlling all aspect of her life. Telling her who she can and can’t talk to, telling her she is not allowed go to work, taking her work clothes so she can’t go. Taking her phone so she can’t communicate with her friends/family. Telling her when she can and can’t see her child.”

#### Respondent 19

“Carer / family member sought to separate vulnerable person from other family members and wider world. People afraid to challenge the “carer”.”

#### Respondent 15

In several accounts, abuse was described as ongoing and normalised within the relationship. Respondents also described fear of challenging controlling behaviour due to dependency or emotional attachment. These accounts demonstrate that much of the abuse described takes place within intimate or family relationships and mirrors patterns seen in domestic abuse.

## Theme 4: Institutional and Authority Based Abuse

Another distinct theme concerned abuse perpetrated by those in positions of authority, including family carers, paid support staff, service providers and professionals. A number of respondents described situations in which power was exercised in ways that limited autonomy, restricted decision making, or enabled exploitation within care or support settings.

Several responses reflected concerns about control being exerted under the guise of care, advocacy or professional support. In one detailed account, a respondent described a situation in which a parent acted as a paid personal assistant while tightly controlling all aspects of the person's work and raising serious questions about independence and self-determination.

| “He is in a ‘one person institution’... he has no say in the matter.”

### Respondent 5

Other responses referred to historical practices within residential services, including control over money, restricted freedoms, and physical intimidation.

These accounts extend the discussion beyond peer relationships or informal friendships. They describe how abuse can arise within structured support arrangements, particularly where there is a clear imbalance of power. In these cases, the issue is about individual exploitation and the potential misuse of authority within systems that are designed to provide care and support. The responses raise concerns about autonomy, consent, and oversight within disability services, and underscore the importance of safeguarding mechanisms that protect the rights, will and preferences of disabled persons.

## Theme 5: Online Exploitation and Digital Targeting

Several responses highlighted online abuse, including romantic scams, manipulated images, pressurised charity donations, and deceptive contact in the online environment. Respondents described being targeted through texts, phone calls and online relationships.

“Romantic relationship entirely online where the vulnerable person was asked to send money regularly.”

### Respondent 22

“People pretending to be their partner to get money off them for dates/ meetings... teens manipulating pictures of them or imposing their heads on animals / human private parts and sharing them with the intent to mock.”

### Respondent 21

“I was contacted by a call with the promise of getting a present in return for my bank details, I didn't give. It felt real when I got the call. The lady was forceful on the phone.”

### Respondent 40

These accounts illustrate how the online environment can replicate and amplify exploitation dynamics, particularly where social isolation or lack of digital literacy increases risk.

## Theme 6: Family Based and Abuse in the Family

A particularly distressing set of responses described abuse perpetrated by family members, including siblings and parents. These accounts included sexual abuse, physical abuse, emotional manipulation, reputational harm and alleged misuse of statutory systems such as reporting the disabled person to Tusla or the Gardaí.

“My mother and 3 older sisters abused me physically emotionally and verbally all my life and continue to do so.... They have damaged my car and kicked my small dogs.. they have put hair removal cream in my shampoo and turpentine in my skin oil... the list is endless...”

### Respondent 11

“Family members completely controlling the disabled person.”

### Respondent 27

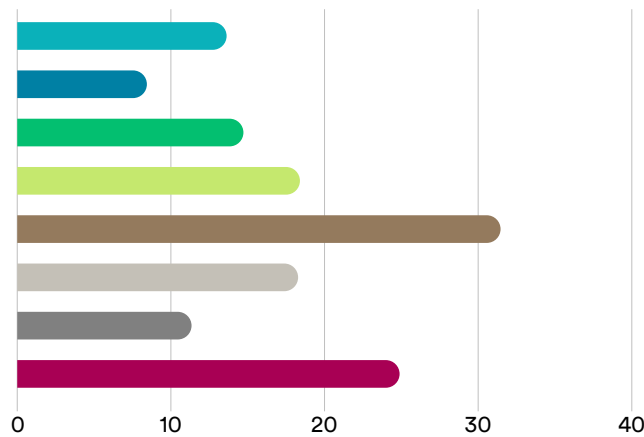
“Abuse by my father sexual abuse up to 19 years.”

### Respondent 43

These narratives demonstrate the embedded and long term nature of some abuse as detailed in the responses to this question. They also highlight the blurred boundaries between mate crime, domestic violence, and safeguarding failures.

### 3.8 Perpetrators of Mate Crime

#### 6. Based on your experience, who are the people that have carried out mate crime?



Support workers or carers	13
Neighbours	8
Other people who use disability services	14
Acquaintances, for example someone known from the community or social settings	18
Friends or people pretending to be friends	31
Romantic or sexual partners	18
Strangers	11
Family members	24

Respondents were asked, based on their experience, to indicate who had carried out mate crime, with the option to select more than one category. The most frequently selected category was friends or people pretending to be friends, identified by 31 respondents. Family members were selected by 24 respondents, highlighting the extent to which abuse may occur within close and trusted relationships. Romantic or sexual partners and acquaintances from the community or social settings were each identified by 18 respondents. Fourteen respondents indicated that other people who use disability services had carried out mate crime, while 13 respondents identified support workers or carers. Eleven respondents selected strangers, and 8 identified neighbours. As multiple responses were permitted, these figures reflect the range of perpetrators identified rather than mutually exclusive categories. The data indicates that mate crime is most commonly perceived as being carried out by individuals known to the victim, often within existing social or family networks, rather than by strangers. This reinforces earlier findings in the survey that trust, familiarity and proximity are central features of mate crime.

### 3.9 Qualitative Analysis of Open Ended Responses: Impact of Mate Crime

Respondents were asked, “How did the experience of mate crime affect you or the person you supported?” This question was included to understand the impact of mate crime beyond the incident itself. While earlier questions identified the types of abuse and those responsible, this question sought to capture the emotional, psychological, social and practical consequences for those affected. Thirty respondents provided detailed responses. Five clear themes ran through the responses.

#### Theme 1: Psychological Trauma and Mental Health Impact

The most prominent theme concerned the psychological and emotional consequences of the abuse. Respondents frequently described anxiety, depression, trauma, self-harm and long term mental health difficulties. In several cases, the impact was described as severe and enduring.

“Person supported became suicidal.”

##### Respondent 3

“Ruined my self-esteem, caused... PTSD, depression and anxiety.  
No longer trust people.”

##### Respondent 13

“It made me hypervigilant, living on a knife-edge and constantly looking over my shoulder as I was being followed from location to location, coming around my home during the night with a torch.”

##### Respondent 37

“It took a long time to heal from these experiences; anxiety was a result of these experiences and working for many years to manage these anxieties. The result of the abuse caused extreme anxiety and large weight loss, I was only 5 stone at a time. It took years to recover. It happened nearly 21 years ago, and it took time to understand at the time what was happening.”

##### Respondent 41

These accounts described how mate crime can have profound and long lasting effects on mental health, often extending far beyond the immediate incident.

## Theme 2: Loss of Trust and Betrayal

A second strong theme concerned the breakdown of trust. Many respondents described a deep sense of betrayal, particularly where the perpetrator had presented as a friend or romantic partner. The loss of trust often extended beyond the person involved and affected future relationships.

“Trust broken, demoralised.”

### Respondent 25

“Created a devastating sense of mistrust and made them question their judgement on friendships. Some, even after discovering that they had been taken advantage of continued to have feelings of connection towards the person and struggled not to maintain contact. This reflects how strong a hold these relationships can have on someone with a disability who may be lonely or craving that connection.”

### Respondent 20

Some responses also noted that victims continued to feel emotionally attached to the person who had harmed them, which made the situation more complex and difficult to resolve.

## Theme 3: Shame, Embarrassment and Damage to Self-Worth

Feelings of shame and embarrassment were frequently referenced in the responses to this question. Respondents described feeling foolish, exposed or responsible for what had happened. In some cases, public humiliation or financial loss intensified these feelings.

“They felt shame and felt they were in trouble. I myself felt very upset that a person could be exploited.”

### Respondent 4

“They were devastated particularly in the area of the fake romances and very embarrassed.”

### Respondent 21

“I felt I let everyone down especially my family.”

### Respondent 43

This theme highlights how mate crime can undermine a person’s confidence and sense of self, compounding the original harm.

## Theme 4: Isolation and Increased Vulnerability

Many responses described increased isolation following the abuse. Victims were said to withdraw socially, become more guarded, or lose confidence in engaging with others. In some cases, financial exploitation led to practical hardship.

| “It makes you feel quite small and isolated.”

**Respondent 3**

| “Yes, they became withdrawn as a result of the crime.”

**Respondent 26**

| “She was in debt with all her utility bills... she was living on little means and was very thin.”

**Respondent 40**

These responses describe how mate crime can deepen existing vulnerability, leading to further social and economic marginalisation.

## Theme 5: Loss of Autonomy and Wider System Impact

A further theme concerned the impact on autonomy and interactions with formal systems. Some respondents described situations where exploitation resulted in institutional interventions, including wardship proceedings or involuntary hospitalisation. Others expressed frustration with justice responses.

“As the situation developed I tried to support vulnerable person as much as I could. I was a near daily presence. Atmosphere was dreadful in the house. House was cold and very little food... I was anxious when visiting... every day... and took a deep breath before I had to go in and face the “carer”. “Carer” told me on numerous occasions that there was no need for me to visit so much. “Carer” continually questioned my motives... The human rights of the vulnerable person were denied by the “carer” and the wider family who were afraid to challenge the status quo.... “Carer” eventually tried to make vulnerable person a Ward of Court with carer as sole Committee. Vulnerable person went to court and challenged the petition. Unfortunately vulnerable person was made a Ward of Court... Being made a Ward of Court damaged the psyche of the vulnerable person. Vulnerable person so traumatised admitted to acute hospital very soon after Court hearing... Recovered and returned to nursing home care.”

### Respondent 15

“I got very upset when there wasn’t enough evidence, and he got away with it.”

### Respondent 42

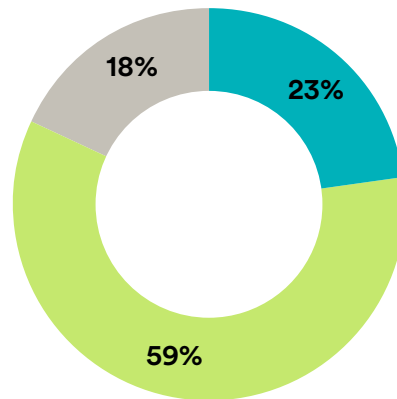
“It was very damaging as I lost a lot of trust in the system.”

### Respondent 44

These accounts show that the impact of mate crime can go beyond the abuse itself, leading to court proceedings, institutional intervention and further distress for the person involved.

### 3.10 Information and Ability to Recognise Abuse

7. Do you feel you or the person you support had enough information to recognise that what happened was a crime or abuse?

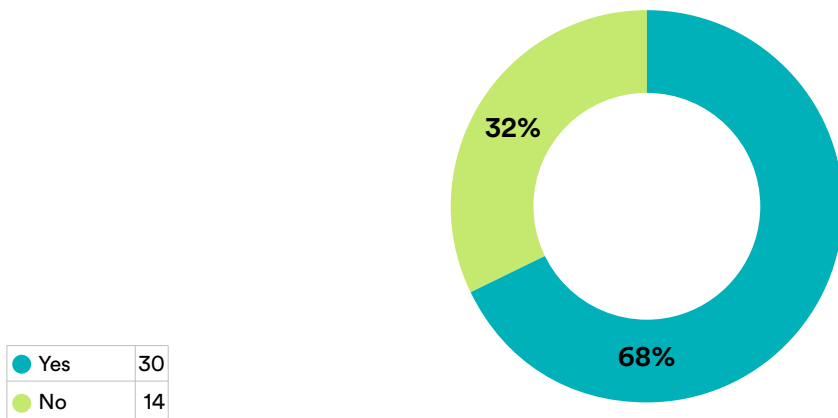


● Yes	20
● No	24
● Don't know	0

Respondents were asked whether they felt that they, or the person they supported, had enough information at the time to recognise that what had happened constituted a crime or abuse. Only 10 respondents answered yes. A clear majority, 26 respondents, indicated that there was not enough information available to recognise the behaviour as abusive or criminal. A further 8 respondents selected “don’t know”. These figures suggest that, in many cases, the abuse was not immediately recognised for what it was. The fact that over half of respondents reported insufficient information points to a gap in awareness, education and accessible guidance. This aligns with earlier findings in the survey, where respondents demonstrated familiarity with the behaviours associated with mate crime but limited awareness of the terminology. The 8 “don’t know” responses may also reflect uncertainty about capacity, understanding or hindsight recognition. In some cases, people may only have come to understand the nature of the abuse after it had escalated or after external intervention occurred. The responses to this question indicates a substantial need for clearer, accessible information on recognising exploitation, coercive control and abuse within the context of friendship and intimate relationships. It also highlights the importance of preventative education and safeguarding supports that enable earlier identification and intervention.

### 3.11 Reporting Mate Crime to Gardaí

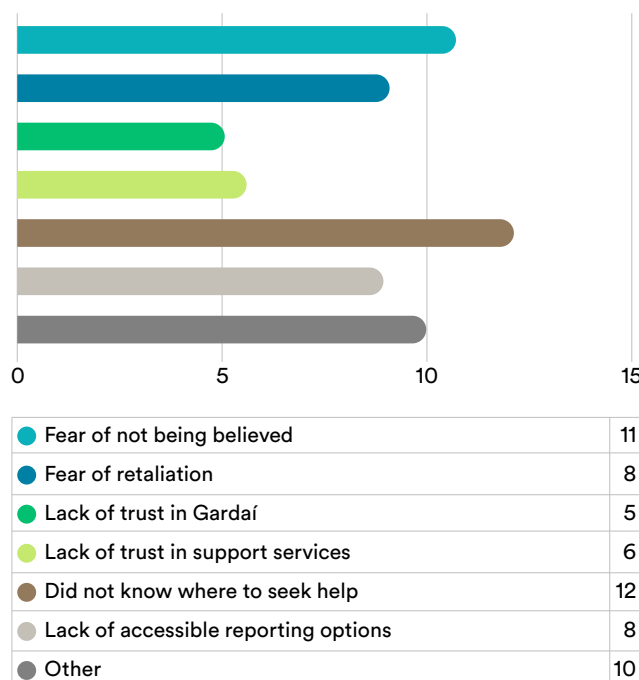
#### 8. Was this experience reported to the Gardaí?



Respondents were asked, “Was this experience reported to the Gardaí?” Thirty respondents indicated that the incident had been reported, while 14 respondents stated that it had not. The fact that a majority of incidents were reported is notable, particularly given the emotional complexity and the fact that many of these situations involved close personal relationships. However, the 14 instances where the matter was not reported are equally significant. When read alongside earlier findings regarding lack of information and difficulty recognising abuse, this raises questions about barriers to reporting, awareness of legal protections, and confidence in the response of the justice system.

### 3.12 Barriers to Reporting

#### 9. If the experience was not reported, what do you think prevented you, or the person affected, from reporting?



Respondents who indicated that the incident had not been reported were asked what they believed had prevented reporting, with the option to select more than one response. The most frequently selected reason was not knowing where to seek help, identified by 12 respondents. Fear of not being believed was selected by 11 respondents, while 8 respondents cited fear of retaliation and a further 8 identified lack of accessible reporting options. Six respondents indicated a lack of trust in support services, and 5 identified a lack of trust in An Garda Síochána. Ten respondents selected the “other” category. As multiple responses were permitted, these figures reflect overlapping barriers rather than discrete categories. The responses suggest that both informational and emotional barriers play a significant role in decisions not to report. Uncertainty about where to seek help and concerns about credibility appear particularly prominent. The presence of fear of retaliation also indicates that, in some cases, reporting may have been perceived as increasing risk rather than resolving harm.

The responses here indicate the complexity of reporting decisions. Barriers are not limited to distrust of formal systems, although that is present, but also include lack of clear pathways, fear, and accessibility concerns. These findings reinforce earlier survey results which pointed to limited awareness and recognition of abuse, and they underscore the importance of accessible, and trusted reporting mechanisms.

### 3.13 Qualitative Analysis of Open Ended Responses: Additional Reasons for Non Reporting

Respondents were asked, “Is there anything else you’d like to share about why people might not report crime or abuse?” Thirty-one of the 44 respondents provided additional commentary in response to this question. This question provided an opportunity to expand on earlier predefined response options and to provide additional information on non-reporting. The responses point to a complex mix of emotional factors, personal circumstances, and structural and systemic barriers. Five key themes emerged from the data.

#### Theme 1: Fear of Consequences and Retaliation

A dominant theme concerned fear. Respondents described fear of retaliation, fear of the perpetrator “coming after them”, and fear of escalation. In cases involving shared intimate images or coercive control, victims continued to comply out of fear of exposure or harm.

“The person had shared explicit pictures of themselves so they kept giving money so that the person would not expose them.”

#### Respondent 2

In some cases, fear was linked to living with the perpetrator or being subject to coercive control. The abuse itself created the conditions that made reporting feel unsafe.

## Theme 2: Emotional Attachment, Loyalty and Fear of Losing the Relationship

A second theme concerned emotional attachment and fear of losing the relationship. Several respondents highlighted the powerful hold these relationships can have, particularly where loneliness or limited social networks are present.

“Fear of losing a friend has been a big issue.”

### Respondent 1

“Sometime person wants to keep believing what isn’t true and maintain the contact rather than be alone/lonely.”

### Respondent 38

Some victims were described as protecting the abuser, denying the severity of the harm, or minimising what had occurred. In family contexts, loyalty and complexity were particularly prominent.

“Family situations are very complex. The bigger the family the greater the complexity. Abused person may love the abuser and not support any efforts to challenge them. Vulnerable person felt duty to protect carer even though vulnerable person being abused. Well aware of what was happening but would not support reporting and could deny “ah sure it’s not too bad”, “...very stressed looking after me”, Carer is “a lamb” etc”

### Respondent 15

These responses indicate that non-reporting is often tied to emotional dependency and social isolation rather than a simple lack of awareness.

### Theme 3: Lack of Awareness and Recognition

Many respondents reiterated that victims may not recognise what is happening as abuse or crime. In some cases, exploitation was normalised within institutional or relational settings.

