

Counting lives

Responding to children who
are criminally exploited

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The
Children's
Society

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We would also like to express our gratitude to Tim Champion and Brittany Clarke from the National County Lines Coordination Centre for their advice on this research and support with data collection that informed this report.

Foreword

Sadly there is nothing new about children being exploited by criminals. And right now The Children's Society is seeing countless young lives torn apart by horrific violence and abuse.

We hear from children being criminally exploited in many ways: forced to work in cannabis factories, coerced into moving drugs across the country, forced to shoplift, pickpocket or threaten violence against others. Children are being cynically exploited with the promise of money, drugs, status and affection. They're being controlled using threats, violence and sexual abuse, leaving them traumatised and living in fear.

In this report, we find that 14 to 17 year olds are the most likely age group to be exploited by criminal gangs. We uncover alarming evidence of primary school children as young as seven or eight being targeted and exploited. But children of all ages are at risk, and the number of 10 to 17 year olds arrested for intent to supply drugs has gone up by almost 50% outside London.

This report suggests that the criminals are winning, and professionals are struggling to keep up with the scale and context of criminal exploitation. The response from statutory agencies is too variable and often comes too late. Children are being too easily criminalised, and are not viewed as victims of exploitation. There is also a concerning lack of data and reporting about children at risk of criminal exploitation.

There is no easy solution to eradicate child criminal exploitation, but we can and must do more. We need earlier help for children at risk, responses that see children as victims and not criminalised, and joined-up national and local responses. Through coordinated, concerted efforts across statutory and voluntary sectors, and by working with local communities and families, we can reach vulnerable young people earlier and begin to disrupt the criminal exploitation of children.

Nick Roseveare,

CEO

Introduction

The exploitation of children for criminal gain is, unfortunately, not new. Yet regular news stories of children affected by violence and crime highlight that as a society we are struggling to get to grips with the current context of threats facing children and young people. This report analyses what is meant by child criminal exploitation; what current methods of exploitation The Children's Society and our partners currently observe; and how responses across national and local organisations could be made more effective.

Child criminal exploitation takes a variety of different forms. It can include children being forced to work in cannabis factories, being coerced into moving drugs or money across the country, forced to shoplift or pickpocket, or to threaten other young people. Recently child criminal exploitation has become strongly associated with one specific model known as 'county lines'. In this model, organised criminal networks typically exploit young people and vulnerable groups to distribute drugs and money across the country through dedicated mobile phone lines (often from cities to counties – hence the term *county lines*). This report suggests that 'county lines' is no longer a fringe issue, but a systemic problem reported in almost every police force in the country.

All forms of criminal exploitation have a detrimental impact on a child's life. As such, any child being forced or coerced to commit crime must be seen as a victim of exploitation. Too often children are criminalised rather than seen as victims of criminal exploitation and given the appropriate child protection response.

There is no statutory definition of child criminal exploitation. Although some guidance does exist, the lack of a consistent definition (for example, one defined in legislation) means that responses are variable across different services and in different parts of the country. As a result, too many children are falling through gaps in support. In 2018, the Home Office produced its Serious Violence Strategy, outlining the Government's proposed response to knife, gun crime and homicide.¹ In the paper, tackling 'county lines' and the misuse of drugs is one strand of a national strategy – alongside early intervention and prevention, supporting communities and partnerships, and an effective law enforcement and criminal justice response.

The Children's Society uses a definition of child criminal exploitation from young people who describe it as '*when someone you trusted makes you commit crimes for their benefit*'.² This definition conveys the key components of exploitation – a trusted person taking advantage of vulnerability to deceive, control, coerce or manipulate children into criminal activity. In some cases children are enticed to take part through manipulation and the promise of reward, and in other cases violence and threats of violence play a more direct role in how control is exerted. Coercion and violence go hand in hand in cases of exploitation.

This report is a call to action for professionals to recognise child criminal exploitation and provide a coordinated safeguarding response. Child criminal exploitation is a complex problem that requires a joined-up approach from statutory and non-statutory agencies, and accurate sharing of intelligence and recording of concerns facing children. The report focuses specifically on the experiences of children targeted by criminal networks to distribute illegal drugs (referred to as the 'child criminal exploitation through the county lines model'). Being caught possessing or distributing drugs is of course a serious crime at any age, but where children are groomed by criminal groups they need to be recognised as victims of exploitation. The report sheds light on how safeguarding duties interact with law enforcement responses in these instances potentially with very different consequences and long term impacts on a child's life.

The research offers analysis of Freedom of Information responses from local authorities and police forces about child criminal exploitation, interviews with professionals working with young people across the country and highlights findings from a survey of police staff.

Key findings

The grooming and exploitation of children

- The criminal exploitation of children can take many forms. It can include children being forced to work in cannabis factories, being coerced into moving drugs or money across the country, forced to shoplift or pickpocket, or to threaten other young people.
- Practitioners and police report increasing awareness of children being exploited through the 'county lines' model. This typically describes the distribution of drugs around the country through the use of dedicated mobile phone 'lines', though the model is not static.
- Children can be targeted for exploitation through face-to-face interactions or online through social media and other platforms. Criminal groups can hijack popular culture such as music videos to entice young people into criminal exploitation.
- Any child can be at risk of exploitation but some vulnerabilities place children at greater risk. These include: growing up in poverty, having learning difficulties, being excluded from school or being a looked after child.
- Going missing from home or care is an indicator of potential exploitation. Children in care go missing more frequently than other children and are more likely to be found outside of the boundaries of their home local authority.
- Older adolescents are more likely to be recorded as having been criminally exploited but there is evidence that primary school age children – as young as seven – are targeted. There can be a lack of recognition of criminal exploitation affecting younger children and so the opportunity to protect children under the age of 10 can be missed.
- Gender, age, ethnicity and background can all affect the way in which professionals do or do not recognise young people as victims, or at risk, of criminal exploitation. This can then affect the response they receive.
- Criminal exploitation often happens alongside sexual or other forms of exploitation.

