

Moving Drugs and Cash Along County Lines - What we know about the Exploitation of Children and Young People by Criminal Gangs and Networks

How are children and young people being exploited by criminal gangs and networks?

Recent publications by the Home Office and National Crime Agency (NCA) have focused attention on the issue of children and young people, typically from urban areas, who are being groomed and exploited by gangs or criminal networks to move cash and Class A drugs between towns and cities across the UK. The lure of money is typically used to draw young people into the network.

By using children and young people (or vulnerable adults) to move drugs and cash, gang members seek to avoid detection and prosecution.

The movement of drugs and cash in this way is often referred to as 'county lines exploitation' because young people are used to move cash and Class A drugs across county boundaries from urban areas into rural towns or county locations. The activity is coordinated by the use of dedicated mobile phone lines. Gangs and networks are also known to target vulnerable adults and take over their premises to distribute Class A drugs in a practice referred to as 'cuckooing'.

Child criminal exploitation is typified by some form of power imbalance in favour of those perpetrating the exploitation and involves some kind of exchange. These exchanges can include both tangible (such as money, drugs or clothes) and intangible rewards (such as status, protection or perceived friendship or affection). Young people can quickly become indebted to the gang / groups and then further exploited in order to pay off debts.

Young people who are criminally exploited, and their families, are at a high risk of experiencing violence and intimidation.

Evidence (which is limited) suggests that white British children are often targeted because gangs perceive they are more likely to evade police detection. Police have reported that children as young as 12 may be involved, although 15 to 16 years old is the most common age range. The young people involved may not recognise themselves as victims of any abuse, and are often used to recruit other young people.

Child criminal exploitation, like other forms of abuse and exploitation, is a safeguarding concern and constitutes abuse even if the young person appears to have initially agreed to take part.

What are the specific risks?

High levels of violence are commonplace among county lines networks, the use of weapons and firearms to intimidate and control members of the group is prevalent.

Young people are exposed to varying levels of abuse including physical, mental and sexual harm - sometimes over protracted periods.

Young people involved will be sent away - often for weeks at a time - to stay with adults they don't know and with no means of getting back.

How many young people might be involved?

Recent media reports (Radio 4, October 2017) have estimated that thousands of young people have been exploited and groomed by organised criminal gangs. The National Crime Agency has identified over 700 county lines operations across the country.

What are the indicators of Child Criminal Exploitation?

As with children who are sexually exploited, gangs and networks will often target the most vulnerable young people, including those who are looked after by local authorities, who have a history of going missing, or who have chaotic or traumatic lives. Indicators of child criminal exploitation include:

- Persistently going missing from school or home and / or being found out-of-area;
- Unexplained acquisition of money, clothes, or mobile phones;
- Excessive receipt of texts / phone calls;
- Relationships with controlling / older individuals or groups;
- Leaving home / care without explanation;
- Suspicion of physical assault / unexplained injuries;
- Parental concerns;
- Carrying weapons;
- Significant decline in school results / performance;
- Gang association or isolation from peers or social networks;
- Self-harm or significant changes in emotional well-being.

Practitioners who have concerns that a child or young person is at risk of county lines exploitation should contact Children's Social Care or, if there is an immediate risk of harm to the young person, the Police.

How should agencies respond?

Where there are concerns that a child or young person may have been criminally exploited, the Police and Children's Social Care should, from the first point of contact with the young person, pursue a safeguarding, rather than criminal justice, response.

Whenever a young person is arrested for drugs offences a long way from home in an area where they have no local connections and no obvious means of getting home, this should trigger concerns about their welfare and they should potentially be treated as victims of child criminal exploitation and trafficking rather than as an offender. Agencies should also make contact with statutory services in the young person's home area to share information.

Where there are concerns that children are being criminally exploited they should be referred to the National Referral Mechanism as potential victims of modern slavery / human trafficking.

When children and young people who have been missing return home, they must be offered an Independent Return Interview. The Independent Return Interview provides an opportunity to ask questions around criminal exploitation, although fear of violence and retribution can make it difficult for young people to ask for help and often young people do not see themselves as victims.

In addition to recognising that young people who traffick drugs in this way may be victims of criminal exploitation, criminal justice agencies are also adopting a different approach with the gangs / networks who oversee the county lines. In two forthcoming criminal trials the defendants have been charged under human trafficking and modern slavery legislation in a direct attempt to curtail the movement of children as well as drugs. The Police hope that this approach will reduce the exploitation of children as more punitive penalties are attached to trafficking offences.

Further Information

Crossing the Line - Britain's Teenage Drug Mules, File on Four (BBC Radio 4, October 2017)
<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b099yh8j>

Criminal Exploitation of Children and Vulnerable Adults: County Lines (The Home Office) (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/criminal-exploitation-of-children-and-vulnerable-adults-county-lines>) - This guidance outlines what county lines (and associated criminal exploitation) is, signs to look for in potential victims, and what to do about it.

County Lines Violence, Exploitation & Drug Supply (National Crime Agency, 2017)
<http://www.nationalcrimeagency.gov.uk/publications/832-county-lines-violence-exploitation-and-drug-supply-2017/file>

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