“They are not aware that it is a crime or that they are being abused. They are just happy to have friends.”

#### Respondent 18

“Some incidents were not reported because they were not recognised as mate crime, but instead seen as coercion that had become a normal practice within an institutional setting... When these behaviours are normalised, they become part of a segregated system that fails to recognise mate crime and may effectively protect or conceal it.”

#### Respondent 24

Confusion, gas lighting and manipulation were also mentioned, with some victims described as unsure whether what they experienced met a criminal threshold. This reinforces earlier survey findings regarding limited awareness and understanding.

“Fear of the abuser, confusion around loyalties, not believed, gas-lighting, unsure who and where to report abuse to has been main reasons in my experience.”

#### Respondent 25

## Theme 4: Shame, Embarrassment and Fear of Not Being Believed

Shame and embarrassment were frequently identified as barriers also. Victims were described as feeling foolish for trusting someone or ashamed of what had happened. Fear of not being believed was also prominent, particularly where professionals or family members were involved.

“Ashamed that they let these people in and trusted them.”

### Respondent 31

“Feeling that it will not meet threshold for prosecution. Some adults with an intellectual disability do not want to report to Gardai as they struggle to believe that what was done to them was a crime.”

### Respondent 19

For some, previous negative experiences with Gardaí also influenced decisions not to report. In other cases, victims were reluctant to have friends or family investigated.

“This person once some work was done to point out what these friends were doing was a crime declined to report it, the Gardaí had been informed but because they would not make a statement due to fear or retribution and having been treated badly by the Gardaí in the past they did not want to report it officially.”

### Respondent 33

## Theme 5: Structural and Systemic Barriers

A further theme concerned structural barriers within support and justice systems. Respondents referred to flawed safeguarding systems, lack of advocacy supports, and uncertainty about how best to report. One response highlighted the absence of advocacy services for a person required to attend court.

“The service user will attend court along with his elderly mother to obtain a restraining order against neighbour's son. They have never been in a court office before, and are extremely nervous about attending. There are no advocates available to support the service user at the court appearance, neither Gardai, or the court office stated that they could provide an advocate and had no idea if an advocacy service existed for people with intellectual disabilities who had to attend court civil or criminal.”

### Respondent 33

Others described situations where the perpetrator was the person's primary carer, raising concerns about loss of care or practical support if reporting occurred.

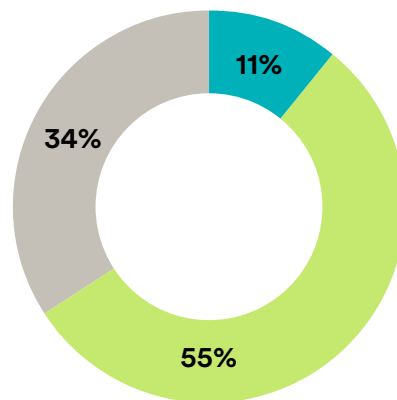
“The persons culpable maybe the only support the vulnerable people have available.”

### Respondent 12

These responses demonstrate that non-reporting is often influenced by structural constraints, gaps in support systems and perceived consequences of engaging with formal processes.

### 3.14 Garda Awareness of Mate Crime

#### 10. How would you describe the awareness of mate crime among Gardaí?

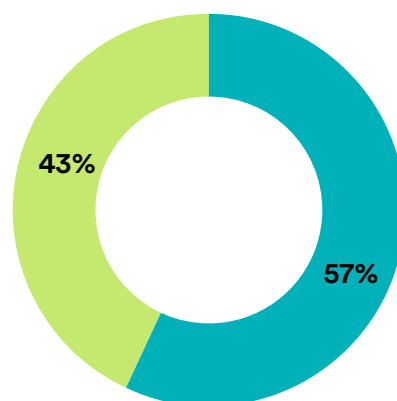


● High – Gardaí understand mate crime and respond appropriately	5
● Moderate – Some awareness but responses vary	24
● Low – Limited awareness and inconsistent responses	15

Respondents were asked, “How would you describe the awareness of mate crime among Gardaí?” Five respondents rated awareness as high, indicating that Gardaí understand mate crime and respond appropriately. The majority of respondents, 24 in total, described awareness as moderate, suggesting that while some understanding exists, responses vary in consistency. Fifteen respondents rated awareness as low, indicating limited understanding and inconsistent responses. These findings suggest that while there is some recognition of mate crime within An Garda Síochána, confidence in consistent and informed responses is mixed. The predominance of the “moderate” category indicates that awareness may depend on individual officers, units or local practices rather than reflecting a uniformly embedded understanding. The 15 responses identifying low awareness further point to perceived gaps in training, recognition and response.

### 3.15 Engagement with Gardaí on Mate Crime Cases

#### 11. Have you or your organisation worked with Gardaí on cases related to mate crime?



● Yes	25
● No	19

Respondents were asked whether they or their organisation had worked with An Garda Síochána on cases related to mate crime. Twenty-five respondents indicated that they had worked with Gardaí in this context, while 19 indicated that they had not. This pattern should be understood in light of the profile of respondents outlined earlier in the chapter. A significant proportion of participants identified as working within disability services, justice settings, or advocacy organisations. Therefore, it is unsurprising that many reported professional engagement with Gardaí in cases involving disability related abuse. At the same time, the presence of respondents with lived experience, family roles or community based perspectives may account for the substantial number who had not had direct involvement with Gardaí in this context. The responses reflect the range of roles represented within the survey response rather than indicating a uniform level of engagement across all stakeholder groups.

### **3.16 Qualitative Analysis of Open-Ended Responses: Garda and Justice System Responses**

Respondents were asked, “Is there anything you would like to share about how Gardaí or other justice services respond to mate crime?” Thirty-five of the 44 respondents provided commentary in response to this question. This question was designed to move beyond the earlier rating scale on Garda awareness and to capture direct experiences, observations and perceptions of how cases are handled in practice. Five clear themes ran through the responses. The data reflects a mixed picture. Individual Gardaí are frequently described as supportive and empathetic, yet concerns remain about inconsistency, delays, evidential thresholds, and disability awareness. The findings indicate that while positive practice exists, there is scope for clearer guidance, specialist training and stronger inter agency coordination in responding to mate crime.

## Theme 1: Inconsistency in Response

A recurring theme was inconsistency. Several respondents indicated that responses varied depending on the individual Garda, the station or the specific team involved. While some accounts were positive, others described dismissive or limited engagement.

“Responses vary, there is no consistent response. Often, though not exclusively, Gardaí can be dismissive and state there is little they can do unless a more serious crime is committed.”

### Respondent 20

“I think there is such inconsistency. People need a lot of support to follow through. Often specialist interviewers are not available for people with disabilities to make a full report.”

### Respondent 25

“Inconsistent, Gardai were called on 2 occasions to service users home. The first team of Gardai were supportive spoke with neighbour and gave feedback to service user and his mother, they were advised to seek a restraining order from Court Office. On the second occasion, the Gardaí... who called to service users house, spoke with the service user and his mother, they then went to speak with neighbour and then left. No feedback on what should happen next if abuse continues was given to service user and his mother.”

### Respondent 36

These responses suggest that awareness and quality of response may depend heavily on individual knowledge and experience rather than reflecting a uniform approach.

## Theme 2: Positive Individual Engagement and Empathy

Alongside criticism, many respondents described supportive and empathetic engagement by individual Gardaí. Community Gardaí were particularly praised in some accounts, as were specialist units.

“On the ground the Gardai are quite supportive.”

**Respondent 1**

“They responded to me very well, they took a statement, and I was appropriately interviewed.”

**Respondent 42**

“Gardai very understanding of vulnerable person’s situation & challenges involved in supporting them.”

**Respondent 22**

“Wearing non uniforms and manner they approached the person was impressive.”

**Respondent 44**

These responses indicate that where understanding and sensitivity are present, experiences of policing can be positive. However, the strength of these individual accounts sits alongside the wider theme of inconsistency.

### Theme 3: Barriers to Investigation and Prosecution

A further theme concerned practical and legal barriers. Respondents highlighted delays in accessing specialist interviewers, difficulties where victims changed their mind, and limitations where no formal statement was made about the mate crime.

“A specialist investigator is needed to make a statement. This can take weeks or months to get an appointment. The person can change their mind in the meantime. Also recall may be a problem.”

#### Respondent 2

“Their power is very limited when the person does not want to make an official statement so it makes it very difficult to respond to the crime. Also the person may have perpetrated a crime for these so called friends and is treated with indifference as they are seen as criminals and not taken seriously.”

#### Respondent 33

“Currently if the person willingly gives something to someone etc money, the Gardaí state they can't do anything even if they have been coerced into doing it.”

#### Respondent 7

Several respondents also queried whether such cases are routinely directed to the DPP. These responses suggest procedural and evidential challenges in progressing cases.

## Theme 4: Disability Awareness and Stigma

Concerns about disability awareness and stigma emerged strongly also. Some respondents felt that disabled victims of crime were not always believed, or that mental health histories were used to undermine credibility.

“They don’t believe disabled people.”

### Respondent 3

“Mental health difficulties are utilised against the victim to avoid having to investigate alleged instances of mate crime.”

### Respondent 37

“The lack of disability awareness in victim support services creates huge barriers to disabled victims. The double victimization that results from this inaccessibility of services and persistent stigmatisation of disabled people makes crime against disabled people de facto legal.”

### Respondent 5

Other respondents called for more training, particularly in relation to intellectual disability and autism. These responses indicate that disability awareness remains a key issue in justice responses.

## Theme 5: Need for Prevention, Training and Inter-Agency Cooperation

Many responses focused on the need for improved prevention, training and coordination between services. Respondents emphasised education, safeguarding, and better co-operation between agencies.

“More focus is needed on prevention of mate crime.”

### Respondent 14

“[I] believe more co-operation between services are required to address it and more training on how to identify etc. there is law there but it can be difficult if the injured party doesn't want to report it or unable to do so due to health”

### Respondent 14

“Accessible information so people know their rights and how to protect themselves. Safeguarding should be a part of schooling and especially children and teenagers.”

### Respondent 41

These responses to this question suggest that justice responses cannot operate in isolation. Respondents referred to gaps in victim support services, safeguarding processes, advocacy provision and specialist interviewing capacity. Concerns were raised about the absence of advocacy support for disabled people attending court, delays in accessing appropriate interviewers, and the need for greater cooperation between services. The responses indicate the importance of clearer coordination between Gardaí, disability service providers, safeguarding teams, victim support services and advocacy organisations. Several responses indicate that without joined up approaches and accessible supports, people struggle to engage fully with the justice process.

### 3.17 Qualitative Analysis of Open-Ended Responses: Good Examples of Garda and Justice System Responses

Respondents were asked to provide examples of good practice in Garda or justice service responses. Thirty-three respondents provided commentary in response to this question. The responses present a mixed picture, combining examples of positive engagement with ongoing concerns about consistency, legal thresholds and disability awareness. Four key themes emerged.

#### Theme 1: Positive Engagement and Community Based Practice

A substantial number of respondents described Gardaí as compassionate, patient and supportive in their interactions with disabled victims. Community Gardaí were frequently referenced as being approachable and familiar with people in their area.

“Very patient garda going beyond the call of duty to meet and follow up with the person.”

**Respondent 2**

“Yes the Gardaí have been very compassionate in their responses.”

**Respondent 8**

“Gardaí are empathic.”

**Respondent 2**

Several respondents also highlighted preventative and partnership work, including safety planning, community talks and collaboration with housing or disability services.

“Yes, community Gardai tend to be very helpful and will meet and talk to people about these issues. I work in a new housing project and we do a half day talk with the people we support and the community Garda on how to keep safe and the different types of crime and friends taking money or making you do something you don't want to are among the topics covered.”

**Respondent 33**

These responses indicate that where relationships are built locally and engagement is proactive, experiences can be positive and constructive.

## Theme 2: Inconsistency and Variable Practice

It is important to note that respondents to this question also pointed to inconsistency in response aligning with responses to earlier questions. Experiences were described as varying depending on the individual officer or team involved.

“Gardai interactions... has been largely positive but the follow up actions have been limited and lack a sense of urgency.”

**Respondent 20**

“It varied.”

**Respondent 20**

“I found the female garda was more approachable than her male counterparts.”

**Respondent 37**

These responses suggest that while good practice exists, it is not uniformly experienced.

## Theme 3: Legal and Evidential Barriers

A further theme concerned perceived limitations in progressing cases. Several respondents referred to Gardaí stating that little could be done where the victim appeared to engage “willingly” or where formal statements were not provided.

“Gardaí are willing to help but the law doesn’t always help.”

**Respondent 7**

“The Gardai would tell us they cannot do much as the vulnerable person was willingly engaging with the perpetrator. However in my experience they did talk to the perpetrator. Discussion around the vulnerable person’s capacity did take place but they felt they could not take this any further. They did advise us to keep reporting.”

**Respondent 7**

These accounts reflect frustration with evidential thresholds, capacity assessments and the challenges of addressing coercion where consent appears ambiguous.

## Theme 4: Disability Awareness, Credibility and Need for Further Training

Finally, respondents raised concerns about disability awareness and stigma. Some described not being taken seriously because of a history of mental illness or vulnerability.

“Generally I am not taken seriously because of my psychiatric disability.”

### Respondent 11

Others called for further training, school based prevention and broader awareness raising.

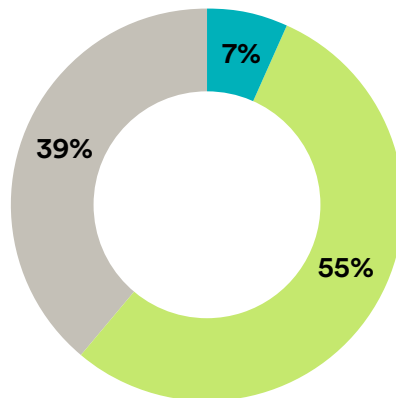
“Garda presence more in the schools... to make people aware to report.”

### Respondent 43

These responses suggest that while empathy and understanding are present in some contexts, continued development in disability awareness and better co-ordination is needed.

## 3.18 Garda Training on Disability Awareness and Mate Crime

12. Do you believe Gardaí receive adequate training on disability awareness and mate crime?

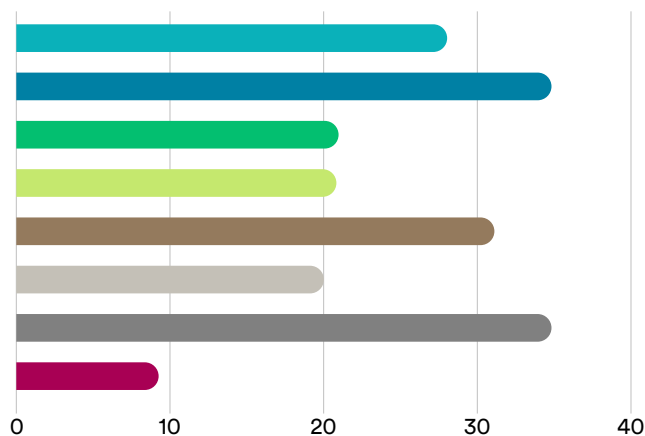


Yes	3
No	24
Don't know	17

Respondents were asked whether they believed Gardaí receive adequate training on disability awareness and mate crime. Only three respondents answered yes. Twenty-four respondents indicated that Gardaí do not receive adequate training, while 17 selected “don’t know”. The distribution of responses is notable. A clear majority of respondents expressed the view that training is not adequate. The relatively high number of “don’t know” responses also suggests uncertainty about what training is currently provided, how consistent it is, or whether it specifically addresses mate crime and disability. In considering these responses alongside earlier findings concerning inconsistency of response and concerns about disability awareness, these results indicate that perceived gaps in training may be contributing to variability in practice. The presence of positive individual experiences reported elsewhere in the survey suggests that where knowledge and sensitivity exist, responses can be effective. On the whole the data points to a perceived need for clearer, more consistent and specialist training in this area.

### 3.19 Barriers to Seeking Help or Justice

#### 13. What barriers prevent disabled people from seeking help or justice?



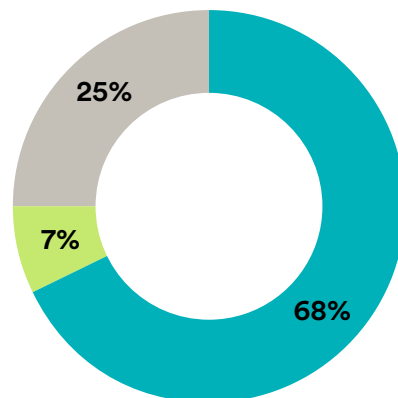
● Fear of not being believed	27
● Lack of awareness about what counts as a crime	34
● Lack of accessible reporting systems	21
● Gardaí or other services not taking concerns seriously	21
● Fear of losing independence or support if reported	31
● Concerned about confidentiality or being recognised	20
● Fear of losing the relationship	34
● Other	8

Respondents were asked, “What barriers prevent disabled people from seeking help or justice?” This question was included to draw together themes emerging earlier in the survey and to examine them more directly. Previous questions explored recognition of abuse, reasons for non-reporting and experiences with Gardaí. This question sought to identify, in a more structured way, the broader obstacles that may prevent disabled people from engaging with support or justice systems in the first place.

The responses indicate that barriers are not only about information, but also about personal relationships and practical circumstances, as well as structural issues within services and systems. The most frequently selected responses were lack of awareness about what counts as a crime, identified by 34 respondents, and fear of losing the relationship, also selected by 34 respondents. Fear of losing independence or support if the abuse is reported was selected by 31 respondents. Twenty-seven respondents identified fear of not being believed. Concerns relating to system accessibility and responsiveness were also prominent. Twenty-one respondents selected lack of accessible reporting systems, and 21 identified Gardaí or other services not taking concerns seriously. Twenty respondents indicated concerns about confidentiality or being recognised. Eight respondents selected the “other” category.

These findings reinforce earlier response patterns in the survey. The high number of respondents identifying lack of awareness reflects earlier responses where people reported not recognising abuse at the time it occurred. The strong emphasis on fear of losing relationships or support aligns with qualitative findings highlighting emotional attachment, dependency and social isolation as barriers to reporting. The concern about losing independence or practical support also connects with earlier responses in which perpetrators were identified as family members, carers or others closely involved in daily life. These responses suggest that barriers to seeking help are not limited to distrust of justice institutions. The responses suggest that the barriers are embedded in personal circumstances, emotional ties, dependency relationships and structural factors within support systems.