Children coming into contact with statutory agencies

- There is currently no statutory definition of child criminal exploitation. This can mean that the response to children from different statutory agencies and in different parts of the country is inconsistent.
- The vast majority of police forces and local authorities across England and Wales were not able to share figures of the number of children affected by criminal exploitation in their area.
- There are no consistent 'markers' to 'flag' children who are at risk of child criminal exploitation across different agencies they come into contact with – including police and social care. These markers could include, for example, children missing from home, stopped by police, or arrested for drug related offences.
- Around 1 in 4 local authorities responded that they collect data – but only around 1 in 5 of all local authorities reported that this data is retrievable to be shared. Police forces were largely not able to provide the number of children arrested for drug related offences who were at risk of child criminal exploitation.
- Data on arrests of children aged 10 to 17 for drug related offences provides the best proxy data available on children exploited by criminal groups. Analysis of this data shows that more children are arrested for 'possession with intent to supply Class A drugs' than for 'possession' alone. The data shows an increase of 13% from 2015/16 to 2017/18 in the number of 10 to 17 year olds arrested for possession with intent to supply Class A drugs. (This number rises to 49% if data from London is excluded).
- The increase in children arrested for intent to supply is outpacing the rise in children arrested for possession alone. Despite a decrease in the number of stop and search instances overall, there was a 34% increase between 2015/16 and 2017/18 in drugs based stop and search instances where firearms or offensive weapons were found – suggesting a link between drug-related crimes and youth violence.

Responses to children who are criminally exploited

- Children and young people who are exploited by criminal groups experience a variety of responses. This inconsistency is driven by a lack of consistent national and local safeguarding strategies and procedures.
- There is currently no statutory definition of child criminal exploitation. This can be part of the explanation of the inconsistent response from different statutory agencies and in different parts of the country.
- We asked whether local authorities have a strategy in place to respond to child criminal exploitation and county lines. Of the 141 upper tier authorities that responded to us, almost 2 in 3 do not have a strategy. Fifty authorities said that they do have a strategy or are in the process of developing one.
- Where children are being criminally exploited, safeguarding responses are largely reactive. Professionals reported that many children come to attention of statutory agencies when exploitation is *already* present in their lives and criminal groups are controlling them to deliver drugs. Typically, in these instances professionals report that law enforcement takes precedence over safeguarding responses.

- There has been an increase in the number of suspected child victims of child criminal exploitation to the National Referral Mechanism (NRM) but very few local authorities collect or can provide this data. Across 17 local authorities, more than half of the children referred to the NRM were because of child criminal exploitation (35 out of 61 referrals).
- Both police and local authorities' data on NRM referrals for child criminal exploitation is patchy – possibly because there is no definition of child criminal exploitation in legislation and neither agency is required to collect and report that data.

Key recommendations

This report highlights a patchwork of data, understanding and responses to child criminal exploitation. This lack of consistent strategies and approaches is leaving statutory agencies struggling to keep up with organised criminal groups who are coercing and controlling children into criminality. Sadly, children are more likely to be identified when exploitation has already happened – or is happening and at a stage where they are more likely to be criminalised – than to receive a safeguarding response.

In order to disrupt the criminal exploitation of children, we identify the following summary of recommendations for central and local government and agencies. A more comprehensive list of recommendations can be found later in this report.

The law should be clarified to ensure that all children who are groomed, coerced and controlled into committing crime are recognised as victims of exploitation.

- The Home Office should amend the Modern Slavery Act 2015 to include the definition of child criminal exploitation. Such a definition would help ensure a common approach from criminal justice and safeguarding professionals, would recognise the traumatic experiences of children who are exploited, and assist the prosecution of criminals and the avoidance of criminalisation for exploited children.
- The Home Office should consult on a new criminal offence outlawing the practice of making a child insert and carry drugs within their bodies. For the purposes of clarity and consistency, this new offence should be introduced via an amendment to the Sexual Offences Act 2003.
- All government departments and statutory agencies should be clear about their role in identifying and disrupting child criminal exploitation, and should fully understand their role in responding to victims.
- The Department for Education and Home Office should jointly lead the development of a cross-departmental strategy on child criminal exploitation, backed up with changes to relevant statutory guidance, to ensure that professionals working with children are clear about how to safeguard children who are at risk or are criminally exploited.

Statutory agencies should have access to appropriate resources to identify and support victims of child criminal exploitation.

- The Department for Education and Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government must urgently address the shortfall in children's social care funding, which is set to reach £3.1billion by 2024/25. Reinvestment in children's services should be focused on supporting local authorities to reinstate early help and early intervention services, including youth services.
- Eligibility for support as a child victim of human trafficking or modern slavery must be universal. The Home Office should commit to making independent child trafficking advocates (ICTAs) available to all children who require them, including children with effective parental responsibility. The support should be long-term and cover transition to adulthood to ensure that children are not revictimised as they reach adulthood.

