

CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE ARE BEING EXPLOITED AND GROOMED BY GANGS INVOLVED IN KNIFE & DRUG CRIME

DEFINITION:

The term 'county lines' is becoming more widely recognised and used to describe situations where children and young people may be trafficked within the UK for the purpose of criminal exploitation.

Criminal Exploitation involves exploitive situations, contexts and relationships where young people (or third persons) receive 'something' (e.g. food accommodation, drugs, alcohol, cigarettes, affection, gifts, money) as a result of them completing a task on behalf of another individual or group of individuals; this is often of a criminal nature. Child criminal exploitation often occurs without the child's immediate recognition, with the child believing that they are in control of the situation. In all cases, those exploiting the child/young person have power over them by virtue of their age, gender, intellect, physical strength, and/or economic or other resources.

Violence, coercion and intimidation are common, involvement in exploitative relationships being characterised in the main by the child/young person's limited availability of choice resulting from their social/economic and / or emotional vulnerability.

- Gangs typically recruit and exploit children and vulnerable people to courier drugs and cash.
- Gangs recruit children and young people through deception, intimidation, violence, debt slavery, and/or grooming.
- Gangs also use local housing as a base for their activities. This often involves taking over a home of a vulnerable adult who is unable to challenge them, often referred to as 'cuckooing'.

The risk to Children, young people their family and friends as a result of experiencing criminal exploitation can include but is not limited to:

- Physical injuries: risk of serious violence and death.
- Emotional and psychological trauma.
- Sexual violence: sexual assault, rape, indecent images being taken and shared as part of initiation/revenge/punishment, internally inserting drugs.
- Debt slavery – young person and families being 'in debt' to the exploiters: which is used to control the young person.
- Neglect and basic needs not being met.
- Living in unclean, dangerous and/or unhygienic environments
- Tiredness and sleep deprivation; child is expected to carry out criminal activities over long periods and through the night.
- Poor attendance and/or attainment at school/college/university.
- Unexplained acquisition of money, clothes, or mobile phones
- Excessive receipt of texts / phone calls and/or having multiple handsets
- 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.

It is important to remember that a young person might not relate to their experience as being abusive or exploitive. The young person may feel a sense of loyalty to the exploiters, they may feel emotionally fulfilled in a way they haven't experienced from parents, carers or professionals before.

The young person may feel they have gained 'friends' or 'family' and that these people care for him or her.

The young person may receive money or rewards that they have not previously had.

The young person may feel a sense of 'power' or 'status' they haven't had before.

PRACTICAL TIPS

- Be interested, professionally curious, listen to what the young person is saying and hear it from a safeguarding perspective.
- Remember they may appear to be willing participants but it is likely that their actions and choices are being controlled by perpetrators with more power than them.
- Advocate for the young person and for child protection processes to be followed;
- Challenge professional views which are oppressive, judgmental, or rejecting the need for a child protection response, or that focus on the criminal activity.
- Explain what is happening and why you might need to share information.
- Keep the young person updated on any outcomes.
- Ensure the young person is given choices: throughout their experience of being criminally exploited they will have been working with parameters of little or no choice and therefore it is important that the young person is given choice back.

This is what we are doing about it...

Leicestershire Police recently took part in an operation designed to disrupt criminals from exporting drugs through children and vulnerable people visiting addresses across the city and county. Officers executed, warrant stop searches (wss) and safeguarding visits, also distributing hundreds of leaflets to increase awareness of county lines. In one operation officers seized drugs estimated to be worth £3,500 and 4 offensive weapons. As a direct result, 5 vulnerable people are now in receipt of support.

Safeguarding Our Young People:

Vulnerability Factors

Contextual safeguarding encourages us to see the child or young person within the context of influencing factors around them which increase their vulnerability:

Child or Individual factors – Looked After, learning disabilities, substance misuse, mental health problems.

Home/family- Neglect/abuse, exposed/ experience violence, parental substance misuse, mental health and domestic abuse, poverty, lack of positivity relationship with a protective nurturing adult, homelessness or insecure accommodation status.

Peers – Exposed to other young people known to be exploited, exposed to or experienced peer on peer abuse.

School – Exclusion from school and not in education/training or employment, exposed of experience violent crime.

Neighbourhood – Exposed or experience violent crime, deprived neighbourhood

There are a number of indicators that could alert us to a young person being criminally exploited:

Some potential indicators of county lines involvement and exploitation are listed below, with those at the top of particular concern:

- persistently going missing from school or home and / or being found out-of-area; being criminally exploited they will have been working with parameters of little or no choice and therefore it is important that young person is given choice back
- As a starting point to explaining exploitation it can be helpful to talk about the long hours a young person is expected to carry out criminal activities as being exploitative in itself and can open up further discussion about what is going on for them.

Helpful Resources and links.

Home Office, County Lines Guidance, September 2018

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/741194/HOCountyLinesGuidanceSept2018.pdf

Leicestershire Police County Lines Team

<https://www.leics.police.uk/CountyLines>

Fearless. A site where young people can access non-judgemental information and advice about crime and criminality anonymously and in confidence.

<https://www.fearless.org/en/campaigns/county-lines>

'Keeping Kids Safe: Improving safeguarding responses to gang violence and criminal exploitation' (February 2019)

Children's Commissioner

<https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/CCO-Gangs.pdf>

Leicester, Leicestershire & Rutland Safeguarding Board

<http://lrsb.org.uk/criminal-exploitation>