### 3.20 Views on Criminalising Mate Crime



Yes	30
No	3
Don't know	11

Respondents were asked whether they believed it would be helpful to legally recognise mate crime as a specific criminal offence. Thirty respondents answered yes, 3 answered no, and 11 selected “don’t know”. The majority support for legal recognition is notable. It suggests that many respondents see value in formally naming and defining mate crime within the criminal law. This may reflect earlier findings in the survey relating to lack of awareness, inconsistent responses and evidential challenges. A specific offence could be viewed as providing clarity, recognition and a stronger basis for investigation.

It is of note that the 11 “don’t know” responses indicate some uncertainty. This may reflect questions about how such an offence would be defined, how it would interact with existing offences, or whether the issue is one of enforcement rather than legal gaps that can be addressed by a new standalone defence. The small number of respondents who answered no suggests limited opposition within this sample, but the presence of uncertainty indicates that the issue would require careful consideration and consultation (see Chapters 2 and 6 for further discussion). The responses to this question point to broad support for legal recognition, while also highlighting the need for clarity about what such recognition would mean in practice.

### 3.21 Qualitative Analysis of Open Ended Responses: Impact on Independent Living and Community Participation

Respondents were asked, “Do you think the risk of mate crime affects how disabled people live independently and take part in the community? If yes, how?”. Thirty-four respondents indicated that they believed the risk does affect independent living and community participation. Four respondents indicated that they were unsure, and two respondents indicated that they did not believe it had this impact. Thirty-nine respondents provided commentary on their responses. This question was included to explore the broader social consequences of mate crime. Earlier questions examined personal impact and reporting behaviour. This question sought to understand whether the perceived risk of mate crime shapes decisions about independent living, social participation and living and being included in the community. Four clear themes ran through the responses.

#### Theme 1: Loss of Confidence, Trust and Social Withdrawal

The most common theme concerned the impact on confidence and trust. Respondents repeatedly linked mate crime to reduced belief in themselves when they experienced this, social withdrawal and reluctance to engage with others.

| “It shatters confidence and trust.”

**Respondent 11**

| “Affects their independence and confidence.”

**Respondent 10**

Several responses described people becoming more isolated after being exploited, or feeling foolish and embarrassed. The loss of trust was seen as having wider consequences for participation in community life.

## Theme 2: Increased Overprotection and Restriction of Independence

A second theme concerned the way risk of exploitation can lead to reduced independence. Some respondents described families becoming overprotective following incidents of mate crime, while others noted that services may restrict opportunities in response to safeguarding concerns.

“Yes they are very easy exploit and lose confidence if they are victims of crime or parents become overprotective.”

### Respondent 21

“When mate crime happens people/services generally look to reduce/restrict their independence. People feel less safe and confident.”

### Respondent 14

“Absolutely. For example if the perceived risk is higher outside the institution or family, people will not move out. People’s independence and level of fulfilment is proportional to the level and quality of support they get which too often is not adequate.”

### Respondent 24

These responses suggest that fear of exploitation can be used, intentionally or unintentionally, to justify limiting independent living or community participation for people who have experienced mate crime.

### **Theme 3: Structural Vulnerability and Lack of Accessible Information**

A further theme concerned structural factors, including lack of accessible information and inadequate community awareness. Respondents emphasised that risk cannot be addressed solely through a person's own resilience.

“Yes, the right to independent living is incomplete without the concurrent right to be a part of the community and this social aspect comes with a wider social responsibility to make the community a safe and access place for all disabled people. The risk of mate crime is not something to be mitigated only through training and skill building of disabled people. The community must be trained and made aware of this crime, how to identify it and report it so that disabled people can take up their rightful place in society safely.”

#### **Respondent 5**

In some cases, community members were described as aware that exploitation was occurring but unsure how to intervene or report it. This points to gaps in individual knowledge, in community level awareness and in support systems.

## Theme 4: Fear, Stress and Ongoing Vulnerability

Respondents also described the ongoing emotional strain associated with risk of exploitation. Fear, stress and economic insecurity were identified as factors affecting people's lives.

| "It must be a very fearful state to be living in."

### Respondent 32

| "It causes stress as if they are giving away their money they don't have enough to support themselves. Also if they are hanging out with someone who is known to have a criminal past they are treated differently by their wider community and so isolated even more."

### Respondent 33

| "Yes, person can be controlled from the phone /online and told not to engage with people/family & services."

### Respondent 38

The responses suggest that mate crime can be an individual safeguarding issue and also a factor influencing independent living and participation in the community. Responses indicated that perceived risk of exploitation can reduce confidence, limit opportunities and reinforce isolation, while also prompting protective responses that may further restrict autonomy.

## 3.22 Qualitative Analysis of Open Ended Responses: Improvements in Policing and Community Safety

Respondents were asked, "What improvements would you like to see in policing and community safety?" This question was included to move the survey beyond identifying problems and towards identifying solutions. Earlier questions explored experiences of abuse, barriers to reporting, perceptions of Garda awareness and views on training. This question provided respondents with an opportunity to set out, in practical terms, what changes they believe would strengthen responses to mate crime and improve safety for disabled people in the community. It also allowed participants to articulate priorities for reform in their own words, drawing on lived experience, and professional experience etc. Thirty-eight respondents provided commentary in response to this question. Five clear themes ran through the responses. The responses indicate that improvements in policing and community safety are viewed as requiring a combination of training, prevention, coordination, visibility and victim support. The emphasis is not solely on enforcement, but on building awareness, trust and accessible pathways across the community and justice system.

## Theme 1: Greater Disability Awareness and Training

The most consistent theme concerned the need for improved disability awareness and training within policing and the wider community. Respondents referred specifically to intellectual disability, capacity, intersectionality and rights based approaches.

| “Better awareness from Gardai.”

**Respondent 3**

| “More awareness of disability.”

**Respondent 7**

| “I would like more training for the Gardaí in intellectual disability and capacity to be given in their training.”

**Respondent 40**

| “Accessible information, films, education for kids and teenagers, peer training, training by people with disability to the trainee garda.”

**Respondent 41**

These responses indicate a perceived need for structured and ongoing training, including training delivered in partnership with disabled people themselves.

## Theme 2: Stronger Community Policing and Relationship Building

A second theme concerned the role of community policing and relationship building at local level. Respondents emphasised visibility, proactive engagement and regular contact.

| “A community guard on duty at all times.”

### Respondent 2

| “More working together in communities, Garda having positive relationships with services so individuals build trust.”

### Respondent 10

| “More police doing community work and community talk around abuse and protection.”

### Respondent 43

| “There is a particular role here for community Gardaí to respond proactively to reports of mate crime; engagement with disability support services to encourage and support the reporting of crime against persons with a disability.”

### Respondent 20

These responses suggest that community presence and sustained engagement are viewed as central to building trust and improving reporting.

### Theme 3: Inter Agency Coordination and Joint Working

Many respondents highlighted the need for improved coordination between Gardaí, disability services, social workers, advocacy bodies and community organisations.

| “Greater joint working.”

#### Respondent 1

| “More joined up thinking and forums that are inter-agency to ensure adequate communication, learning and sharing of resources/responses to tackle this form of abuse in a community focused manner.”

#### Respondent 25

| “There is a particular role here for community Gardaí to respond proactively to reports of mate crime; engagement with disability support services to encourage and support the reporting of crime against persons with a disability.”

#### Respondent 20

| “[A]gency’s that deal with disabled people living independently be more open to An Garda Síochána. [T]here does be a closing of ranks at times.”

#### Respondent 29

These responses reflect earlier findings in the survey indicating that barriers to justice are often linked to fragmented systems rather than policing alone.

## Theme 4: Prevention, Education and Public Awareness

Again, a strong preventative focus also emerged. Respondents called for education in schools, awareness campaigns and clearer information about reporting mechanisms.

| “More education and awareness.”

### Respondent 28

“The Vulnerable persons register is not something that people are aware of I think there should be some kind of campaign to inform people of it and who is on it. I think education is key it is something that should be taught in schools and disability services and it is a topic that should be visited regularly particularly with people who have an Intellectual Disability.”

### Respondent 33

| “Greater awareness and online videos of case examples and personal stories shared with consent”

### Respondent 38

| “An improvement in online reporting systems.”

### Respondent 34

The emphasis here extends beyond enforcement to community safety as a shared responsibility.

## Theme 5: Victim Support and Specialist Roles

Finally, respondents identified gaps in victim support and specialist capacity.

“Advocates at court service, to attend hearings with (service users consent). Appointment of a Garda Disability Liaison Officer in every county/region.”

### Respondent 36

“More supports available. It took two years for a space to become available for me on the mental health team.”

### Respondent 13

These responses suggest that improvements in policing must be accompanied by strengthened victim supports, advocacy and specialist roles to ensure that individuals can engage safely with the justice system.

## 3.23 Qualitative Analysis of Open Ended Responses: Improvements in Disability Services and Advocacy

Respondents were asked, “What improvements would you like to see in disability services and advocacy?” Thirty-seven respondents provided commentary in response to this question. This question was included to complement the earlier focus on policing and justice by examining the role of disability services, advocacy organisations and community supports in preventing and responding to mate crime. It recognises that safeguarding and autonomy are shaped by both the criminal justice systems and the design and resourcing of disability services. The responses indicate that improvements in disability services and advocacy are viewed as important in preventing mate crime. Again, education, independent advocacy, adequate funding and clear safeguarding pathways were repeatedly identified. The findings reinforce the view that prevention requires both empowerment of disabled people and structural reform within service that disabled people receive. Five clear themes ran through the responses.

## Theme 1: Education, Awareness and Accessible Information

Again, a strong theme concerned the need for education and accessible information for disabled people. Respondents called for easy read guides, videos, training courses and peer group discussions focused on recognising abuse, understanding rights and reporting safely.

“Easy read guides and videos on mate crime for persons with disability.”

### Respondent 2

Several respondents emphasised that individuals often do not recognise mate crime when it is happening. Accessible and repeated education was viewed as essential to prevention.

## Theme 2: Strengthening Advocacy and Independent Support

Many respondents highlighted the need for stronger and more accessible advocacy services. This included independent advocates, peer support and greater funding for advocacy organisations.

“More advocacy services I haven’t got the physical, mental and emotional energy to advocate for myself, and I often get dismissed and invalidated.”

### Respondent 13

There was also support for increased inclusion of people with disabilities in organisational decision making and policy development. It was noted that advocacy should not be provided when a crisis emerges but as ongoing support for autonomy and decision making.

“Education, increased community integration. focus on prevention rather than restriction and interventions which reduce people supported independence and engagement with their community.”

### Respondent 14

### Theme 3: Capacity Building Without Increasing Restriction

A recurring concern was that responses to mate crime should not result in greater restriction or risk averse practices. Respondents called for prevention and empowerment rather than reduced independence.

“Focus on prevention rather than restriction and interventions which reduce people supported independence.”

#### Respondent 28

This reflects earlier findings in the survey where fear of exploitation was linked to overprotection or reduced community participation.

### Theme 4: Resourcing, Funding and Service Gaps

Funding and staffing pressures were repeatedly identified. Respondents referred to limited service allocation, long waiting times and insufficient community based supports.

“More funding for staffing for vulnerable people living independently in the community”

#### Respondent 22

“Community-based services need to be upscaled with proper funding into the care and support sector so disabled people can live in the community for the entirety of their lifetime. Advocacy efforts should receive funding to support these services such as NGO’s providing circles of support and peer support services that bolster disabled peoples autonomy and provide support to their decision-making that respects their inherent legal capacity rights.”

#### Respondent 5

These responses suggest that safeguarding is closely linked to broader resourcing of disability and health services.

## Theme 5: Safeguarding Reform and Collaboration with Gardaí

A final theme again concerned safeguarding processes and coordination with policing. Respondents called for clearer safeguarding procedures, mandatory reporting of criminal concerns and greater collaboration with An Garda Síochána.

“Clearer safeguarding... All concerns considered criminal to be reported to the Gardaí.”

### Respondent 44

“More education around what a crime is. More collaboration with the Gardai in delivering talks on crime because most to not see mate crime when it is happening to them.”

### Respondent 33

Some respondents also emphasised the importance of managing expectations about Garda roles and ensuring that services understand what can and cannot be progressed through the criminal justice system.

## 3.24 Qualitative Analysis of Open Ended Responses: Legal and Policy Reform

Respondents were asked, “What legal or policy changes would most help prevent mate crime or support those affected?” Thirty-six respondents provided commentary in response to this question. This question was included to build directly on earlier survey questions. Previous questions explored awareness, reporting barriers, Garda responses and views on whether mate crime should be legally recognised as a specific offence. This question invited respondents to move from identifying gaps to articulating concrete legal and policy reforms. Four clear themes ran through the responses. The responses to this question indicate that respondents see legal reform, safeguarding legislation, mandatory training and strengthened victim supports as interconnected. The findings suggest that tackling mate crime will require more than improved Garda responses. Respondents are calling for changes in legislation, safeguarding frameworks and better practice in services that support disabled people.

## Theme 1: Legal Recognition and Criminalisation of Mate Crime

A clear theme concerned formal legal recognition. Several respondents explicitly called for mate crime to be criminalised as a distinct offence or for specific provisions within existing criminal law.

“Criminalisation of mate crime as a distinct offence and the forthcoming National Human Rights Strategy for Disabled People 2025-2030 must include targeted actions and initiatives for the prevention of violence, abuse and exploitation of disabled people in line with article 16 of the CRPD”

### Respondent 5

These responses align with earlier survey results in which 30 respondents supported legal recognition of mate crime. Some respondents also suggested procedural adaptations, such as exemptions to evidential rules or enabling family members to give evidence on behalf of a vulnerable person. This reflects earlier responses in which participants described Gardaí as saying there was not enough evidence to proceed, or that cases would not meet the threshold for prosecution.

## Theme 2: Safeguarding Legislation and Regulatory Reform

A second strong theme concerned safeguarding reform. Respondents repeatedly referred to the need for adult safeguarding legislation, regulation of services and clearer statutory duties.

“Enact Safeguarding legislation and Regulation of home care and private operators”

### Respondent 4

Others referred to OP-CAT ratification, updates to domestic violence legislation and adoption of Clare’s Law. These responses connect to earlier findings in which respondents described institutional and authority based abuse, gaps in reporting mechanisms and inconsistent responses within services.

### Theme 3: Training, Awareness and Statutory Obligations

Again, training and awareness were also framed as legal and policy matters. Respondents called for statutory training requirements for Gardaí, disability workers and professionals who may come into contact with disabled people.

“Ensure it’s a legal requirement for people to have disability awareness training.”

#### Respondent 24

These responses echo earlier survey findings in which respondents believed Garda training on disability awareness and mate crime was not adequate. The emphasis here moves from voluntary improvement to mandatory obligation.

### Theme 4: Victim Support, Reporting Mechanisms and Access to Justice

A final theme concerned strengthening support for victims within the legal process. Respondents again highlighted the need for accessible complaint mechanisms, confidential reporting options and greater support during court proceedings.

“Public Awareness and a disability Garda hotline to report mate crime.”

#### Respondent 36

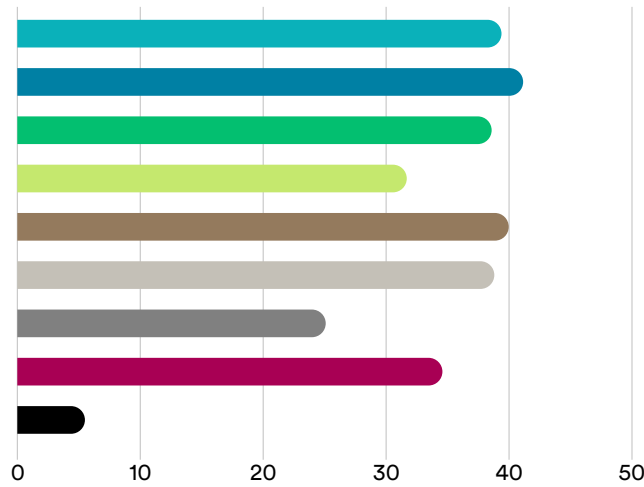
“Drop in service to confidentially discuss/report individuals personal experiences.”

#### Respondent 10

Some respondents also emphasised the need for Gardaí to actively investigate allegations and not dismiss complaints prematurely. These concerns reflect earlier qualitative responses describing barriers to reporting, fear of not being believed and inconsistent investigative responses.

### 3.25 Support, Training and Resources to Prevent Mate Crime

#### 14. What kind of support, training, or resources would help prevent mate crime?



● Disability awareness and safeguarding training for Gardaí and justice professionals	39
● Clear, accessible information about rights and how to report abuse	41
● Relationship and boundaries education	38
● Peer-led programmes or workshops	32
● Public awareness campaigns about mate crime	40
● Training for support workers and family members to recognise signs of abuse	38
● Stronger vetting and oversight of support staff	25
● Greater funding for advocacy and self-advocacy organisations	34
● Other	5

Respondents were asked, “What kind of support, training, or resources would help prevent mate crime?” A number of predefined options were offered and respondents could select all that apply. This question was included to identify preventative measures and capacity building needs across systems. Earlier questions examined experiences of abuse, barriers to reporting, Garda awareness and justice responses etc. This question sought to focus specifically on prevention and to identify what respondents believe would reduce risk and strengthen community safety.

The responses indicated strong support for a multi-layered approach. The most frequently selected option was clear, accessible information about rights and how to report abuse, identified by 41 respondents. Public awareness campaigns about mate crime were selected by 40 respondents. Disability awareness and safeguarding training for Gardaí and justice professionals was selected by 39 respondents. Education about relationships and boundaries and training for support workers and family members to recognise signs of abuse were each selected by 38 respondents. Peer-led programmes or workshops were selected by 32 respondents. Greater funding for advocacy and self-advocacy organisations was identified by 34 respondents. Stronger vetting and oversight of support staff was selected by 25 respondents. Five respondents selected the “other” option.