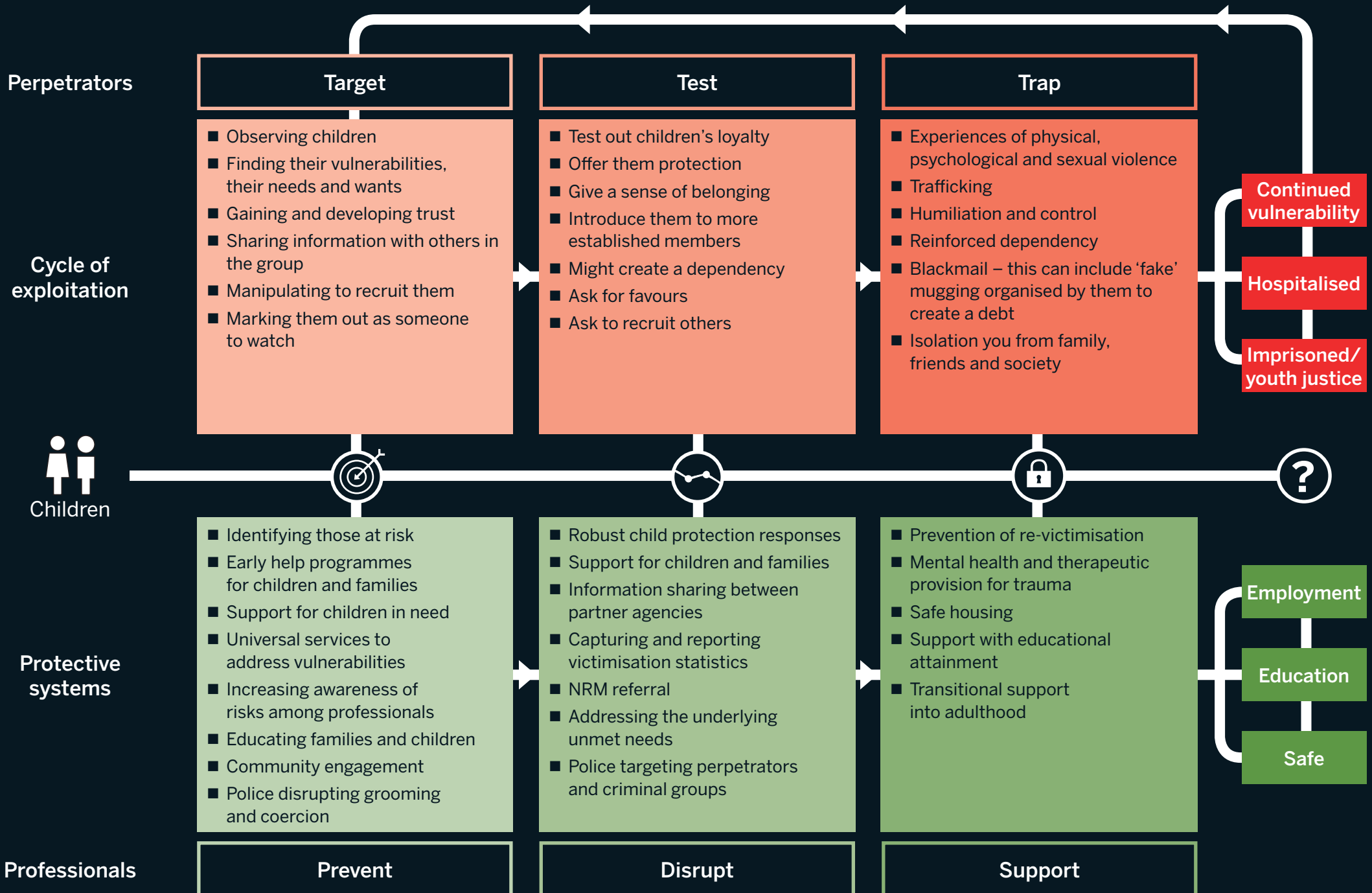
The introduction of new local safeguarding partnerships should be seen as an opportunity to ensure that multi-agency arrangements are structured in a way to identify and respond to child criminal exploitation.

- New local safeguarding partnerships should undertake an assessment of how many children are at risk of child criminal exploitation in their areas and produce local strategies to address the issues. The strategies should outline the early help and early intervention support available to children who are identified as at risk, as well as prevention activities.

Data collection and recording around child criminal exploitation should be improved to ensure more accurate understanding of scale and prevalence and the effectiveness of interventions.

- Local authorities and police should collect data on the number of children identified at risk of criminal exploitation and referred to the National Referral Mechanism. Markers for child criminal exploitation should be introduced on the systems used by police and children's services to ensure consistent identification of children who may be at risk. This includes the introduction of a marker on the Missing Persons Database which is currently being developed.

A child's journey through child criminal exploitation



Methodology

This research project included a mixed methods approach to data collection and involved a range of different methodologies.

Literature review

A conceptual review of relevant literature was conducted for the purpose of discovering and analysing what peer-reviewed literature already existed on child criminal exploitation and County lines. The keywords included in the searches were: *youth crime, criminal exploitation, gangs, drug supply & trafficking*. Literature was limited to publications relevant to the UK only.

Freedom of Information requests to local authorities in England and Wales

We initially sent a pilot FOI request out to 10 local authorities asking what information was recorded about child criminal exploitation. Of these, nine local authorities responded and only one could respond to the full set of questions. The remaining eight could respond to some but not all questions. An evaluation of responses showed that the way in which local authorities record data on CCE is inconsistent.

We therefore decided to amend the FOI and sent out a second version out which asked Local authorities if they recorded specific groups of data and whether or not it was retrievable. The type of data we asked for included referrals to National Referral Mechanism, recording by Children's Social Care and on the numbers of missing children.

In July 2018, the second Freedom of Information request was sent to all local authorities in England and Wales. We received responses back from 151 Local authorities, although 10 of these were not complete.

For the Local authorities who responded to confirm specific data was retrievable, we then asked a set of follow up questions, which mirrored the questions in the initial pilot. While the responses to the FOI are reported in the related sections, the number of responses vary due to the differences in how Local authorities record the data.

Freedom of Information requests to police forces in England and Wales

A FOI request was sent out to all 43 police forces across England and Wales. In total there were 40 questions relating to arrests of children and young people aged 10 to 17 for possession with intent to supply Class A drugs, possession of Class A drugs, stop and search, National Referral Mechanism and children and young people missing from home and care.

We received responses from 32 forces, though not all of the forces who responded were able to answer all questions, therefore the total number of responses vary and are as stated per question.

A survey of police staff in England and Wales

An online survey was developed with support from National County lines Co-ordination Centre (NCLCC), who provided advice on question wording and topics to include in the survey of police staff.

We launched the survey in the summer of 2018, disseminating it through known contacts within police forces and regional organised crime units. We were also supported in dissemination by NCLCC, who sent the link to their county lines coordinators who then distributed it among police forces to increase uptake.

We received 202 complete responses to the survey from police staff from 28 police force areas across England and Wales, the British Transport Police (BTP) and from four Regional Organised Crime Units (ROCU). Data is presented as proportion of the sample police staff who responded to each question.

Interviews with professionals

To complement the quantitative data collected through the FOI requests we conducted a number of semi-structured interviews with professionals from with local authorities.

The local authorities selected to participate in the research were drawn from a list of potential areas that were identified based on their responses to the FOI requests using the following criteria:

- Where there was evidence that a criminal exploitation policy or protocol is in place within the local authority (a copy of which was requested for inclusion in the literature review)

Geographical location (to provide an even mix between urban, sub-urban and rural areas)

We aimed to interview the lead professional with responsibility for criminal exploitation work at the local authority and a team manager from a Youth Offending team in the area. The purpose was to gather perspectives from those who had a strategic role in the writing of the CCE strategy or policy for the local authority, and from a professional who is working with a high number young people who have been criminally exploited.

The semi-structured interviews were conducted either in person or over the phone. The data generated by these interviews was transcribed and analysed thematically using the NVivo analysis programme.

We spoke to 15 professionals in six of local authorities. Information shared during the interview has been anonymised with participating local authorities given unique identifying numbers.

Interviews with practitioners who work directly with young people affected by CCE

We spoke to seven practitioners across our services that work directly with young people affected by exploitation.

The semi-structured interviews were conducted either in person or over the phone. The data generated by these interviews was transcribed and analysed thematically using the NVivo analysis programme. The framework for analysis of interviews was created focussing on the experiences of children from being groomed to being exploited and responses they receive. This approach is reflected in how information is presented through this report.

Glossary and abbreviations

Child Criminal Exploitation - The Serious Violence Strategy (2018), defines child criminal exploitation as ‘...where an individual or group takes advantage of an imbalance of power to **coerce, control, manipulate or deceive** a child or young person under the age of 18 into any criminal activity (a) in exchange for something the victim needs or wants, and/or (b) for the financial or other advantage of the perpetrator or facilitator and/or (c) through violence or the threat of violence. **The victim may have been criminally exploited even if the activity appears consensual.** Child Criminal Exploitation does not always involve physical contact; it can also occur through the use of technology.’¹

County lines - The National Crime Agency (NCA) have been reporting on the intelligence about this issue since 2016.³ The Home Office defines county lines as ‘*county lines is a term used to describe gangs and organised criminal networks involved in exporting illegal drugs into one or more importing areas [within the UK], using dedicated mobile phone lines or other form of ‘deal line’. They are likely to exploit children and vulnerable adults to move [and store] the drugs and money and they will often use coercion, intimidation, violence (including sexual violence) and weapons.*’¹

Organised Criminal Group: The internationally agreed definition of an organised criminal group is ‘A group of three or more persons existing over a period of time acting in concert with the aim of committing crimes for financial or material benefit.’

‘Gang’: A gang is defined by the Metropolitan Police Service as ‘*a relatively durable, predominantly street-based group of young people who: 1. see themselves (and are seen by others) as a discernible group; 2. engage in criminal activity and violence; 3. lay claim over territory (not necessarily geographical but can include an illegal economy territory); 4. have some form of identifying structural feature; and 5. are in conflict with other, similar, gangs*’. The government has also adopted the above definition, taken from the 2009 report by the Centre for Social Justice.⁴

Child in need: A child in need is defined under the Children Act 1989 as a child who is unlikely to achieve or maintain a reasonable level of health or development, or whose health and development is likely to be significantly or further impaired, without the provision of services; or a child who is disabled.

List of abbreviations

CCE - Child criminal exploitation
CSE - Child sexual exploitation
NRM - National Referral Mechanism
NCA- National Crime Agency
OCG - Organised criminal groups
CPS - Crown Prosecution Service
PWITS - Possession with Intent to supply
ICTA - Independent Child Trafficking Advocate

About The Children's Society

Right now in this country there are children who feel scared, unloved and like they simply don't matter. They're not seen, they're not understood, and they aren't getting the help they need. In fact, we know that a million children and young people in England are living with seven or more serious problems in their lives. Without the right help, this can be overwhelming and a lonely place to be.

This has to change. No child should feel alone.

We want to stop exploitation to keep children and young people safe from harm - our direct practice, looks to change the systems that are failing young people.

Below are some of The Children's Society's projects that work to tackle child criminal exploitation.

Disrupting Exploitation Programme

With funding from the National Lottery Community Fund The Children's Society has developed and established the three-year Disrupting Exploitation Programme. The programme is running in Greater Manchester, London and the Birmingham. We work one-to-one with child victims of exploitation and on changing systems and contexts that put children at risk of exploitation. The programme is built on partnership working and youth participation that will guide and shape the delivery of our work.

Each region has a multi-disciplinary response team, including caseworkers, insight and engagement officers and a therapist in our London service. This programme builds on our expertise in building trusting long-term relationships with young people and delivering national and local policy and systems change to affect the lives of millions of young people across the country.

The service is for children and young people who are at risk of exploitation, with a focus on child criminal exploitation, including county lines. We also encourage the partners and professionals in the services to raise issues and have the freedom to approach new ideas and themes to help create system change.

The programme is working on systems change in custody to make the point of arrest a moment to better safeguard victims of exploitation, is working to disrupt exclusions and investigate more the link between school exclusions and exploitation from the perspective of young people and produced resources to support high-quality multi-agency referrals to the National Referral Mechanism to support children being recognised as a victim of trafficking. We have reached over 6,000 people – both professionals and young people through our systems change work.

To find out more please visit <https://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/what-we-do/helping-children/disrupting-exploitation-programme>

The Stride project

The Stride Project is for boys and young men who are at risk of, or are being trafficked for criminal exploitation. The project works with 11-18 year olds providing one to one support, group work and training for professionals.