These findings indicate broad agreement that prevention cannot rest on a single intervention. Respondents supported awareness-raising within the general public, targeted training for professionals, and education for disabled people themselves regarding relationships and boundaries. The emphasis on accessible information and public campaigns reflects earlier findings in the survey that many individuals did not recognise abuse at the time it occurred. The strong support for training of Gardaí and justice professionals aligns with previous responses highlighting inconsistency in awareness and practice. Similarly, the emphasis on advocacy funding and peer-led programmes connects to earlier findings concerning fear, isolation and dependency as barriers to reporting. The responses here suggest that respondents view prevention as requiring co-ordinated action across policing, disability services, families, communities and advocacy organisations. The responses reinforced the view that mate crime is both a criminal justice issue and a safeguarding, education and community safety issue.

### **3.26 Qualitative Analysis of Open Ended Responses: Final Reflections**

Respondents were invited to share any final comments. Twenty-nine respondents provided additional reflections. As this was the final open-ended question in a survey that already contained multiple qualitative opportunities, some repetition of earlier themes was evident. However, this section also surfaced broader reflections on rights, loneliness, societal attitudes and the limits of policy reform. Four themes emerged. These final reflections do not introduce entirely new issues but deepen and reaffirm themes already identified across the survey: including gaps in safeguarding law, the central role of loneliness and social exclusion, the risk of over restrictive responses, and the enduring emotional harm caused by mate crime.

## Theme 1: Human Rights, Equality and Structural Failure

A number of respondents framed mate crime within a wider human rights context. They highlighted structural inequality, gaps in safeguarding legislation and the failure to fully implement existing rights commitments.

“This is a significant issue and warrants further research. There is group of professionals being silenced to safeguard. The legislative framework does not exist in any substantive way we do not align with UNCRPD only in name. The tokenistic policy approach needs challenge. No accountability exists due to the above. We are failing to respect people with disability.”

### Respondent 4

“If we recognise people with disabilities as having the same rights as others then they won’t be ‘othered’ and abuse will be taken more seriously.”

### Respondent 25

These comments reinforce earlier calls for safeguarding legislation, legal recognition and systemic reform. They also broaden the discussion by situating mate crime within ongoing concerns about dehumanisation and tokenistic policy approaches.

## Theme 2: Loneliness, Isolation and the Search for Connection

Loneliness emerged strongly as an underlying factor. Several respondents linked mate crime to reduced opportunities for friendship, intimacy and belonging.

“Loneliness and reduced access for people to make and have relationships is a huge area of need to reduce mate crime. Even when people knew they had been a victim of mate crime many said they were ok with this because it was better than being alone/lonely. They were ok for the exploitation to continue if it meant they could keep the friend/partner.”

### Respondent 14

“I am aware of several situations... due to a person’s loneliness and wish for love/affection/partner/sexual relationship they would prefer to have someone online to communicate with and experience coercive control and exploitation than be alone and find it difficult to give up on the dream that was initially promised as part of the grooming process.”

### Respondent 38

“I would hope there could be more of a focus on helping people with disabilities to make friends, join community groups and engage positively in society. A community campaign on making the effort with people in the community that are vulnerable or lonely would be more beneficial than a campaign to make people more wary or scared of strangers. We need to work harder as a society to include people in our communities and as service providers to create social groups and opportunities for people to get to know their communities and meet people in a positive way.”

### Respondent 16

This theme echoes earlier findings where fear of losing relationships was identified as a major barrier to reporting. It also aligns with responses on independent living and community participation, where isolation and limited social networks were described as increasing vulnerability.

### Theme 3: The Balance Between Protection and Restriction

Again a theme that emerged in this final question concerned the need to avoid overprotective responses. Respondents cautioned that reforms should not result in more restrictive or risk averse lives for disabled people.

“[A]ny changes in policy or law should focus on improving the lives of people with disabilities enabling them to lead fuller lives which will naturally then include risk. If the focus of policy or legislation is just on mate crime it will naturally lead to society making people with disabilities lead more risk adverse restricted lives and will only really be about protecting society from worry or the state from responsibility.”

#### Respondent 7

“It is a delicate balance in that some of the people complained of may be the primary supports for victims. There may be issues in relation to witness evidence in contested cases.”

#### Respondent 12

These reflections connect with earlier concerns that safeguarding responses can reduce independence. The emphasis here is on enabling fuller lives while addressing abuse, rather than using mate crime as justification for increased control.

### Theme 4: The Personal Impact and Urgency of the Issue

Finally, several responses returned to the profound personal impact of mate crime.

“Mate crime ruins lives.”

#### Respondent 11

“Mate crime causes exceptional undue emotional and psychological stress for people with disabilities. The service user that I support has developed a visibly tremor in his hands from fear. He is also constantly asking his day service staff “what’s going to happen to me”. He is in fear of leaving his home and avoids his back garden.”

#### Respondent 36

These accounts echo earlier qualitative responses describing anxiety, trauma, loss of trust and long term psychological harm. The repetition across multiple open-ended questions reinforces the depth of impact reported throughout the survey.

## 4. Conclusion

This survey provides a structured snapshot of how mate crime is understood, experienced and responded to in Ireland. While the overall number of responses was modest, the consistency of themes across both closed and open questions is of note. The same issues arose repeatedly, regardless of whether respondents were speaking from lived experience, professional roles in disability services, advocacy work, or engagement with the justice system.

Awareness of the term “mate crime” itself remains limited. Just over half of respondents had not previously heard the term. However, once the concept was explained, respondents were able to clearly describe the behaviours involved. Exploitation under the guise of friendship, targeting of perceived vulnerability, financial abuse, coercive control, and emotional manipulation were consistently identified. This suggests that the issue is recognised in practice, even if it is not consistently named.

The survey confirms that disability related abuse, including behaviour consistent with mate crime, is widely experienced and observed. Almost all respondents had personally experienced or witnessed abuse linked to disability. Financial exploitation and coercive control were the most frequently reported forms. Abuse was most often carried out by people known to the victim, including friends, family members, partners, carers and others within existing support networks. This shows that mate crime most often happens within relationships that appear close and familiar, where trust is already established.

The impact described was profound for the victims of this crime. Respondents reported trauma, anxiety, loss of confidence, shame and long term damage to trust. In many cases, the consequences extended beyond the immediate incident. People withdrew from community life, became more isolated, or experienced increased restriction on the basis of protection or safeguarding. Several respondents explicitly warned against responses to incidence of mate crime that reduce independence. The impact goes beyond the immediate incident or crime. It affects how people live, who they trust and how safe they feel in their communities.

A consistent thread throughout the chapter is the difficulty of recognising and reporting abuse. Most respondents felt that there was not enough information available to identify what was happening as a crime at the time. Fear of losing a relationship, fear of not being believed, and fear of losing support were major barriers to reporting. In some cases, the perpetrator was also the person’s main carer or source of companionship. These factors make reporting complex and emotionally difficult.

Responses relating to Garda awareness and justice processes present a mixed picture. Some respondents described compassionate and supportive engagement. Others described inconsistency, delays and evidential barriers. Very few believed that Garda training on disability awareness and mate crime is currently adequate. There was broad support for clearer training, stronger community policing, and better coordination between Gardaí, disability services, advocacy bodies and safeguarding teams. The data does not suggest that mate crime can be addressed by policing alone. It requires coordinated responses across systems.

Support for legal recognition of mate crime as a specific offence was strong, though not unanimous. Respondents also called for safeguarding legislation, clearer statutory duties, improved victim supports and accessible reporting pathways. It is of note that several respondents expressed concern that reforms could lead to more restrictive or risk averse approaches to disabled people's lives. The emphasis was on protection without reducing autonomy.

Prevention emerged as a shared priority. Respondents consistently identified the need for accessible information about rights, public awareness campaigns, disability awareness training, relationship and boundaries education, peer led programmes, and greater funding for advocacy. The responses indicate that mate crime sits within a wider set of issues. Respondents repeatedly referred to loneliness, social isolation, lack of accessible information and gaps in services.

**The survey findings place a premium on three interconnected issues:**

1. Mate crime is recognised in practice and experienced across different settings in Ireland.
2. Barriers to recognition, reporting and justice are both personal and structural.
3. Effective responses require co-ordinated legal, safeguarding, community and educational measures that strengthen rights without reducing people's independence and autonomy.

As a baseline study, this survey does not claim representativeness. However, the consistency of themes across 44 responses provides a strong foundation for the analysis that follows. When read alongside the focus groups and key informant interviews in subsequent chapters, these findings contribute to a clearer understanding of the scale, complexity and different aspects of mate crime in Ireland.



## **Findings from the Key Informant Interviews**

# 1. Introduction

This chapter presents the findings of the qualitative analysis of 20 key informant interviews conducted as part of this research project exploring experiences of targeted abuse against disabled people living independently in Ireland. The interviews were undertaken with professionals occupying a range of roles across disability services, safeguarding systems, advocacy organisations and the criminal justice system.

Participants included safeguarding practitioners, social workers, psychologists, advocacy representatives, policy advisors, researchers specialising in access to justice, and members of An Garda Síochána. The interviewees brought extensive professional experience in supporting disabled people, responding to safeguarding concerns, and addressing issues related to crime, vulnerability and community safety.

The purpose of the interviews was to explore professional perspectives on the nature, prevalence and dynamics of what is often referred to as mate crime. As discussed in the literature review in Chapter 2, the concept of mate crime has emerged in recent years as an important lens through which to understand certain forms of targeted abuse affecting disabled people. A growing body of research, particularly in the United Kingdom, has documented situations in which people befriend disabled people, or present themselves as friends, with the intention of exploiting or manipulating that relationship. The term mate crime is generally used to describe this form of abuse, which may involve financial exploitation, coercion, emotional manipulation, or pressure to participate in criminal or risky behaviour.

However, as outlined in chapter 2, the concept remains relatively underdeveloped within Irish policy and legal frameworks. There is currently limited public awareness of the issue and no systematic mechanisms for recording or analysing cases of exploitation that occur within relationships framed as friendship. As a result, many instances of such abuse are likely to be captured within broader safeguarding categories rather than being recognised explicitly as mate crime. This lack of conceptual recognition contributes to the limited visibility of the issue within official data, policy discussions and safeguarding practice. In light of these gaps, the key informant interviews sought to draw on the knowledge and experience of professionals who encounter such situations in their work. Through the interviews we sought to develop a clearer understanding of how exploitative relationships develop in practice, how they are currently recognised and responded to within existing systems, and what changes may be necessary to improve prevention and protection.

Across the interviews, participants described coming across situations in which disabled people had been exploited by people who presented themselves as friends or companions. In many cases, these relationships developed gradually and were characterised by trust and emotional connection before patterns of exploitation became apparent. Participants emphasised that such situations can be particularly difficult to identify and address because they often occur within informal social relationships that take place outside formal service environments. In this context, formal service environments refers to structured settings in which disability services provide organised support to people they support. These may include residential services, supported living arrangements, day services, community programmes or other organised supports delivered by disability service providers. Within these environments there are typically staff members, safeguarding procedures and organisational oversight intended to support people's safety. It was suggested that concerns about potential abuse or exploitation that arise within these settings are therefore more likely to be noticed and addressed through established safeguarding processes.

However, many of the relationships described by participants developed in ordinary community settings that fall outside these structured service contexts. Friendships may form through interactions in the community, local social networks, online communication, shared accommodation or encounters in public spaces such as shops, pubs or town centres. Because these relationships take place in everyday social settings rather than within organised services, they may not be visible to professionals or family members until concerns begin to emerge. As a result, patterns of exploitation may develop gradually over time before they come to the attention of support services or safeguarding systems.

It is of note that key informants emphasised that the fact that relationships develop outside formal service environments should not be viewed negatively, noting the right of disabled people to live independently and to participate fully in community life. Developing friendships, relationships and social networks beyond disability services is an important aspect of inclusion and personal autonomy. Many key informants stressed that disabled people should not be expected to limit their social lives to structured service settings in order to remain safe. Rather, the challenge identified in the interviews lies in ensuring that people can enjoy meaningful community participation while also having access to appropriate supports and safeguards when exploitation occurs. The experiences described by key informants highlight the need for approaches that strengthen community safety and awareness without undermining peoples' independence, choice and inclusion.

The interviews also highlighted the broader structural and social conditions that can increase vulnerability to exploitation. Participants repeatedly referred to the role of social isolation, limited opportunities for friendship, and barriers to community participation in shaping the contexts in which mate crime occurs. These factors create circumstances in which people may be particularly susceptible to manipulation by those who seek to exploit trust and friendship. Key informants also described significant challenges in responding effectively to such abuse. These challenges include barriers to reporting crime, gaps in safeguarding frameworks, difficulties engaging with the criminal justice system, and tensions between protecting people from exploitation while respecting their autonomy and right to live independently.

The thematic analysis followed the reflexive approach to qualitative analysis developed by Braun and Clarke<sup>148</sup>.

148. Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, *Thematic Analysis: A Practical Guide* (Sage 2021).

## 2. Theme 1: Recognition and Conceptualisation of Mate Crime

One of the most striking findings across the interviews was the limited recognition of mate crime as a distinct category of abuse among professionals working in disability services, safeguarding, and the justice system in Ireland.

While participants were able to readily identify examples of exploitation occurring within relationships framed as friendship, many reported that the specific term “mate crime” was unfamiliar or rarely used within their organisations. Participants suggested that the absence of a shared language for describing these forms of exploitation contributes to fragmented responses across different sectors. In practice, many professionals encounter situations that clearly involve manipulation, financial exploitation, coercion, or abuse within relationships that appear to be friendships. However, without a commonly recognised term such as “mate crime” to describe this pattern of behaviour, these incidents are often interpreted and recorded in different ways depending on the organisational context in which they arise.

“I was sharing what I first heard the term in the National Federation of Voluntary Bodies... I’d never heard it before. It was new to me... and then I started reading it and I shared it with the team, and they were just so excited by it because they’re like, oh my God, that’s awful... this is what we’re dealing with.”

### **K108 Principal Clinical Psychologist**

Participants suggested that the absence of a shared language for describing these forms of exploitation contributes to fragmented responses across different sectors. In practice, many professionals encounter situations that clearly involve manipulation, financial exploitation, coercion, or abuse within relationships that appear to be friendships. However, without a commonly recognised term such as “mate crime” to describe this pattern of behaviour, these incidents are often interpreted and recorded in different ways depending on the context in which they arise. For example, in disability services such situations may be understood primarily through safeguarding frameworks and categorised under existing forms of abuse such as financial abuse, emotional abuse, or coercive relationships. Within policing contexts, the same behaviours may be treated as individual offences such as theft, fraud, assault, or harassment without necessarily recognising how the exploitation occurs through a relationship that appears to be friendship. Similarly, in policy or advocacy settings, these cases may be discussed more broadly in terms of vulnerability, safeguarding failures, or barriers to independent living rather than being identified as a distinct form of targeted abuse.

Participants also noted that the absence of a common terminology across sectors can contribute to fragmented and inconsistent responses to situations of exploitation. In practice, professionals often encounter different aspects of the same situation depending on their role or organisational responsibilities. A disability service provider may first observe changes in behaviour, financial difficulties, or new relationships that raise safeguarding concerns. A community Garda may encounter incidents involving theft, fraud, or antisocial behaviour. Advocacy organisations may focus on the person's right to autonomy and independent living, while social workers may be concerned with questions of capacity, vulnerability, and support needs. When each of these actors interprets the situation through their own professional frameworks, the broader pattern of exploitation can remain obscured.

“[I]t often depends on what our relationship might be with the other agency. And that goes for the Guards, it goes for the HSE, it goes for Safeguarding Protection teams as well.”

#### **KI11 Professional Working in Disability Services (1)**

Participants suggested that without a shared conceptual understanding of mate crime, responses may remain reactive rather than preventative. It was suggested that intervention might only occur once harm has become visible or when a specific safeguarding or a criminal offence is identified. In the absence of a recognised category linking these incidents together, opportunities to recognise early warning signs may be missed. As a result, people may experience prolonged periods of exploitation before concerns are formally identified or addressed.

“Things are not getting as far as the DPP... massive under reporting”

#### **KI09 Senior Prosecutorial Official**

Several interviewees also highlighted that a lack of conceptual clarity can create uncertainty about responsibility and appropriate intervention. When a situation appears to involve a voluntary relationship between adults, practitioners may hesitate to intervene out of concern that doing so could undermine the person's autonomy or right to make their own decisions.

“The right to be free means the freedom to make a bad decision.”

#### **KI16 Principal Social Worker (2)**

This tension was particularly evident in discussions about the move towards more rights-based approaches in disability services, including the emphasis on autonomy, supported decision making, and positive risk taking. While these developments are widely regarded as essential to advancing the rights of disabled people, they can also create complex situations where practitioners must balance respect for autonomy with the need to recognise and respond to exploitation.

“We're trying to move away from the medicalised paternalistic care to more freedom. But we can't live in la-la land either.”

#### **KI16 Principal Social Worker (2)**

“So, you’re always kind of on that tightrope of how to build capacity, trying to promote their rights whilst at the same time trying to kind of navigate that with families who may be very controlling and very paternalistic and have a huge sense of their own rights towards their disabled relative”

#### **K1107 Safeguarding Principal Social Worker**

Key informants described how this tension can lead to situations in which warning signs might be initially interpreted as lifestyle choices or interpersonal conflicts rather than as indicators of abuse. For example, when a person repeatedly gives money to someone, they consider to be a friend, professionals may be reluctant to question the relationship too quickly for fear of appearing overly protective or paternalistic. Similarly, situations in which someone allows others to stay in their home or becomes involved in questionable activities may initially be framed as expressions of independence or social participation. However, interviewees noted that over time these situations can reveal patterns of coercion, manipulation, or exploitation that were not immediately visible.

“He had a girlfriend... he told a worker in the day service that he had gone to the bank with his new girlfriend... ‘she really helped me because she told me that my shed should be insured’... so she set up a weekly direct debit for him to insure his shed... she’s siphoning off the money.”

#### **K116 Principal Social Worker (2)**

Several key informants suggested that a clearer conceptual framework for identifying mate crime could support earlier and more confident decision making by practitioners. If staff members are trained to recognise the common patterns associated with mate crime, they may feel better equipped to distinguish between ordinary social relationships and situations where someone is being targeted for exploitation. This does not necessarily mean intervening in ways that restrict a person’s autonomy. Rather, it may involve providing information, discussing potential risks, supporting the person to reflect on the relationship, or ensuring that appropriate safeguards are in place. Participants also suggested that the development of a shared understanding of mate crime could improve collaboration between different sectors. Where professionals across disability services, safeguarding systems, advocacy organisations, and the criminal justice system share a common language for describing these forms of exploitation, it becomes easier to exchange information, identify patterns, and coordinate responses. In contrast, when incidents are interpreted solely within the frameworks of singular organisations, knowledge about emerging risks may remain dispersed and fragmented.

“Maybe we could find a campaign for vulnerable people or older people to look out for the characteristics of a mate crime.”

#### **K120 Garda (2)**

It was suggested that this conceptual clarity was important for more coordinated responses. For example, recognising mate crime as a distinct form of exploitation that occurs through relationships of trust and friendship may help services to develop preventative strategies, provide targeted training, and ensure that individuals at risk receive appropriate support. Key informants also emphasised that raising awareness of the concept could also help shift the focus from viewing incidents as isolated cases of poor decision making towards recognising them as part of a broader pattern of targeted abuse affecting disabled people.

“It’s more common than we know and it’s quite common in the work we’re doing.”

#### **KI17 Safeguarding Practitioner (4)**

More broadly, interviewees suggested that recognising mate crime as a distinct issue could contribute to greater visibility of the problem within policy and practice. It was noted that when forms of abuse remain unnamed or poorly understood, they are less likely to be systematically recorded, monitored, or addressed through policy frameworks. Conversely, developing a clearer conceptual understanding of mate crime may support the development of more consistent safeguarding responses, improved data collection, and more informed policy discussions about how best to protect people while respecting their rights to autonomy and participation in community life.

“When there’s no legislation, people immediately think there’s nothing you can do and that becomes the narrative.”

#### **KI20 Garda (1)**

Key informants emphasised that improving recognition of mate crime requires more than introducing new terminology. It was suggested that there was a need to develop a shared understanding across sectors of how exploitation can occur within relationships that appear to be based on friendship or trust. The view of key informants was that strengthening awareness of these dynamics, services and policymakers may be better equipped to identify emerging risks, support people who may be vulnerable to exploitation, and respond in ways that protect both safety and autonomy.

“I mean obviously that’s the reason people do it, they target people, they prey on their vulnerability, and they befriend them and all that... and then they take advantage of that.”

#### **KI19 Garda (1)**

## 3. Theme 2: Forms and Dynamics of Exploitation

Across the interviews, key informants described a wide range of situations in which disabled people had been exploited by people presenting themselves as friends.

Although the specific circumstances varied, key informants consistently identified recurring patterns in how exploitation develops within the examples shared. These patterns often involved the gradual development of trust, followed by escalating demands that placed people at financial, emotional, or personal risk. Key informants emphasised that mate crime is shaped by the fact that the exploitation occurs within relationships that appear to be friendships or are based on trust. The particular relationship can make it more difficult for the person experiencing mate crime and others around them to recognise exploitation at an early stage. To better understand these dynamics, three interrelated forms of exploitation emerged across the interviews: financial exploitation, relational manipulation and grooming, and involvement in harmful or criminal activities.

### 3.1 Financial Exploitation

Financial exploitation emerged as the most frequently reported form of abuse across the interviews. Participants described numerous situations in which people had been persuaded to lend money repeatedly to acquaintances who promised repayment but failed to honour these commitments. In some cases, people had been manipulated into sharing bank cards or granting access to financial resources. Professionals working in disability services and adult safeguarding noted that these situations often develop gradually and may initially appear to be ordinary acts of generosity between friends.

“I’ve seen situations where somebody keeps asking for small amounts of money... and the person thinks they’re just helping a friend out, but it keeps happening again and again.”

#### **KI17 Safeguarding Practitioner**

Participants emphasised that requests for financial assistance often begin with relatively small or seemingly reasonable requests. Because these requests occur within relationships framed as friendships, people may feel obliged to help.

“It’s easy to fall for something like that when someone portrays themselves as a friend... you’re putting your trust in this person.”

#### **KI20 Garda (2)**

However, once trust has been established the scale and frequency of requests may increase. Several key informants described situations where people were gradually persuaded to provide larger sums of money or to make ongoing financial commitments.

“She had an inheritance that she had received of €28,000 into a savings account from her father, €14,000 of it disappeared in about 3 weeks ...he was eventually arrested”

#### **KI16 Principal Social Worker**

Key informants suggested that the effect of repeated requests can result in significant financial harm, particularly where people feel emotionally invested in maintaining the relationship. It was suggested that at first may appear as a one-off act, such as lending money, buying items, or covering an expense for someone, can escalate over time into sustained patterns of financial abuse. It was also noted that the ongoing nature of these requests can normalise the behaviour, making it more difficult for the person to recognise it as exploitative or wrong. This can be further compounded by the emotional dynamics involved, where people may prioritise preserving the relationship, avoiding conflict, or sustaining a sense of companionship, even where the financial impact becomes substantial. Therefore, financial exploitation can build gradually rather than through a single identifiable incident, making it less visible and more difficult to intervene.

“It might maybe start off at somebody like, you know, borrowing cigarettes and then could lead to bigger things where we actually have had somebody pay for somebody else’s washing machine... and then the other person was like, well, they didn’t mind.”

#### **KI17 Safeguarding Practitioner (4)**

### **3.2 Manipulation and Grooming**

Beyond financial exploitation, participants highlighted the importance of understanding the relational dynamics that enable exploitation to occur. Several interviewees described how people seeking to exploit someone may deliberately cultivate trust and emotional connection before introducing requests or behaviours that serve their interests. This process was often described as gradual and difficult to detect, particularly in the early stages of a relationship.

“I mean obviously that’s the reason people do it, they target people, they prey on their vulnerability and they befriend them... and then they take advantage of that.”

#### **KI19 Garda (1)**

Key informants noted that these relationships can initially appear supportive or caring, which can make it difficult for people and others to recognise emerging risks. In some cases, the relationship may provide a sense of companionship or belonging that the person values highly.

“You’re in the bubble of this friendship and it’s lovely and you’re cared for, and then next thing money is going missing.”

#### **KI20 Garda (2)**

Because the relationship is experienced as a friendship, the realisation that someone has taken advantage of that trust can cause significant emotional distress. Key informants noted that the betrayal of trust may lead to feelings of shame, confusion, or embarrassment. It was noted that this emotional complexity can make it difficult for people to acknowledge the situation as abuse or to seek support or advice from others.

“There can be real shame associated... where they could potentially realise that this is after happening and... they’re embarrassed that this may have happened to them.”

**KI01 Senior Policy Advisor**

### **3.3 Exploitation through Risky or Criminal Activities**

Participants also described situations where a person had been drawn into activities that placed them at personal and legal risk. In some cases, people were encouraged or pressured to participate in substance misuse, antisocial behaviour, or criminal activity. In other cases, people were persuaded to provide accommodation or other forms of support to people who subsequently exploited them. Professionals working in policing and safeguarding contexts noted that such situations often arise when people seeking to exploit someone recognise that they may be socially isolated or open or eager for friendship. As one key informant explained:

“[O]ver the years we’ve had a number of situations of people who have their own accommodation where... people would be coming and taking advantage of them one way or another and staying in and basically taking control of the house.”

**KI03 Safeguarding Practitioner (1)**

Key informants suggested that the nature of these relationships can make it difficult for others to recognise the broader pattern of exploitation. Again, incidents may initially appear as isolated events, such as theft, fraud, or antisocial behaviour, rather than being recognised as part of an ongoing exploitative relationship. Key informants also emphasised that the gradual nature of these dynamics can delay recognition of exploitation until significant harm has already occurred.

“It is that very gradual incremental... exercise of power and control over a period of time.”

**KI07 Safeguarding Principal Social Worker**

Therefore, key informants emphasised the importance of recognising the relational and social dynamics that underpin mate crime. They indicated that understanding how trust, friendship, and emotional connection can be manipulated is essential in identifying situations of exploitation earlier and responding in ways that protect people while respecting their autonomy.

## 4. Theme 3: Social Isolation and Structural Vulnerability

Another prominent theme across the interviews was the role of social isolation in shaping vulnerability to mate crime. Key informants repeatedly emphasised that many people with intellectual disabilities experience limited opportunities to form and sustain friendships within the wider community. This was described as a consequence of the social and structural conditions in which people live.

### 4.1 Constrained Social Networks and Limited Opportunities for Connection and Belonging

Key informants described how, for many disabled people, everyday interactions take place primarily within structured or service-based environments such as residential settings, day services, or supported employment. It was noted that while these settings provide essential support, they do not always create opportunities for people to develop friendships outside of services or to build relationships within their wider community.

“A lot of the people we support would have quite small circles... it might be staff, family, and maybe one or two peers, but not much beyond that.”

#### KI11 Professional Working in Disability Services (1)

As a result, opportunities to form new relationships in broader community settings are often limited. Several key informants emphasised that this could lead to relatively closed social networks, where contact with others outside formal supports is infrequent.

“With more independent people it is fairly common... but a huge risk is isolation... loneliness... sometimes people feel like it’s anything as opposed to nothing.”

#### KI03 Safeguarding Practitioner (3)

Key informants identified that limited opportunities for meaningful inclusion in the community can result in new relationships taking on a heightened level of importance in people’s lives.

### 4.2 Loneliness, Emotional Need, and the Value of Friendship

Key informants highlighted the emotional dimensions of social isolation. The desire for companionship, belonging, and friendship was described as a key factor impacting upon how people respond to relationships that become exploitative.

As discussed above situations where people experience loneliness, the emergence of a new friendship may be particularly meaningful. As a result, people may place a high value on maintaining that relationship, even where concerns arise. This illustrates how exploitation can be embedded within relationships that are experienced as positive and supportive. The emotional benefits of companionship may obscure or delay recognition of harm or concerns within the friendship / relationship. Several key informants noted that people may be reluctant to challenge or question behaviour within these relationships due to fear of losing the friendship.

“[T]hat person goes, there’s nobody else there... and that’s the reality for some people.”

#### **KI07 Safeguarding Principal Social Worker**

A number of key informants also highlighted the emotional consequences when the exploitation becomes evident. It was suggested that feelings of shame, embarrassment, or self-blame may make it difficult for people to disclose what has happened or to seek support. It was also noted that the emotional complexity can contribute to prolonged periods of exploitation, as situations remain unreported or the conduct of friends or trusted persons minimised.

“There’s a whole load of shame in general about being a person with an intellectual disability in Ireland... that shame really comes crashing in because you have to kind of admit out loud while this is happening and I have been vulnerable”

#### **KI15 Chief Executive Officer, National Disability Representative Organisation**

### **4.3 Structural Barriers and Enduring Forms of Social Exclusion**

Key informants consistently located these dynamics within broader structural conditions. Vulnerability to mate crime was not understood as arising from disability itself, but from the social environments in which disabled people live. Several key informants pointed to the legacy of historically segregated models of care, noting that although policy has shifted towards community-based supports, many of the underlying barriers to inclusion remain.

“We’ve moved away from institutional models, but the reality is people are still quite separate in how they live their lives.”

#### **KI09 Senior Prosecutorial Official**

Key informants identified a range of structural barriers that continue to limit meaningful participation in community life. These included inaccessible environments, limited transport options, and restricted opportunities to take part in social and recreational activities, as well as ongoing social stigma.

“I’ve seen people being restricted from going out in the evening who are well able to travel independently but are told no, you might be at risk.”

#### **KI06 Disability Advocate**

The distinction between presence and participation in the community was discussed by a number of key informants. Living in the community does not necessarily equate to having access to meaningful social relationships. Key informants also emphasised that these structural conditions could create environments in which exploitation is more likely to occur. It was noted that people who are socially isolated may be more open to forming relationships quickly, particularly where those relationships offer companionship or a sense of belonging.

“I think a huge risk is isolation, that’s what makes it worse. Loneliness, I think a lot of people may see red flags or may not, sometimes they feel like it’s anything as opposed to nothing.”

#### **KI04 Safeguarding Practitioner (2)**

Across the interviews, social isolation was consistently identified as a key condition shaping vulnerability to mate crime. However, participants were clear that this vulnerability does not arise from disability itself, rather it reflects the cumulative effects of limited social networks, limited opportunities for participation, and enduring structural barriers to inclusion in the community. Therefore, addressing mate crime requires responding to individual incidents of exploitation, but also engaging with the broader social conditions that limit opportunities for connection, belonging, and meaningful participation in community life.

## **5. Theme 4: Barriers to Reporting and Access to Justice**

Another consistent theme across the interviews was that experiences of exploitation are significantly underreported, and that a range of interconnected barriers can prevent people from seeking support or engaging with the criminal justice system in Ireland. It was suggested that addressing these barriers requires reporting and justice processes that are accessible, supportive, and respectful of autonomy, and that take account of the social and emotional realities in which exploitation occurs. Key informants also emphasised that difficulties in reporting exploitation should be understood as part of the broader dynamics of mate crime, rather than as arising from the individual decision making of the person affected to report or not.

### **5.1 Emotional Barriers: Shame, Self-Blame and Fear of Judgement**

A key barrier identified across the interviews was the emotional impact of this type of exploitation, particularly feelings of shame, embarrassment, and self-blame. Key informants emphasised that because mate crime occurs within relationships framed as friendship, people may struggle to reconcile the experience of trust with the reality of exploitation. This can lead to internalised responsibility, where people feel that they should have recognised what was happening or prevented it themselves.

“I think part of it can be embarrassment... because someone has portrayed themselves as a friend and then it turns out they were taking advantage of that.”

#### **KI20 Garda (2)**

Key informants also noted that this emotional response can significantly delay or prevent disclosure. The perceived judgement of others, including family members, professionals, or authority figures, may further discourage people who experience mate crime from coming forward.

“Sometimes they don’t want to say anything... because they feel they should have known or that people will question why they let it happen.”

#### **KI11 Professional Working in Disability Services (1)**

## 5.2 Fear of Losing Independence and Increased Restrictions

A second major barrier relates to concerns about the consequences of reporting, particularly the potential loss of autonomy and freedom. Key informants described situations where people were reluctant to disclose exploitation because they feared that doing so would result in increased supervision, restrictions, or loss of independence.

“That’s often the fear... that if this is reported, then suddenly there will be more restrictions put in place around them.”

### **KI07 Safeguarding Principal Social Worker**

For people who have worked towards independent living, reporting abuse may be perceived as risking a return to more restrictive forms of support. It was suggested that this creates a significant disincentive to engage with safeguarding or justice processes. A number of key informants linked this concern to broader practices within services, where protective responses can sometimes result in limitations on access to money, social activities, or community participation.

“Being at risk of something is not a valid reason to deny somebody access to their finances... but that’s often what happens.”

### **KI06 Disability Advocate**

This highlights a key tension identified across the interviews in that efforts to protect a person from harm may inadvertently create additional barriers to reporting by reinforcing fears of loss of control and independence in the person’s life.

## 5.3 Systemic and Procedural Barriers within the Justice System

Key informants also identified a range of structural and procedural barriers that can limit access to justice for people who experience mate crime. These included challenges relating to communication, capacity assessments, and perceptions of credibility. Key informants noted that people may be discouraged from reporting where there is an assumption that they will not be viewed as reliable witnesses or that cases are unlikely to progress.

“I have had cases where there were vulnerable victims and they had been abused for their vulnerability... sexual offences and we had difficulties then trying to prosecute those cases”

### **KI09 Senior Prosecutorial Official**

Concerns were also raised about how issues of capacity are approached within investigative processes of instances of mate crime. It was suggested that in some cases, uncertainty about a person’s ability to provide evidence may result in cases not proceeding.

“[t]here is an issue around the capacity of the person being inferred that they would not be a good informant... there’s also another issue around cotton wool procedures or whatever. You know, saying it would be better not to take this further. Let’s take other actions rather than engaging with the Gardaí”

#### **KI06 Disability Advocate**

These dynamics can contribute to a perception that engaging with the justice system is unlikely to result in a meaningful outcome, further discouraging reporting.

### **5.4 Reliance on Third Parties and Limited Supported Reporting**

Another recurring theme across the interviews was that reports of exploitation are often initiated by third parties, such as family members, support staff, or service providers, rather than by the person who experienced mate crime. While this can be an important safeguard, it also raises questions about participation and autonomy in decision-making. Participants highlighted that people may not always be fully involved in decisions about whether or how to report abuse.

“It very much presents either in the realm of a service provider expressing concern or being involved in some sort of investigation or safeguarding process, or there has been a report made to the Gardaí...”

#### **KI06 Disability Advocate**

This reflects a broader issue identified across the interviews, namely the need to support people to recognise exploitation and to engage with reporting processes in ways that respect their autonomy. However, it is of note that key informants also emphasised that reporting systems themselves can be intimidating or unfamiliar, particularly for people with limited prior engagement with the justice system.

“I guess to make a report anywhere to any sort of public authority is daunting. It can feel a bit, a bit traumatic. Certainly, if there has been a previous encounter that was negative, it can discourage anybody from, you know, coming back to the Guards, people not being taken seriously is another thing that stops people from coming to us.”

#### **KI19 Garda (1)**

Across the interviews, the barriers to reporting were described as multi-faceted and involve factors such as the interaction of emotional, structural, and systemic dynamics. Feelings of shame and self-blame, fears about loss of independence, and limitations within justice processes combine to create significant obstacles to disclosure of mate crime. It is of note that these barriers reflect broader tensions between protection and autonomy. While safeguarding and justice systems are intended to respond to risk and harm, they may also be perceived as threatening independence or failing to accommodate the needs of a person who has experienced mate crime. Addressing these barriers requires the development of reporting and access to justice frameworks that are accessible, supportive, and grounded in respect for autonomy, while also recognising the complex social and emotional contexts in which exploitation occurs.

## 6. Theme 5: Safeguarding Systems and Institutional Responses

Safeguarding systems were consistently identified by key informants as important in responding effectively to concerns about abuse within disability services or people supported to live independently.

Key informants described a range of safeguarding procedures designed to identify and respond to potential harm affecting people receiving supports. However, a strong and recurring theme was that these systems are not always well equipped to respond to forms of exploitation that occur beyond formal service environments.