The Stride Project promotes an approach to working with boys and young men so that they are supported in terms of safeguarding, and not just seen through the lens of the criminal justice system.

Stride practitioners provide intensive therapeutic one to one support for boys and young men to ensure they are given the most appropriate support to enhance their mental health and wellbeing. The cumulative experience of grooming, internal trafficking and exposure to different forms of exploitation and abuse can have a significant and traumatic impact on a young person and their mental health. We use a trauma-informed approach and are committed to empowering young people to make informed choices and increase the understanding of the exploitation they may have experienced.

To find out more please visit <https://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/what-we-do/helping-children/>

Missing from home services

We support children and young people who go, or are at risk of going missing, from home or care. Young people go missing for a number of reasons: unhappiness at home or in a placement, abuse, neglect or child sexual exploitation. We have services in various parts of the country which offer support in different ways.

To find out more please visit <https://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/what-we-do/helping-children/>

Resources on child exploitation

Intelligence Guide



Guides for parents



Are you worried about your child being criminally exploited?

Do you think they may be involved in selling drugs or other types of criminal activity? Have you seen a change in behaviour recently and don't understand why?

What does criminal exploitation mean?

Disruption checklist



Disruption checklist for child criminal exploitation (related to 'county lines')

Where there are reasonable grounds to suspect a child or young person to be a victim of trafficking, the following steps should be taken:

- This should be reported to the police in order for them to investigate the offences committed (i.e. modern slavery and trafficking offences)
- A referral should be made to Children's Social Care, as trafficking and exploitation means a child could be experiencing, or at risk of, significant harm and Child Protection processes need to be followed.
- A referral should be made to the National Referral Mechanism (NRM) directly. This

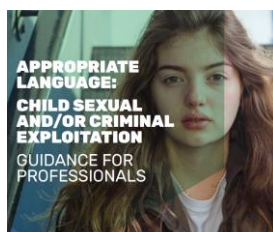
NRM guide and reconsideration template

Guidelines for writing a clear referral for the National Referral Mechanism (NRM)

Purpose of the NRM

It is important to remember that the NRM is an evidence gathering process. When writing a referral, you should be coordinating evidence and observations from other people who know and work with the young person you are referring in, so that you can include all evidence available to the network at that point. Other professionals, including those who are not First Responders, can submit written statements to the NRM to support the referral once submitted, so alert the wider professional network (as well as the young person and family, if appropriate) that you are submitting a referral.

Language guide



CCE Toolkit



To download these resources please visit <https://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/what-we-do/helping-children/disrupting-exploitation-programme>

Chapter 1. Introduction and background to Child Criminal Exploitation (CCE)

'Child Criminal Exploitation' (CCE) is a relatively new term for something that has been happening in our society for centuries. As many commentators have pointed out, it is not something that has only just emerged.⁵ Yet, addressing exploitation happening in a multitude of ways, requires an understanding of the current nature and context of the threats to children and young people.

In 2018, the Home Office produced its Serious Violence Strategy, outlining the Government's proposed response to the recent increases in knife, gun crime and homicide. In the strategy, tackling 'county lines' and the misuse of drugs is one strand of the national strategy; alongside early intervention and prevention, supporting communities and partnerships, and effective law enforcement and criminal justice responses.

The strategy introduced a definition of 'child criminal exploitation', with the intention '*to support different agencies and sectors working together*' and to ensure consistent understanding of what constitutes CCE.

The Serious Violence Strategy (2018), defines child criminal exploitation as

*'...where an individual or group takes advantage of an imbalance of power to **coerce, control, manipulate or deceive** a child or young person under the age of 18 into any criminal activity (a) in exchange for something the victim needs or wants, and/or (b) for the financial or other advantage of the perpetrator or facilitator and/or (c) through violence or the threat of violence. **The victim may have been criminally exploited even if the activity appears consensual.** Child criminal exploitation does not always involve physical contact; it can also occur through the use of technology.'*¹

Criminal exploitation can present in so many different forms. It can affect British children, non-British children living in this country and children trafficked into this country. Children can be exploited to 'work' in cannabis factories, for the purposes of pickpocketing, to distribute drugs, committing theft or burglary, or to assist financial fraud. Any child who is forced and coerced to commit **any type of crime** is a victim of criminal exploitation.

One particular example of criminal exploitation that has come to recent prominence due to high profile media and court cases and perceived links to youth violence and knife crime is 'county lines'. County lines is a police term used to describe a model of exploitation where criminal groups distribute illegal drugs from one area to another within the UK through the use of dedicated mobile phones – using young or vulnerable people to assist the storage and movement of cash and drugs. The National Crime Agency (NCA) has been reporting on the intelligence about this issue since 2016.³

The Home Office defines county lines as:

*'County lines is a term used to describe gangs and organised criminal networks involved in exporting illegal drugs into one or more importing areas [within the UK], using dedicated mobile phone lines or other form of "deal line". They are likely to exploit children and vulnerable adults to move [and store] the drugs and money and they will often use coercion, intimidation, violence (including sexual violence) and weapons.'*¹

A typical county lines scenario is defined by the NCA by the following components:

- a. A group (not necessarily affiliated as a gang) establishes a network between an urban hub and county location, into which drugs (primarily heroin and crack cocaine) are supplied.
- b. A branded mobile phone line is established in the market, to which orders are placed by introduced customers. The line will commonly (but not exclusively) be controlled by a third party, remote from the market.
- c. The group exploits young or vulnerable persons, to achieve the storage and/or supply of drugs, movement of cash proceeds and to secure the use of dwellings (commonly referred to as cuckooing).
- d. The group or individuals exploited by them regularly travel between the urban hub and the county market, to replenish stock and deliver cash.
- e. The group is inclined to use intimidation, violence and weapons, including knives, corrosives and firearms.

In 2018 the government created the National County Lines Co-ordination Centre to co-ordinate policing response to these issues.