Key informants emphasised that existing safeguarding frameworks have largely developed in response to abuse occurring within institutional or service-based settings. As a result, safeguarding has developed and been structured around contexts in which organisations have clear oversight and responsibility. By contrast, it was suggested that mate crime often occurs within informal social relationships and in community settings that fall outside these traditional boundaries of service delivery. This limitation was reflected in accounts of how safeguarding thresholds are applied in practice. In some cases, situations involving exploitation were not taken forward because they were perceived as falling outside the scope of the organisation's safeguarding frameworks.

“[W]hen... safeguarding brought into the mix... safeguarding will refuse to get involved because they would see that people are willingly being involved in situations. So, there's safeguarding policies we would have... concerns we don't want to see people overly safeguarded either because it does restrict rights, but also, we see on the other side that people don't want to be put in getting involved and they feel that it's not a matter that's meeting the threshold or criteria for... adult safeguarding policy”.

**KI06 Disability Advocate**

This highlights a significant gap between experiences of mate crime and the frameworks designed to respond to it. Where harm occurs within relationships that appear voluntary or consensual, safeguarding systems may struggle to recognise or respond to the underlying dynamics of that exploitation. A related challenge identified across the interviews relates to the difficulty of responding to relationships that are framed as consensual. A number of key informants described how the person may continue to engage in relationships despite concerns about exploitation, particularly where those relationships provide companionship or a sense of belonging. This creates complex dilemmas for professionals, who seek to balance respect for autonomy with concerns about risk.

“They don’t see the way people take advantage of them as being abusive... the friendship thing outweighs them being abused.”

### **KI13 Professional Working in Disability Services (3)**

As discussed earlier in this chapter, participants also raised concerns about restrictive responses introduced in the name of protection. In the context of safeguarding, several interviewees described situations in which efforts to prevent exploitation resulted in measures that limited access to money, restricted social interactions, or reduced opportunities for participation in community life. While such measures are often introduced with protective intentions, participants emphasised that they could undermine autonomy and reinforce paternalistic approaches. Therefore, safeguarding responses may inadvertently reproduce some of the very conditions that disability rights frameworks seek to challenge.

“I think that the way the system works is the safeguards sometimes restrict the victim because if something happens and next thing you see the person who reported it in, their life becomes so small because staff are worried and this risk starts dictating everything... They’re still living in their own apartment, but they can’t leave it without a staff. And it’s almost like sometimes they are in prison for being a victim.”

### **KI12 Professional Working in Disability Services (2)**

This reflects a broader tension that emerged across the interviews between protection and autonomy. While safeguarding systems are designed to reduce risk, they may also be experienced as limiting independence or restricting opportunities for living in and being included in the community. Therefore, participants highlighted the importance of approaches that move beyond a purely protective model that prioritises empowerment, rights recognition, and supported decision-making. This includes ensuring that people are supported to understand risks, make informed choices, and exercise control over their own lives.

“If we just take it through a very narrow lens of just safeguarding legislation, we end up with people living highly regulated lives within service provision but not actually tackling the real world issues that people face and the real world opportunities that people should have, which is to live... as part of the community with the supports that you need to do so.”

**KI15 Chief Executive Officer, National Disability Representative Organisation**

The effectiveness of safeguarding responses was closely linked to the extent of interagency collaboration. Many interviewees emphasised that addressing exploitation in community contexts requires coordinated responses involving disability services, advocacy organisations, safeguarding teams, and the Gardaí. Where such collaboration was present, responses were described as more effective and more responsive to the needs of people experiencing mate crime. However, participants also noted that collaboration is not always consistent and can be shaped by differing organisational priorities and resource constraints.

“There are a lot of different anomalies in the approaches... and a lot of restrictions to stop things happening in the first place.”

**KI06 Disability Advocate**

“[J]ust listening to the experiences of the others is that it often depends on what our relationship might be with the other agency... that goes for the Guards, it goes for the HSE, it goes for Safeguarding Protection teams as well.”

**KI14 Professional Working in Disability Services (4)**

A related concern raised by key informants was the continuing absence of a statutory safeguarding framework in Ireland, despite the recommendations of the Law Reform Commission. Several interviewees suggested that the lack of legislative underpinning weakens the overall safeguarding response and contributes to uncertainty about roles, thresholds, and powers of intervention, particularly where abuse occurs outside disability services or in community settings. In the absence of a clear statutory framework, safeguarding was described as overly dependent on policy, local practice, and individual service responses, resulting in uneven and inconsistent approaches. This key informant spoke to the way in which the absence of safeguarding legislation limits the authority and scope of social work intervention in cases of abuse and exploitation.

“I do think so. I think sometimes it can be hard to be a social worker in this area. We don't have as much of a legal stance as some social workers in other areas.”

**KI17 Safeguarding Practitioner (4)**

The key informants highlighted the complex and often contradictory role of safeguarding systems in responding to mate crime. Key informants consistently identified the absence of a statutory safeguarding framework as a significant gap, contributing to inconsistency, uncertainty, and limited powers of intervention they also expressed concern in relation to an over-reliance on safeguarding as a solution. In particular, there was a clear concern that responses framed primarily through risk and protection can lead to overly restrictive practices that undermine autonomy, independence, and the right to participate in community life.

“Sometimes we have to balance the person’s safety with maintaining their engagement, because involvement with the social work service is voluntary. If someone decides they no longer want to work with us, that can create real difficulties. Thankfully, that doesn’t happen too often, but it does mean you can’t go in like a bull in a China shop trying to sort things out.”

#### **KI17 Safeguarding Practitioner (4)**

While the development of safeguarding legislation was widely described as necessary and overdue, participants emphasised that it must be grounded in a human rights-based approach. This includes ensuring that safeguarding responses are proportionate, person-centred, and oriented towards empowerment, rather than control, and that they support people to navigate risk, exercise choice, and maintain meaningful connections within their communities.

## **7. Theme 6: Training, Awareness and Self-Guarding**

**Across the interviews, a consistent and cross-cutting issue emerged in relation to the need for enhanced training and awareness among professionals working across disability services, safeguarding systems, and the criminal justice system.**

While key informants demonstrated significant experience in responding to safeguarding concerns and supporting disabled people who experience exploitation, many emphasised that there is currently limited structured training specifically focused on recognising and responding to mate crime. A number of key informants noted that the concept of mate crime itself is not widely embedded within professional training or practice. As discussed in Theme 1, many professionals were unfamiliar with the term prior to engagement with research or external discussions. This lack of conceptual clarity was also reflected in training gaps, where key people working in disability services or the administration of justice may not be equipped to identify the relational and gradual dynamics of exploitation that characterise mate crime. In the absence of targeted training, these situations tend to be framed within existing categories of abuse, which can obscure the way exploitation develops over time within relationships.

“I think there there’s definitely a lack of awareness of that and if you look at the main kind of areas of abuse it’s nearly it. It could be overarching with lots of them. So, I think it definitely would be something well worth sticking into safeguarding policy, safeguarding training to kind of make people just think.”

#### **KI08 Principal Clinical Psychologist**

Key informants suggested that training is particularly important in supporting professionals to navigate the tension between respecting autonomy and responding to risk. As highlighted across earlier themes, practitioners are working within a rights-based framework that emphasises independence, supported decision-making, and positive risk-taking. However, key informants noted that without appropriate training, this can lead to uncertainty about when and how to intervene in situations that may involve exploitation.

Importantly, key informants emphasised that training cannot be confined to professional working in disability services or in the administration of justice. A number of key informants emphasised the need to resource disabled people themselves with the knowledge, skills, and confidence to recognise and respond to exploitation. This included supporting people to understand the dynamics of relationships, identify early warning signs, and make informed decisions about trust and their own boundaries. Key informants highlighted the importance of moving beyond a model of protection that relies primarily on professional intervention, towards an approach that also strengthens people’s own capacity to keep themselves safe.

“I suppose it’s usually when something has already happened, or there’s been a near miss, that we would get involved in empowering someone. It would tend to be one-to-one, talking through how they might safeguard themselves to a certain extent. But as a more general, preventative approach, I don’t think that’s something we’ve really considered or developed in a structured way. It does happen informally within services, but not as a defined or proactive model.”

#### **KI16 Professional Working in Disability Services (1)**

While the term “self-guarding” (see literature review) was not explicitly used by key informants, the concept was clearly reflected in these accounts. Participants pointed towards approaches that support people to recognise risk, exercise judgement, and retain control over their own lives, rather than positioning safety as something delivered solely by services or family members. This reflects a shift towards a more enabling model of safeguarding, where people are supported to develop the skills and awareness necessary to navigate relationships and respond to potential exploitation.

Training was also identified as necessary to support more consistent responses across the justice system. Participants described how different professionals, including disability service staff, safeguarding teams, Gardaí, and advocacy organisations, may interpret the same situation in different ways depending on their training and organisational frameworks. This can contribute to fragmented responses and missed opportunities for early intervention. Several interviewees suggested that joint or interagency training could help to develop a shared understanding of mate crime and improve coordination between services.

“You know you used to be able to phone the local Guards and say, look, this person is dabbling in drugs, or this person is engaging in this behaviour, and can you just have an informal chat with them? As of lately, they won’t do that. They’re saying they have to have a formal statement, and I do think it brings it to another level then.”

#### **KI14 Professional Working in Disability Services (4)**

This key informant emphasised that the presence or absence of specialist training within An Garda Síochána can significantly shape responses to incidents, noting in particular the positive role played by Gardaí with expertise in working with persons with intellectual disability.

“You’re so dependent on a good relationship with the Guards and that they won’t flip the person into a criminal, even though technically you could say all right, they are doing some criminal things... But you know the specialist Garda people for vulnerable persons. They’re very good to deal with. We’ve had nothing but a good experience with them.”

#### **KI16 Principal Social Worker (2)**

In addition, key informants highlighted the importance of training that addresses the broader social and dynamics within relationships that underpin mate crime, including loneliness, social isolation, and the significance of belonging. It was suggested that without this wider understanding, there is a risk that responses focus narrowly on individual incidents rather than recognising the range of conditions that enable exploitation to occur and continue. The key informants indicated that training is a key component in strengthening responses to mate crime. The absence of consistent and targeted training contributes to gaps in recognition, uncertainty in decision-making, and variability in practice across sectors. It is noteworthy that while participants emphasised that effective responses must include investment in the knowledge and agency of disabled people themselves. Self-guarding emerged as a key complementary dimension of safeguarding, one that supports people to recognise, resist, and respond to exploitation while maintaining autonomy, choice, and participation in community life.

## 8. Conclusions

The thematic analysis of the 20 key informant interviews chapter has shown that mate crime is a significant but still under-recognised form of abuse affecting people with intellectual disability living in the community.

Across the interviews, key informants described patterns of exploitation that were familiar in practice, but not always named, understood, or responded to as mate crime. The findings indicate that such abuse often develops within relationships of trust and friendship, frequently in community settings beyond formal service environments, and factors such as social isolation, limited opportunities for meaningful inclusion, and other structural barriers to participation in community life are important. The chapter has also highlighted the limitations of existing responses.

Barriers to reporting, difficulties accessing justice, inconsistencies in safeguarding practice, and the absence of a statutory safeguarding framework all emerged as significant concerns. Key informants were also adamant that responses to mate crime grounded solely in risk and protection can themselves become restrictive and may undermine autonomy, independence, and the right to live in and be included in the community. The findings point to the need for a more coherent and better resourced approach to mate crime in Ireland. This includes clearer conceptual recognition of mate crime, improved training and awareness across the health and justice sectors, stronger interagency collaboration, accessible and supportive routes to reporting crime, and greater investment in measures that enable disabled people themselves to recognise and respond to exploitation. The thematic analysis indicates that addressing mate crime requires coordinated criminal justice responses, effective safeguarding systems, accessible advocacy and support, improved professional training, and sustained attention to the social and structural conditions that shape people's opportunities for connection, autonomy, and inclusion in the community.



## Findings from the Focus Groups

## Overview of the Focus Groups

We organised four focus groups to examine experiences and perceptions of mate crime. The purpose of these groups was to gather in-depth insights into how people with intellectual disabilities experience exploitation, abuse, and harassment in the context of friendships, and how people supporting them in the community encounter and respond to these issues.

Three of the focus groups were comprised of experts by experience, people who identified as having an intellectual disability and who were living in the community, most with some level of support. These groups reflected a geographical spread across rural, suburban, and urban areas and were recruited through Corlann's advocacy councils and the researchers' own networks. That approach was intended to ensure that the findings reflected a range of lived experiences shaped by differences in community life, service provision, access to transport, social inclusion, and exposure to risk. The discussions with participants were not confined to narrow legal understandings of crime. The focus group discussions revealed the forms of hostility, manipulation, exploitation, and fear can impact upon people's lives and explain the lived reality of mate crime.

The fourth focus group was conducted with staff and support workers who support people living independently in the community. It was decided to convene a dedicated staff group because staff are frequently the first point of disclosure when concerns arise. They are also often the people who witness patterns of exploitation over time, try to distinguish between autonomy and risk, and navigate the systems and procedures that shape responses within their organisations. This group included staff supporting people in urban, rural, and suburban service areas. Their contributions were particularly valuable in identifying recurring patterns, and the practical tensions involved in safeguarding while also respecting choice and independence. All four focus groups followed the same inclusive format. Participants received an easy-read information sheet and easy-read consent form in advance. At the beginning of each session, the concept of mate crime was explained in accessible language and participants were shown a short video to explain the issue. Ground rules were agreed collectively, and the research team emphasised confidentiality, voluntary participation, and respect for all contributions. This was especially important given the sensitive nature of the issues discussed and the fact that some participants were talking about painful or ongoing experiences.

## Thematic Analysis

The focus group discussions were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and anonymised prior to analysis. Reflexive thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's approach, was used to analyse the data.

This approach was selected because of its flexibility and because it is particularly suited to identifying both shared patterns across the dataset and the nuance and complexity of individual experience. The focus group material did not lend itself to simple categorisation. Participants moved between different examples, significant disclosures, practical suggestions, reflections on trust, and broader concerns about safety, friendship, and living in the community. Reflexive thematic analysis made it possible to hold these layers together and to identify the central patterns of meaning that ran across the discussions. The analysis identified six interrelated themes. While these themes are analytically distinct, they are closely connected and together explain the interpersonal, emotional, and structural dimensions of mate crime as experienced by participants based on lived experience and professional practice. Each of these themes is set out in the sections that follow here.

### Theme 1: Common Experiences of Harassment and Exploitation

One of the clearest points to emerge from the focus group discussions was that experiences of harassment and exploitation came up repeatedly across participants' accounts. Public spaces, streets, shops, buses, pubs, phones, and online spaces all emerged as settings in which people could be targeted, intimidated, pressured, mocked, or exploited. Therefore, participants described mate crime as something that was experienced routine encounters within the community. This was especially evident in participants' discussions of verbal abuse and harassment. Across the three lived experience focus groups, participants spoke about being called names in public, being mocked because of their disability, or being made to feel unsafe when out in the community. It was clear from the discussions that these experiences had a real emotional impact. Where participants initially downplayed what had happened, further discussion showed that they felt upset, frightened, or angry, and in some cases avoided places or activities they would normally have taken part in. The impact did not end with the incident itself, but affected how they felt about going out, being in public, and trusting other people.

Financial exploitation also emerged as a significant issue across the focus groups. In some cases, this took the form of direct scams, especially through phone and online contact. Participants spoke about scam calls and scam messages as something they encountered regularly. This participant described an active and successful police response to such a scam.

“I set up a camera on my phone; I had contact with the Guards. He was on one camera here and I said (to the Garda) can you listen to this and he (Garda) was recording everything this guy was saying. They straight away found out where he lives, somewhere in Nigeria.”

**Focus Group 3, Participant 2**

This example was interesting as the participant explained how they to dealt with the situation, and with the Gardaí. This is one example of an issue that came up across the focus groups, with participants raising concerns about online scams and fraud in different contexts.

Other forms of financial exploitation arose through direct interactions, often involving people within participants' social networks. Participants described people asking them for money, expecting them to pay for meals or drinks, or gradually taking advantage of their generosity. One participant described the following situation.

“Yeah, one person I know... she used to constantly ask her to buy her dinners all the time...She went to staff and complained about her. So, she's not talking to that friend now”

#### **Focus Group 2, Participant 4**

This example highlights how these situations can build over time through repeated requests. On the surface these may appear minor incidents. Participants also described how, when living on a limited income, repeated requests for dinners, drinks, or small amounts of money could have a real financial impact.

The staff focus group reinforced just how ordinary and normalised such exploitation can become. One participant in the staff focus group described a situation where a neighbour would cut the grass of a person they supported and then expect payment for it.

“A neighbour who's very good to them, of course, because they're always very good to them cuts their grass. That neighbour goes to the friend and says, you owe me €20 for cutting the grass in front of your house. Because we're good neighbours so we have to cut your grass”

#### **Focus Group 4, Staff Participant 1**

Another example described by participants involved a similar expectation of payment.

“I decided to get you a BBQ for €40 because you're looking for one. I need the money now.”

#### **Focus Group 4, Staff Participant 5**

These examples could be seen as being neighbourly, friendly, or doing someone a favour. However, the participants described how these interactions were seen with a view to taking money from the person they support in an exploitative way. Participants also described situations where people were sold items that did not exist or were asked to give money in exchange for companionship. One participant in the staff focus group provided the following example.

“He’d come up and he’d have a set of car keys. They said I have a car. Someone sold him a car.”

**Focus Group 4, Staff Participant 3**

What is notable in this example is that, as described in the discussion, the person was aware of what was happening but continued to engage with the person involved, as they were seen as friends.

Participants in the focus groups also described how forms of exploitation could escalate into physical violence or highly traumatic events. This participant speaking to their own experience described the following experience of violence and property damage.

“Last November all the windows in the house were smashed. They did it with a baseball bat, smashed all the window. Don’t know who did it people came with baseball bats and smashed all the windows. I rang the Guards, but they didn’t come until six in the morning.”

**Focus Group 3, Participant 6**

These experiences described by participants ranged from harassment through to more serious incidents of violence. They also highlight that these experiences were not confined to one setting, but could occur in public spaces, in the home, and in interactions with others. While not all of these incidents would necessarily fall within a strict definition of mate crime, they were clearly significant in participants’ lives and shaped how they experienced safety in the community.