Although the specific vulnerability of children under the age of 18 being exploited criminally is recognised – both in the Serious Violence Strategy and in NCA reports on county lines – the legal framework defining legal responses to children is complex, resulting in variable responses in safeguarding and law enforcement.

1.1. What is known about the scale of child criminal exploitation through the county lines model

Since 2016, the NCA have published three annual reports that have provided insight into the national scale of county lines.^{3,6,7} The most recent, published in January 2019, found that there are approximately 1,000 branded deal lines, with over 2,000 individual deal lines.⁷

The Children's Commissioner for England in 2018 warned that up to 30,000 to 50,000 young people could be affected, based on the NCA's estimation of 1,000 county lines in Britain and evidence that as many as 30 or 50 children can be involved in any single county line.⁸ Yet, the NCA report and the Children's Commissioner recognise that the true scale of children and young people being abused and exploited is difficult to determine and remains a clear intelligence gap.⁷ We do not know the real number of those affected and a large number of young people remain hidden without any support.

Where children and young people are identified and recorded as victims of criminal exploitation, the majority fall within the age range of 15 to 17 years old.⁷ According to official reports, 91% of individuals recorded as associated with 'county lines' are male reflecting a historic trend associated with organised crime as dominated by males.⁹ The NCA reported that the nationality/ethnicity of 'county lines' individuals was extremely mixed and varied by region.⁷

Other relevant data to help piece together the number of children being criminally exploited, is the number of children recognised as potential victims of modern slavery and referred to what is known as "the National Referral Mechanism" (NRM). This number is growing year-on-year.

The NCA annual overview of NRM statistics shows that referrals of children increased by 48% across all different types of exploitation, from 2,118 in 2017 to 3,137 in 2018. Child criminal exploitation is not a separate category recorded for NRM purposes, but the report acknowledges that the increase is due, in the majority, to the combined increase in NRM referrals related to the county lines criminal business model.¹⁰

Table 1 presents the number of referrals of children under the age of 18 to the National Referral Mechanism by types of exploitation, child's nationality and referring agency. Referrals due to child criminal exploitation, including through the county lines model, are included with all referrals due to labour exploitation, as criminal exploitation of children is not a separate offence and there is no legal definition of child criminal exploitation in legislation. The data suggests that around half of the referrals in that category are of British children, and the biggest number of referrals came from police and local authorities.

Even the number of referrals to the NRM are likely to present only the tip of the iceberg. The Modern Slavery Police Transformation unit reports that criminal exploitation was the primary type of slavery in 370 police operations in April 2019, an increase of 1956% from April 2017 where there were only 18 operations. An increase in the number of operations where child victims were identified was reported alongside that increase.¹¹

County lines activity and child criminal exploitation is affecting communities the length and breadth of the country, and the true scale of how many children are affected has still to be established.

Table 1: Number of children referred to the National Referral Mechanism by referring agencies, nationality and types of exploitation. Source: NCA, 2019

	Domestic servitude		Labour exploitation		Sexual exploitation		Unknown exploitation	
	British	Other nationalities	British	Other nationalities	British	Other nationalities	British	Other nationalities
Home Office Immigration Enforcement	0	4	0	21	0	5	0	2
Gangmaster and Labour Abuse Authority	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
National Crime Agency	0	0	0	1	1	2	0	0
UK Border Force	0	3	0	10	0	10	2	60
UK Visas and Immigration	0	47	0	499	0	76	0	60
Local authorities	0	19	481	240	207	71	17	185
Police	3	6	480	177	172	100	9	71
Voluntary sector	2	42	25	51	22	32	1	5
Total	5	121	986	1000	402	296	29	383
% of British children and children of other nationalities in each type of exploitation	4%	96%	50%	50%	58%	42%	7%	93%

1.2. Why 'county lines' exist

The NCA report that the main driver of county lines is the demand and supply of controlled substances within the UK. The use of the specific substances that are reportedly most closely aligned to county lines are heroin and cocaine-based substances (crack and powder). Both substances are regulated under the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971 (MoDA c.38, 1971), and are controlled based on the risk they pose to society.

The illicit drug market works on similar principles to that of any legitimate business, with a careful balance of supply and demand. What has been observed in recent years is that conventional/local markets for drugs have become heavily saturated – potentially due to a decrease in demand from the reduction in users and a surplus of supply.¹² This has led to the gangs and organised criminal groups (OCGs) needing to expand their operations and seek out new client bases.^{13,14,15,16}

There is significant research on what structural and behavioural features distinguish 'gang activity' and that of an organised criminal group, with the origins of each form of organisation subject to in-depth analysis.^{4,17,18,19}

It is beyond the scope of this report to focus on the distinction between what is a gang and what is an organised criminal group or to suggest how best to tackle serious and organised crime. However, it is important to identify that there is often a dependence on grouping all violent crime relating to young people under the umbrella of gangs, without understanding the nuance and difference in the cultural structures and organisation of the different criminal groups. Moreover, the label of 'gang' itself is also misused, misunderstood and misinterpreted when it comes to understanding the situations that young people are in.

When considering the impact and role that these groups play in the criminal exploitation of children, the effect on the young person will be the same – the child will be the bottom of the hierarchal criminal pile.

The drug line

As stated above, the substances that are seen as the key drivers of 'county lines' are heroin and crack cocaine, which was affirmed in our interviews with professionals. Yet neither of these substances are grown or manufactured in this county. There is a significant journey that the substances go through to end up on the streets of Britain. From production to end users, there is a complex system that revolves around a massive international network.²⁰

Both substances are produced in specific geographical regions; cocaine is predominantly produced in three South American countries around the Andean region. Whereas the majority of heroin found in the UK is still produced in Afghanistan.²⁰ This therefore requires an elaborate international network to transport and distribute the substances to consumer markets across Western Europe.