## Theme 2: Friendship, Trust, and Betrayal

Another key issue raised across the focus group discussions was the role of friendship, trust, and social relationships in shaping experiences of exploitation. Participants often spoke about situations in terms of discomfort or unfairness rather than explicitly describing them as abuse or exploitation. This was a consistent theme across the focus groups and is important in understanding how mate crime is experienced in practice. The focus group discussions indicate that harmful behaviour was often carried out by people known to participants, rather than by strangers. In many cases, these were relationships that had developed over time and were regarded as meaningful or important in their lives.

A participant in one of the lived experiences focus group described the following situation involving a long-standing friendship.

“I had a friend. I trusted him since we were about 10. We used to go to the pub. We used to have a game of pool. Eventually, one day I was a diabetic. He spiked my drink. You should have seen the state I was in after that. I couldn't get up. I thought I was going to have to be pumped out.... I trusted him we went to school together; we played hurling together. If we needed help we would help one another out. When he spiked my drink, I was in danger.”

### Focus Group 3, Participant 2

This example shows how harmful behaviour can occur within relationships based on trust and long-standing friendship. As described by the participant, this was a long-standing friend, which is important in understanding how mate crime may arise within familiar and trusted relationships.

The staff focus group provided further insight into how these kinds of relationships operate in practice. Participants described situations where people they supported were aware they were being exploited but continued to engage with those involved, as they were seen as friends. One participant in the staff focus group described the following situation.

“Now he knows what’s happening. He knows he’s being exploited, that there’s no car here. But ‘they’re my friends’ and so if ‘I can hang out with you for the rest of the day I will”.

**Focus Group 4, Staff Participant 3**

Another participant described a similar situation.

“I know what’s happening. But I’m happy with this happening right now, and if I want to change it I will. But right now, I don’t want you to do anything about it.”

**Focus Group 4, Staff Participant 2**

Therefore, in some cases, people were aware of what was happening but chose to continue engaging in these relationships. As discussed in the focus groups, this was often linked to the importance of having friends, even where those friendships involved elements of exploitation. This issue was raised across all four focus groups. Staff noted that, for some people they supported, maintaining a relationship, even where there were difficulties, could be preferable to being socially isolated. This provides context for understanding why these relationships may continue and why it can be difficult to identify exploitation and to challenge or end this type of behaviour.

Participants also described situations where people presented themselves as friends but were not seen as genuine. One participant described this as follows:

“People ... pretend to be your friend. They put on the pretend act.”

**Focus Group 1, Participant 3**

Other examples described how relationships could develop quickly and become difficult to manage. As discussed in the literature review, ‘cuckooing’ refers to situations where people are exploited by others who take over or make use of their home for their own purposes. This issue also arose in the focus group discussions. This participant in the staff focus group described the following situation:

“A woman... she met some guy and took him in and he wouldn't leave then.”

**Focus Group 4, Staff Participant 5**

A further example of this type of situation was described in the staff focus group.

“A man in the service whose address was widely known in Castlereagh Prison. People got out and went to his house... Going on for years.”

**Focus Group 4, Staff Participant 4**

As discussed in the focus group, this involved the person's address and contact details becoming widely known within the prison, with people who had no prior relationship with him going directly to his home on release. Participants described how strangers would arrive at the house and stay there, and that this became an ongoing pattern over a number of years. It was also noted that this situation was not identified at an early stage. As described in the discussion, it was only when staff became aware of what was happening that supports were put in place to assist the man in setting boundaries and managing access to his home. This intervention was important in bringing the situation to an end and preventing further instances of the home being used in this way. This example reflects the type of situation described in the literature as “cuckooing”, where a person's home is used by others over a sustained period of time.

Another participant speaking to their own experience described a situation where people known to them came into their home in a social context, where they would spend time together and drink. However, this developed into people overstaying their welcome, taking drugs, and others coming to the house whom they did not know, and they found it difficult to ask them to leave.

“I knew one or two of them and we were friendly enough... My sister said no, I was afraid to give out to them.”

**Focus Group 3, Participant 1**

This theme highlights that experiences of exploitation described were linked to friendship and trust. The examples provided by participants show that these relationships can be important and valued, even where there are concerns about how others are behaving. This has implications for how mate crime is understood and responded to. Approaches to mate crime that focus only on identifying and reporting this behaviour to Gardaí or safeguarding within services may not fully reflect the importance of these relationships in person's lives or the difficulty involved in challenging or ending them. As reflected in the focus group discussions, in some cases it was only when support was provided, either by staff or family members, that people were able to set boundaries or bring these situations to an end.

### Theme 3: Normalising Harm, Silence, and the Difficulty of Naming Mate Crime

A further theme that emerged from the focus group discussions concerns the difficulty of identifying and naming what is happening. Participants did not always describe their experiences in terms of abuse, exploitation, or crime. Even where something was recognised as wrong, it was not always immediately described or discussed in these terms. In some cases, participants minimised what had happened, delayed taking action, or chose not to describe the situation as criminal.

This was evident across the three lived experience focus groups. Participants often spoke about situations in terms of discomfort or unfairness rather than explicitly describing them as abuse or exploitation. References were made to people “taking advantage”, but these were not always framed as criminal behaviour.

One participant described a situation involving repeated financial requests within a relationship, where they had refused on a number of occasions, but the behaviour continued over time.

“I was hurt but I said no to her plenty of times... and then I had to go to Guards about it... I didn’t want to go.”

#### Focus Group 2, Participant 3

This example shows how recognition of harm can develop over a period of time. As described by the participant, the situation was initially experienced as something upsetting, but it was only at a later stage that it led to contact with Gardaí as the requests and pressure for money continued.

The staff focus group provided further insight into how these situations are understood and managed by services supporting people. Participants described how people may hold onto experiences and not speak about them, even where there are concerns. One participant in the staff focus group described the following:

“There’s a piece where people we support hold onto stuff and normalise it and put it into that case and throw it away and they will never let it out. No matter if you put all the social workers and psychologists, psychiatry medication etc. they’re not going to let it out... then they say hang on a sec, I don’t want to talk about that again and walk away. So, they put on their armour again.”

**Focus Group 4, Staff Participant 1**

Another participant described a similar dynamic:

“There’s a gap there and at the end of the conversation it was ‘I know what’s happening’. But I’m happy with this happening right now, and if I want to change it I will. But right now, I don’t want you to do anything about it... I’m not going to insist on this; I’m not going to upset my mother.”

**Focus Group 4, Staff Participant 6**

Therefore, it was suggested that people may choose not to revisit or disclose what has happened, even where there is some awareness of the situation. This was described as a way of managing what is happening, rather than an indication that it was not understood as being problematic. The focus group discussions also identified the role of discomfort, and in some cases embarrassment, in shaping whether or not people speak about these experiences.

The focus groups also included more complex accounts where it was not always clear at the time how a situation should be addressed. In some cases, participants described experiences within intimate relationships that they only later came to recognise as involving pressure, coercion, and, in some instances, potential criminal behaviour. One staff participant described the following situation in respect of a person they supported.

“She has now come out of that relationship. She was being asked to participate in group sex, and her partner brought multiple people into the relationship and into the bed. At the moment, she is trying to work through that.”

#### **Focus Group 4, Staff Participant 2**

As discussed in the focus group, this situation was only recognised over time, with support, as the person reflected on what had happened.

This theme helps to explain why experiences of mate crime may not always be identified or reported at an early stage. Where situations are not immediately seen as abuse or crime, or where people are not ready to describe them in these terms, responses that depend on formal reporting may not be engaged. It also suggests that providing information alone may not be sufficient. While accessible information is important, the focus group discussions indicate that people may also require time, support, and trusted relationships in order to reflect on what has happened and to decide how, and when, to respond.

Participants were recruited through established networks and had received accessible information about the purpose of the research. They were supported to participate in discussions about mate crime. However, in a number of cases, participants chose not to speak about their own experiences, instead contributing to the discussion in more general terms or by referring to the experiences of others.

This may reflect a range of factors, including a preference for privacy, which was fully respected. It may also reflect the difficulty of speaking about these experiences, including possible discomfort or embarrassment. As discussed in the focus groups, people may not always wish to revisit or disclose what has happened, even where they are willing to engage in the discussion more broadly. It is also of note that a number of people, identified through our networks as people who had experienced mate crime and who had initially expressed interest in participating, chose not to take part at a later stage.

This may further reflect the challenges associated with speaking openly about these experiences.

#### **Reflection from the researchers in conducting this research and facilitating the focus groups**

## Theme 4: Fear, Safety, and Participation in the Community

A further theme arising from the focus group discussions concerns the impact of harassment and exploitation on how people experience safety and participate in the community. Participants described how fear affected their day-to-day decisions, including where they went, who they went with, and whether they felt safe travelling or being at home. Some of this fear arose from direct experiences of violence or intimidation.

One participant in the lived experience focus group described the following experience of assault in public.

“I was at a bus stop one day ... and this guy came up and struck me (a number time, cuts on my face and my forehead) he assaulted me. I rang the Guards. I was in town that evening and I seen him walking up the street... I had to write a letter to them. Nothing ever happened. I enquired a few times in [the] Garda Station”.

### Focus Group 3, Participant 5

As discussed earlier under Theme 1, participants described experiences of violence affecting the home environment, which influenced how safe they felt in their own homes. These experiences of violence affect how safe people feel in both public and private spaces. As discussed in the focus groups, these types of incidents are not confined to a single setting but could occur both in the home and in the community.

Other accounts described how fear could build over time through repeated experiences. Participants referred to harassment in public spaces, being followed, scam calls, and situations where they were asked for money, expected to pay for others, or felt under pressure in their interactions with others. These experiences contributed to a sense of needing to remain alert when out and about in the community. Participants also described a range of practical strategies used to manage this. These included relying on staff or keyworkers, avoiding certain places, not travelling alone, and contacting trusted people when concerned.

Participants in the focus groups also indicated that feeling safe was often linked to the presence of trusted support. One participant referred to the role of staff in providing reassurance, describing a particular staff member who was trusted in an advocacy role and to whom people felt comfortable disclosing their experiences. In that context, the participant noted:

“When they... are not with someone they feel comfortable with... can be afraid to open their mouths.”

#### **Focus Group 2, Participant 2**

This reflects how confidence in the person providing support can influence whether a person feels able to speak about what is happening. It also highlights that the presence of a trusted staff member can make a significant difference in enabling people to raise concerns or seek help about mate crime. This indicates that safety is linked to whether the person feels supported and confident in engaging with others. Where that support is present, people may be more likely to speak up and seek assistance. Where it is absent, fear and uncertainty may limit their ability to do so. This has implications for how safety is understood in practice, particularly in the context of participation in the community.

Participants in the focus groups also referred to positive experiences with Community Gardaí, noting instances where they felt supported and listened to. Within that context, there were also calls for greater Garda presence in the community.

“If they have more Guards in the evenings and on the weekends, just going down that lane would make a difference.”

#### **Focus Group 2, Participant 2**

This reflects how safety was experienced in particular places and at particular times. Certain areas or routes were described as less safe, which influenced how people moved about within their communities.

The staff focus group highlighted an additional issue relating to the consequences of reporting. One participant referred to the following:

“The other thing about reporting... the fallout of it all... the person is at risk of further social isolation.”

#### **Focus Group 4, Staff Participant 3**

This indicates that concerns about what might happen after reporting can also affect decision-making. As discussed in the focus groups, this may include concerns about losing relationships or becoming more isolated.

This theme highlights that fear and safety are closely linked to how people participate in the community. The focus group discussions indicate that decisions about where to go, who to interact with, and whether to seek support are influenced by these experiences. This has implications for how mate crime is understood and addressed. As discussed in Theme 1, participants described repeated experiences in a range of contexts, including public spaces, their homes, and social interactions. This indicates that focusing only on individual incidents may not fully reflect how these experiences affect whether people go out, where they go, and how safe they feel in the community.

### **Theme 5: Reporting, Response, and the Role of Gardaí, Staff, Family, and Advocacy**

A further theme arising from the focus group discussions concerns how experiences of harm are identified, disclosed, and responded to. Participants' accounts indicate that reporting is not straightforward. The decision to report was described as involving a series of stages, including recognising what has happened, deciding whether to speak about it, identifying someone to speak to, and considering the possible consequences of reporting. For many participants, the first point of contact was not Gardaí, but trusted people around them. These included staff, keyworkers, family members, and advocates. As reflected across the focus groups, people did not always know how to describe what was happening or what steps to take, but they often knew who they could speak to. This highlights the importance of trusted relationships in supporting people to raise concerns and seek help.

The focus group discussions also indicate that even speaking to someone can be difficult in the first place. Participants referred to people being reluctant to speak or unsure about raising concerns. This reflects wider issues discussed in Theme 3 in relation to silence, hesitation, and the difficulty of naming what is happening. Where people did engage with Gardaí, experiences were mixed. Participants referred to positive interactions with Community Gardaí, particularly where there was familiarity and continuity. These experiences were described as supportive and helpful in responding to issues as they arose. Participants across all four focus groups described instances where responses were inconsistent. One staff participant described the following.

“The Guard who took the phone call was excellent. But another Guard phoned back 20 minutes later and they were abysmal. So that’s where we get kind of the mixed responses.”

**Focus Group 4, Staff Participant 1**

Another participant described an interaction where Gardaí appeared reluctant to engage with them when attempting to report an instance of mate crime.

“We walked over and to approach them, but you could see straight away they were defensive, went up and introduced myself, shook hands and tried to get their names, but straight away they were very closed. So, we’ll go we won’t be taking a statement.”

**Focus Group 4, Staff Participant 5**

This indicates that responses from Gardaí can vary. As discussed in the focus groups, this influenced whether people felt confident about reporting, as there was uncertainty about how they would be treated and whether their concerns would be taken seriously or followed up.

The staff focus group also highlighted a tension between safeguarding processes and individual readiness. Staff described how, where there are concerns about risk, they are often required to act quickly and initiate safeguarding procedures. However, this does not always align with how the person themselves experiences the situation. As discussed in the focus groups, a person may not be ready to speak about what has happened, to engage with formal processes, or to take action at that point. One participant described the following:

“[W]e need to put that process in place immediately because we know there’s a safeguarding risk or a concern, so it sits into a process immediately that we hold and sometimes the people we support, they’re not ready to go into that process as quickly...but sometimes it doesn’t fit into the timeline.”

**Focus Group 4, Staff Participant 2**

Family members were also identified as playing an important role in responding to situations of mate crime. In some cases, they acted to support the person, for example by intervening where there were concerns about exploitation or helping to address issues when they arose. This reflects the role that family can play as a source of protection and support. However, other accounts from the focus groups highlighted that family involvement in cases of mate crime could also be more restrictive, particularly in relation to managing money or limiting access to communication. Some participants indicated that these actions were often taken with the intention of protecting the person from harm or further exploitation. However, it was noted that they could limit the person's independence and control over their own decisions. This theme speaks to the complexity of these situations, where responses to mate crime may provide protection, but can also impact on autonomy.

Advocacy was identified across the focus groups as a key support. Participants emphasised the importance of building confidence and creating opportunities for people to speak about their experiences.

“We could probably offer courses every week of the year, whether it's on budgeting, mate crime, advocacy or other topics. That doesn't mean people will attend. But for this in particular, I think three or four good sessions would be a good starting point. I'll bring it up with advocacy as a starting point.”

**Focus Group 4, Staff Participant 1**

There was also a strong emphasis across the focus groups on the value of peer-led advocacy. Participants highlighted that people may be more likely to engage with these issues and speak about their experiences when support is provided by someone with shared experience. As discussed in the different groups, peer-led approaches were seen as a way of building confidence and creating a space where people feel more comfortable raising concerns and speaking about what has happened.

“We need to empower and train up our advocates and pay them for a role to deliver a course like this... Advocates delivering to advocates and that makes it more real.”

**Focus Group 4, Staff Participant 3**

This reflects how advocacy, particularly peer-led advocacy, can support people to recognise and respond to situations of harm. As discussed in the focus groups, having access to trusted and relatable sources of support can make it easier for people to speak about what has happened and to consider what steps to take. This also highlights that reporting and response are influenced by a range of factors, including the person's own circumstances, the support available to them, when they feel ready to speak, and how others respond when concerns are raised.

## Theme 6: Independence, Risk, Prevention & Training

The final theme arising from the focus group discussions concerns the relationship between independence, exposure to risk, and approaches to prevention of mate crime. Participants emphasised the importance of living independently. This was associated with dignity, adulthood, participation, and being part of the community. Independence was described by participants as important both in how they saw themselves and in how they participated in the community.

However, focus groups highlighted that living independently could also increase exposure to risk. Participants by experience and staff participants described how living alone or more independently in the community could make people more visible and more accessible to others who may seek money, company, or access to their home. In the staff focus group, participants indicated that people with intellectual disabilities living more independently in the community were often more likely to be targeted than those living in more structured residential settings, where staff were present or where there was a higher level of support.

These experiences were not linked to disability alone, but also to a wider set of factors. Participants and staff referred to issues such as limited income, difficulties accessing banking services, challenges with transport, experiences in public spaces, and limited community supports. These factors can increase exposure to risk and can affect how easily a person is able to recognise, respond to, or seek support in situations of exploitation.

Issues raised in relation to transport and access to money further illustrate this point. Participants described how difficulties using public transport, or feeling unsafe when travelling, or being in the town centre could limit their participation in the community.

“Beggars would follow me around the town... every time I go in there... I’m frightened of them.”

### Focus Group 1, Participant 4

Similarly, where people experienced challenges accessing or managing their own money, or where finances were managed by others, this could increase dependence and reduce control, creating conditions where exploitation may arise.

“It’s also that piece where their Disability Allowance is part of the household income and they have to ask for money...”

**Focus Group 4, Staff Participant 2**

The focus groups also highlighted that responses to risk can, in some cases, lead to increased restriction. As discussed earlier, family members or others may intervene by managing money or limiting access to communication in an effort to provide protection. While often well intentioned, these responses can affect independence and control over decision-making.

Participants and staff also identified a range of approaches that could support prevention. These included greater visibility of Gardaí in the community, particularly at certain times and in certain places, as well as supports to build confidence in recognising and responding to these situations. Participants highlighted the importance of accessible information, including visual and video-based materials, as a way of supporting understanding.

One participant referred to the video shown at the beginning of the focus group, which was used to introduce the concept of mate crime and support discussion. Reflecting on this, they noted:

“I think maybe every service should have a video of that.”

**Focus Group 2, Participant 5**

In the same discussion, another participant reflected on the potential impact of these types of resources and supports, noting that they could help people feel more able to respond to these situations. As they explained:

“[[I]t would build up courage and confidence.”

**Focus Group 2, Participant 1**

This indicates that participants viewed prevention as something practical and relevant to them. This included building confidence, recognising situations as they arise, and having access to tools and supports that make it easier to respond. Staff also emphasised the importance of peer-led and collaborative approaches to prevention. As discussed in Theme 5 in relation to advocacy, supporting people to learn from others with shared experience was seen as particularly effective in building confidence and awareness.

“Training people supported and skilling them... “Make it more of a collaborative piece.”

**Focus Group 4, Staff Participant 3**

Staff also noted that simply offering training or courses is not always sufficient, as availability does not necessarily lead to engagement. This highlights the need for approaches that are ongoing, accessible, and responsive to how people engage with learning and support in practice. There was also a clear emphasis on the role of advocacy in prevention.

As discussed across the focus groups, advocacy was seen as important in responding to situations of harm, and in supporting people to build confidence, develop awareness, and reduce the likelihood of exploitation. Some participants also drew comparisons with domestic violence, noting similarities in how situations can develop and how difficult it can be to recognise or leave harmful relationships.

“Domestic violence, there are so many similarities.”

#### **Focus Group 4, Staff Participant 6**

The importance of training was raised across all of the focus group discussions. Participants and staff emphasised that training plays an important role in building confidence, supporting understanding, and enabling people to speak about their experiences. Participants in all focus groups discussed a need for training for people at risk of mate crime, for peers and advocates, for family members, and for those working within services and the justice system. Across these different groups, training was seen as supporting awareness of what mate crime is, how it can arise, and how people can respond. Participants highlighted that having opportunities to engage in supported discussions, particularly in familiar and trusted settings, could make it easier to raise concerns and to understand what was happening. This reflects the role of training in providing information, and in supporting people to feel able to speak and participate in these discussions.

“I want to get the people involved in every service and I want to get the confidence, so just speak about these things, that there’s a system, there is help out there. There is support for them.”

#### **Focus Group 2, Participant 6**

Participants also spoke about the importance of feeling supported when engaging in discussions about these issues. As discussed in the focus groups, people may be reluctant to speak about their experiences unless they feel reassured that they are in a safe and supportive environment. This included concerns about saying the wrong thing, not being understood, or feeling judged. In that context, supported discussions and facilitated spaces were identified as important in enabling people to participate and to speak about what has happened.

“They need to sit in these focus groups with support. Just to think that you’re not saying anything wrong.”

**Focus Group 2, Participant 6**

Participants also referred to uncertainty about what to do or who to approach when something happens. This arose in the context of experiences of being followed and feeling unsafe in public spaces, where participants described feeling frightened but unsure how to respond or who to speak to. This further highlights the role of training in supporting people to understand how to respond and where to seek support.

“I didn’t know who to talk to at the time... I got an awful fright and I’m afraid it would happen me again.”

**Focus Group 1, Participant 4**

This indicates that fear, lack of confidence, and uncertainty can act as barriers to speaking about experiences of mate crime. As discussed across the focus groups, training and supported discussions can play an important role in addressing this by creating spaces where people feel safe to speak, where they are reassured that their experiences are valid, and where they are supported to understand what steps, they can take.

## Conclusions

The focus group discussions provide a detailed account of how mate crime is experienced, understood, and responded to by people with intellectual disabilities and those supporting them in the community.

Across all four groups, participants described experiences of harassment, exploitation, and pressure arising in a range of contexts, including public spaces, the home, and within their relationships. These experiences did not define their lives, which were otherwise active and engaged in the community, but they were significant in shaping how safe people felt and how they interacted with others.

A key finding in this chapter is that mate crime is closely connected to relationships of trust. Much of the harm described occurred within friendships or ongoing social interactions, which made it more difficult to identify, challenge, or disengage from. Participants spoke about these situations in ways that reflected uncertainty, discomfort, and, in some cases, acceptance. This highlights the limitations of approaches that rely on clear distinctions between victim and perpetrator or that assume harm will be readily recognised and reported.

The analysis also shows that recognising and responding to mate crime is a process that develops over time. Participants did not always describe their experiences as abuse or crime, and in many cases were hesitant to speak about what had happened. Fear, embarrassment, and uncertainty about how others would respond were significant factors. These dynamics help to explain why experiences may go unreported and why formal systems are not always engaged at an early stage. Where people did seek support, the response they received depended on whether there was trust, how consistently they were engaged with, and what they believed the consequences of speaking up would be. Access to justice, as described in the focus groups, was not just about reporting. Participants described how access to justice requires that people feel able to speak, are supported to do so, and are taken seriously when they raise concerns. The focus groups also highlight an important tension in how risk is addressed. Measures introduced to protect people, whether through safeguarding processes or family intervention, may reduce immediate risk but can also limit independence and control over people's own lives. This shows the challenge in practical terms. Steps taken to protect a person from mate crime can also limit their independence and control over their own life.

Importantly, participants and staff identified clear and practical approaches to prevention. This included building confidence to speak, strengthening peer advocacy, improving awareness, and ensuring that information and supports are accessible and meaningful. Training emerged as a key issue across all of the focus groups, extending beyond people at risk of mate crime to include families, services, and those working within the justice system. The focus groups make clear that one-off interventions are not enough. Prevention requires ongoing engagement, trust, and consistent support over time. The findings in this chapter show that mate crime arises within relationships and in how people interact with others. It is not limited to isolated incidents. This means that responses cannot rely just on legal or procedural measures. People need support to recognise what is happening, to speak about it, and to decide how to respond, while ensuring that their independence and control over their own lives are respected.



# Conclusions and Recommendations

## 1. Introduction

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. As outlined in the literature review, patterns of exploitation, violence and abuse affecting disabled people are often embedded within relationships of trust, dependency, and social isolation. These dynamics challenge traditional legal and policy frameworks, which tend to regard these as discrete incidents rather than ongoing patterns of exploitation. This report builds on that analysis by examining how these dynamics operate in practice within the Irish context. This report has explored the experiences of disabled people, particularly those with intellectual disabilities, who are targeted for exploitation within relationships that present as friendship, support, or intimacy.

Although the term “mate crime” is not yet widely used or understood in Ireland, both the literature and the empirical findings demonstrate that the behaviours it captures are both present and persistent across community settings. 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 report reinforce and extend the insights from the literature review, particularly in relation to 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.

## 2. Defining Mate Crime

Although there is no universally accepted legal or policy definition of “mate crime” in Ireland or elsewhere, the literature reviewed in this study, together with the empirical findings from interviews, focus groups, and survey responses, identify a number of consistent and recurring characteristics associated with the phenomenon.

Existing literature identifies mate crime as involving the exploitation of friendship, trust, dependency, social isolation, or perceived vulnerability, often directed towards disabled people living within the community. The findings of this research strongly reflected these themes, with participants describing experiences of financial exploitation, coercion, sexual exploitation, online abuse, cuckooing, and manipulation perpetrated by people presenting themselves as friends, peers, romantic partners, neighbours, or trusted acquaintances.

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 study. 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.

### **3. The Hidden and Under-Recognised Nature of Mate Crime**

**A central conclusion 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.**

This reflects a broader finding in the literature that exploitation of disabled people is frequently hidden, underreported, and poorly captured within existing data systems. 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. As highlighted in the literature review, this lack of conceptual clarity contributes to the invisibility of this type of abuse within law and policy. As such 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. This lack of clarity means that people's experiences are often not seen as exploitation, which can result in inconsistent responses and people not receiving the support they need.

## 4. 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. This aligns with findings in the literature that 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 literature 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. This reflects a growing recognition in the literature that such abuse cannot be adequately understood through discrete categories of criminal offence alone.

## 5. The Role of 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.

As identified in the literature, 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 literature frequently draws parallels between these dynamics and patterns of grooming and coercive control observed in other contexts. The emotional connection to the perpetrator can also make it difficult to disengage, or challenge even when concerns are raised by others. This highlights the importance of understanding mate crime as a criminal justice issue, but also as one that is connected to social inclusion, community participation, and ensuring that people can live safely in their communities.

## 6. Barriers to Reporting and Access to Justice

This research strongly suggests that mate crime is significantly underreported. This is consistent with the literature, which identifies underreporting. People may not recognise their experiences as abuse, particularly where the person involved is seen as a friend, partner, or someone they trust.

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. This reflects wider concerns in the literature about the marginalisation of disabled people's voices within justice processes. Communication barriers, inaccessible information, and a lack of trusted support further limit the ability of people to seek help.

## 7. 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. As identified in the literature review, traditional legal concepts of consent do not always adequately capture situations involving exploitation, manipulation, dependency, or control. Current legal frameworks do not always 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.

## 8. 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.

## 9. 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 identified in the literature 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. The literature similarly highlights the challenges of fragmented service provision and the absence of integrated safeguarding responses. While there are examples of good practice, these are not consistently embedded within the wider system. This results in a situation where outcomes can depend heavily on who is dealing with the situation rather than on structured and consistent processes.

## 10. 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. This reflects a key insight from the literature review, particularly the Law Reform Commission's recent work on safeguarding, which 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. As identified in the literature, 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.

These gaps point to the need for clearer legal recognition of mate crime and for the introduction of a statutory safeguarding framework. In their absence there is a risk that mate crime will continue to be under-recognised and that people will not receive an effective response when concerns are raised.

## **11. The Failure to Recognise Mate Crime within a Human Rights Framework**

A significant finding from the literature review, reinforced by the qualitative and quantitative research, is that mate crime has not yet been clearly situated within a human rights framework, particularly in the context of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

While the CRPD sets out strong protections in areas such as freedom from exploitation, violence and abuse, equal recognition before the law, and access to justice, the specific experiences captured by the concept of mate crime are not explicitly considered within this framework. Without being recognised as a human rights issue, mate crime risks being addressed in fragmented ways, for example as individual incidents of financial abuse or safeguarding concerns, rather than as a pattern of targeted exploitation that engages core rights under the Convention. This gap limits both visibility and accountability, meaning that responses may not fully reflect the State's obligations to prevent exploitation, protect people, and ensure effective access to justice. Mate crime should be situated within a human rights framework as this would strengthen recognition, support more coherent legal and policy responses, and ensure that the experiences of disabled people are understood as rights issues rather than solely as welfare or protection concerns.

## **12. Recommendations for Policy and Practice**

The recommendations arising from this research reflect the complex and multi-dimensional nature of mate crime. The findings demonstrate that 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. As such the recommendations below are organised across these interconnected levels of response, recognising that addressing mate crime requires both short, mid and longer-term law reform and systemic change.

## Building on Existing Access to Justice Recommendations for Reform

1. 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. The recommendations set out in that report remain directly relevant and should be implemented in full. This is reinforced at international level, where the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, in its List of Issues to Ireland, has specifically asked the State to address the concerns raised in that report as part of its reporting process. Therefore, the recommendations from the baseline study are endorsed here and should be progressed as part of any comprehensive response to mate crime and access to justice more broadly. This report builds on that work by identifying additional issues specific to mate crime, particularly in relation to legal recognition, safeguarding, and prevention etc.

## Recognition and Data Collection on Mate Crime

2. 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. Without this, mate crime will remain under-recognised and difficult to address effectively.

## Introduction of a Specific Criminal Offence of Mate Crime

3. Consideration should be given to the introduction of a specific criminal offence of mate crime within Irish law. As this research has shown, existing offences do not always capture situations where a person is targeted, befriended, and exploited over time, particularly where the person is seen to have agreed to what happened. This reflects a broader concern identified in the literature, and particularly by the Law Reform Commission, that existing criminal offences are not well suited to addressing patterns of exploitation that occur over time within relationships characterised by trust, dependency, coercion, manipulation, or controlling behaviour. In many of the situations identified through this research, exploitation did not occur as a single isolated incident, but rather as an ongoing pattern of coercive and controlling conduct that gradually limited the person's autonomy, financial security, safety, or ability to seek support.

In practice, this can result in cases not progressing, even where there are clear concerns about manipulation, coercion, exploitation, or lack of understanding. A specific offence would provide clearer recognition of this form of exploitation and support more consistent responses across the criminal justice system. It would also help to bridge the gap identified in both the literature and this research between lived experiences of exploitation and the ability of the criminal law to respond effectively.

In developing such an offence, careful consideration should be given to how consent, coercion, dependency, and exploitation are understood, particularly in situations where trust has been established and then used to take advantage of the person. This should include recognising that apparent consent may be shaped by dependency, pressure, social isolation, fear of losing relationships, or lack of meaningful alternatives. Consideration should also be given to lessons emerging from coercive control legislation<sup>149</sup> and broader understandings of exploitation based on relationships, 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.

## Introduction of Safeguarding Legislation

4. There is also a clear need for the introduction of a statutory framework on adult safeguarding in Ireland. At present, responses to exploitation are often dependent on policy and local practice, which can lead to inconsistency. As highlighted in the literature review, and particularly in the Law Reform Commission's work on adult safeguarding, the absence of a statutory framework limits the effectiveness and consistency of responses to abuse and exploitation. Safeguarding legislation would provide clarity on roles and responsibilities, support earlier intervention, and ensure that safeguarding is treated as an important part of protecting people's rights. It would also provide a legal basis for responding to situations that may not meet the threshold for criminal offences but nevertheless involve clear patterns of exploitation. The safeguarding framework must be grounded in a rights-based approach, ensuring that it supports autonomy while also providing effective protection where there are concerns about exploitation. This includes recognising the need to balance respect for autonomy with appropriate safeguards, in line with evolving understandings of legal capacity and supported decision-making. In this context, the recommendations of the Law Reform Commission are endorsed, and should be progressed as a matter of priority. The work on developing the statutory framework (Health (Adult Safeguarding) Bill) requires meaningful consultation with disabled people and Disabled Persons' Organisations, to ensure that the framework adopt a rights based approach in line with the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

## Upholding Autonomy and Rights-Based Approaches

5. 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. Interventions should not unnecessarily restrict independence but should enable people to live safely and participate fully in their communities.

149. See section 39 of the Domestic Violence Act 2018.

## Strengthening Criminal Justice Responses

6. 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. Clear and consistent approaches are needed to guide responses to suspected mate crime across Garda divisions, reducing reliance on individual discretion and improving confidence in the system. Particular attention should also be given to improving the quality, accessibility, and consistency of first contact and initial reporting experiences for disabled people engaging with the criminal justice system. This should include greater awareness of how exploitation may occur gradually over time within relationships framed as friendship, intimacy, care, or trust, and recognition that disabled people may experience barriers in identifying, disclosing, or reporting abuse. Existing examples of good practice within An Garda Síochána, including specialist interviewing approaches, community engagement initiatives, and Garda National Protective Services Bureau responses, should be embedded more consistently across Garda divisions and supported through ongoing disability-informed and rights-based training. Consideration should also be given to expanding the use of communication supports, accessible reporting mechanisms, and registered intermediaries to support disabled people throughout all stages of the criminal justice process, including at the reporting and investigation stage. Strengthening criminal justice responses in this way would help address the inconsistencies identified in both the literature and the empirical findings and support a more structured, accessible, and rights-based approach to justice.
7. 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.

## Awareness, Education and Prevention

8. 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.
9. 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.

## Multi-Agency and Community-Based Responses

10. 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.

## Supporting Independent Living and Inclusion in the Community

11. 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.

## 12. Summary of Recommendations, Responsible Stakeholders, and Indicative Timeframes

Recommendation Area	Key Recommendation	Primary Responsibility	Timeframe
1. Access to Justice Reform	Implement existing IHREC access to justice recommendations relevant to disabled people and mate crime	Department of Justice, An Garda Síochána, Courts Service, Department of Children, Disability and Equality	Short to Medium Term
2. Recognition and Data Collection	Formally recognise mate crime and improve disability-related crime data collection and research	Department of Justice, Department of Health, CSO, An Garda Síochána, National Office for Community Safety, Research Bodies	Short to Medium Term
3. Specific Criminal Offence	Consider introduction of a specific criminal offence addressing mate crime and coercive exploitation	Department of Justice, Department of Health, Oireachtas	Medium to Long Term
4. Adult Safeguarding Legislation	Introduce statutory adult safeguarding framework grounded in CRPD principles	Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration, Department of Health, Department of Children, Disability and Equality, Oireachtas	Medium Term
5. Rights-Based Approaches	Ensure all responses uphold autonomy, legal capacity, and supported decision-making principles	All State Agencies, Disability Services, Safeguarding Bodies	Ongoing
6. Criminal Justice Responses	Strengthen Garda and criminal justice responses through training, communication supports, intermediaries, and consistent practice	An Garda Síochána, Courts Service, DPP, Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration, Policing and Community Safety Authority	Short to Medium Term
7. Victims of Crime Act Implementation	Improve awareness and implementation of obligations under the Criminal Justice (Victims of Crime) Act 2017	An Garda Síochána, Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration, Policing and Community Safety Authority	Short Term

Recommendation Area	Key Recommendation	Primary Responsibility	Timeframe
8. Awareness and Prevention	Develop accessible awareness, peer-led education, and community safety initiatives	Disability Organisations, Community Organisations, Local Authorities, Department of Children, Disability and Equality	Short to Medium Term
9. Community Safety Structures	Embed awareness of mate crime within Local Community Safety Partnerships and the National Strategy for Improving Community Safety	National Office for Community Safety, Local Community Safety Partnerships, Local Authorities	Medium Term
10. Multi-Agency Coordination	Strengthen collaboration between Gardaí, safeguarding, disability, financial, and community sectors	An Garda Síochána, HSE, Disability Services, Financial Institutions, Local Authorities	Medium Term
11. Independent Living and Inclusion	Provide targeted supports for disabled people living independently or with limited support	Disability Services, HSE, Local Authorities, Community Organisations, Department of Children, Disability and Equality	Ongoing / Long Term

## 13. 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.







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