The 'traditional model' for cocaine production, trafficking and sale has involved European OCGs working with the Cartels who control production, importing through human trafficking and other methods into wholesale points in western/central Europe. The wholesale 'middle men' then sell to national OCG's/ and community level 'gangs' who manage direct sales to end users.²⁰

In recent years, there has been a shift in the model of distribution in the UK. There are two developments that have shifted this model, the first of which is tangential to County Lines, and that is the increase in sales through the dark web. This is most prevalent in the recreational/premium product market – where users can order direct and is a holdover from the Novel Psychoactive Substances influx in 2010.²¹

The second development in relation to County Lines is the rise in control by one specific OCG, as discussed by Townsend (2019), who have revolutionised the distribution model and removed the intermediaries. Undercutting the supply of poor quality with high purity product direct from cartels.²²

The riskiest points of contact for the organised criminal groups are international transport/importation and then again at point of sale. Human trafficking and exploitation has always been an established part of the distribution of illicit substances at a global level. The new model has shown a way to reduce risk by removing the number of contact points between producer and distributor with one organisation handling the whole chain.

The risk is then emphasised and shifted onto establishing new or taking over the area of demand. This is especially critical in the context of a locally shrinking demand in saturated urban regions. While demand is still evident, it is logical to summarise that it is less profitable than previous years and so County Lines emerged as groups sought new markets in areas that may not previously had such organised involvement.²³

However, the establishment of business in a new area has inherent risks, not least the threat of violence from rival organisations, police disruption and state intervention. The people in charge of the criminal groups see it preferable that such risks are faced by people who pose little risk to themselves or their organisation rather than their established members.

And so the criminal groups use children and young people to 'run' the substances for them – as outlined in the earlier County Lines definition. The main goal for almost all criminal groups is to maximise profit and to maintain the business.

Where do the drugs go?

Having addressed where the substances are coming from, and how they get into the country, one question not yet examined is where do they go?

In a recent report, Hay et al. (2019) estimated that there were 313,971 people who used opiates and/or crack cocaine aged 15 to 64 in England in 2016/17.²⁴

Adult substance misuse statistics from the National Drug Treatment Monitoring System (NDTMS), found that there were 279,793 in contact with structured treatment in 2016/17. Of the individuals in treatment, 52% had presented for problematic use of opiates, of which 43% also presented with use of crack cocaine. The median age of an opiate user is reported as 39, with 73% of the cohort of opiate users being over the age of 35.²⁵

The NCA report that there has been an increase in the use of crack cocaine, likely the result of focused marketing activity by criminal groups and that it may be perceived as more attractive amongst younger users.⁷

Many of the people purchasing the substances will be individuals who are facing addiction, dependence or substance abuse disorders as well as other issues in their lives. Research has demonstrated a strong association between adverse childhood experiences and substance use disorders.²⁶ These vulnerabilities are used by the criminal groups to exploit the users in a method known as 'cuckooing', which is defined by the NCA as:

*'In some cases the dealers will take over a local property, normally belonging to a vulnerable person, and use it to operate their criminal activity from. This is known as cuckooing. People exploited in this way will quite often be exposed to physical, mental and sexual abuse, and in some instances will be trafficked to areas a long way from home as part of the network's drug dealing business.'*⁷

It is in these 'cuckooed' properties that young people are forced to sell the substances under the county lines model. The young people are often in extremely risky environments, facing the risk of violence from their exploiters or the drug users who have been cuckooed, and from an unsafe physical environment featuring toxic substances and used needles.

1.3. The legal framework for responses to children targeted for criminal exploitation

The possession of drugs with intent to supply (PWITS) is a serious criminal offence, even when young people are involved.

Yet when organised criminal groups are grooming or exploiting children, forcing them to distribute drugs, this is obviously a serious safeguarding issue. This issue requires a coordinated response from children's services and the police, with other services such as education, criminal justice, judiciary, youth services also having a role to play.

How these safeguarding duties are fulfilled in relation to children who are criminally exploited, and the interaction of law enforcement response, is not straightforward or simple – reflecting the complex legal statutory framework that underpins those responses.

For individual children who are affected by criminal exploitation, that complexity may mean the difference of being treated as a victim of crime or as a perpetrator of a serious offence – a difference which will have a long term impact on the child's life.

The safeguarding framework

In England, the Children Act 1989 implemented through the Working Together Statutory guidance updated in 2018 stipulates that local authorities have a duty to safeguard and promote the welfare of children in need in their area, i.e. those children who would not be able to achieve reasonable standard of health or development without support from the local authority. It means that local authorities have a responsibility to intervene where there may be issues within families, such as abuse or neglect, or where child's needs are greater than the family is able to deal with on their own – including where child is groomed or exploited by people outside family.

Recent changes made to the Working Together guidance introduced contextual safeguarding, which specifically stressed that *'as well as threats to the welfare of children from within their families, children may be vulnerable to abuse or exploitation from outside their families'*, and that children should be safeguarded in those cases.

Both 'county lines' and 'child criminal exploitation' are defined in the guidance in order to enable safeguarding professionals to recognise that children may be victims of criminal exploitation through the county lines model.

Whether there are issues within the family or contextual safeguarding risks from outside families, local authorities are required to take a number of steps to keep children safe. They are required to:

1. Undertake an assessment of issues in child's life, including considering whether wider environmental factors are present in a child's life and are a threat to their safety and/or welfare, the individual needs and vulnerabilities of each child and the parental capacity to support the child

2. Decide whether the child is a 'child in need' (Section 17 of the Children Act 1989) or is suffering or likely to suffer significant harm (Section 47 of the Children Act 1989). This means that local authorities make a decision about the level of support the child and child's family may need to help them overcome issues identified.
3. Put in a place either a child in need plan or a child protection plan. Local authorities do this jointly with other agencies. These plans set out which agencies will provide which services to the child and family. Both types of plans should set clear measurable outcomes for the child, and expectations for the parents. The plan should reflect the positive aspects of the family situation as well as the weaknesses. The child protection plan should specifically ensure that actions are taken to keep a child safe from harm and prevent him or her from suffering further harm.
4. Provide support to address those needs to improve the child's outcomes and welfare, and where necessary to make them safe via early help services or by taking a child into the care of local authority if needed.

The safeguarding response from the local authorities allows for early help and quick response when a child is identified as being at risk of significant harm. Local authorities have an opportunity to identify and intervene when a child is being groomed or targeted for criminal exploitation, as well as responding when exploitation actually happens.

In Wales the Social Services and Well-being Act 2014, which has now superseded the Children Act 1989, ensures that children have their needs assessed and receive appropriate support if needed.

Section 21 of the Social Services and Well-being Act 2014 requires local authorities to carry out a needs assessment and where relevant provide care, support, preventative services or information or advice.²⁷ The All Wales Child Protocol for missing children sets out the key approaches that should be taken by agencies and professionals in response to a child going missing. A similar protocol exists for children who are at risk of or who are experiencing child sexual exploitation; and equally for children who may have been trafficked. Each of these set out a clear expectation that information will be shared to ensure a joined up safeguarding response to children.²⁸

Criminal justice framework

Under English criminal law there are a number of offences that relate to situations where adults who exploit young people for modern slavery or trafficking (which may also apply to the criminal exploitation of children) and to offences related to the possession of drugs or drugs distribution.

Dealing with adults exploiting children

The area of legislation that criminal exploitation is most closely aligned with is modern slavery. Modern Slavery covers a range of criminal offences that, in England and Wales, are defined under the Modern Slavery Act 2015 (MSA 2015). Where there are not enough evidence to

charge individuals with offences under the Modern Slavery Act 2015, perpetrators may be charged with a range of other offences.

Adults who traffic or exploit children can be charged with a number of different offences:

Offences of trafficking for the purposes of exploitation or slavery, servitude, forced or compulsory labour under the Modern Slavery Act 2015

Definitions under the Modern Slavery Act 2015	
Offence of slavery, servitude or forced or compulsory labour	When the person requires another person to perform forced or compulsory labour and the circumstances are such that the person knows or ought to know that the other person is being required to perform forced or compulsory labour.
Offence of human trafficking	A person commits an offence of human trafficking if the person arranges or facilitates the travel of another person [A] with a view to [A] being exploited. Travel can be happening between different countries or within the same country
Meaning of exploitation	Exploitation in the context of trafficking may mean: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Slavery, servitude and forced or compulsory labour • Sexual exploitation • Removal of organs etc. • Securing services etc. by force, threats or deception Securing services etc. from children and vulnerable persons in situation where an adult, or a person without the illness, disability, or family relationship, would be likely to refuse to be used for that purpose

Additional offences that perpetrators who exploit children can be charged with:

- Offences under the Children and Young Persons Act 1933 of cruelty to persons under 16, there is no similar offence in relation to children aged 16 and 17.
- If exploitation of a child involves benefit fraud and trafficking for exploitation could not be evidenced, offences under the Social Security Administration Act 1992, the Fraud Act 2006 and the Theft Act 1978 could be considered.
- Where a child has been inappropriately removed from their family and held elsewhere, depending on the facts of the individual case, offences of child abduction (Sections 1 and 2 of the Child Abduction Act 1984), false imprisonment or kidnapping. These offences would only apply to children under the age of 16. Children aged 16 and 17 are not offered the same protection.
- Where there is no evidence of movement for trafficking offences but evidence that a child was exploited sexually, there are offences to tackle sexual exploitation of children under

the Sexual Offences Act 2003. Some offences under the Sexual Offences Act 2003 apply to children under the age of 18. These include child sexual exploitation offences and abuse of position of trust. Other child sex offences only apply to children under 16 as children under 16 cannot consent to sexual activity.

All of these offences may result in substantial penalties and lengthy prison terms. However, securing enough evidence to secure successful outcome in courts for these offences is often difficult, particularly if a child is aged 16 or 17.²⁹

Responding to children found in possession of drugs

In relation to children found in possession of drugs, the law enforcement framework may both allow for a child to be recognised as a victim of exploitation and for a child to be charged with drug related offences. These offences are regulated under the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971 (MoDA c.38, 1971) and the subsequent amendments.

Under the Act, it is a criminal offence to be in possession of a controlled drug or possession of a controlled drug with intent to supply to others. Both offences can result in penalties or custodial sentences following trials in Magistrate or Crown Courts. As already discussed, the substances driving 'county lines' are Class A – the possible punitive responses are described in the following table.

Offences related to possession of drugs	Maximum penalty if found guilty in Magistrate Court	Maximum penalty if found guilty in Crown Court
Possession - s.5(1) of the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971	Class A drug: £5000 fine and/or 6 months' imprisonment	Class A drug: Unlimited fine and/or 7 years' imprisonment
Possession with intent to supply - s.5(3) of the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971	Class A drug: £5000 fine and/or 6 months' imprisonment	Unlimited fine and/or life imprisonment

There is no statutory definition of 'criminal exploitation', 'child exploitation' or 'county lines' in the legislation.

Children exploited by criminal groups need to be considered as victims of trafficking when they are arrested in possession of controlled drugs.

Where it is found that the child committed an offence as a direct result of their situation, prosecutors should follow the CPS guidance on suspects in a criminal case who might be victims of trafficking or slavery and consider the statutory defense for slavery or trafficking victims, meaning that they should not be seen as guilty of drug related offences.³⁰ Section 45 of the Modern Slavery Act 2015 provides this statutory defense for child and adult victims of modern slavery who were compelled to carry out criminal offences as a result of their exploitation, for example, being forced to produce or sell illegal drugs. The defence does not apply to the most serious crimes, such as sexual offences or offences involving serious violence. In the case of children, it needs to be established that their action was a direct

consequence of their exploitation and that a reasonable person in the same circumstances and with the same characteristics would do the criminal act. There is no requirement for compulsion to be demonstrated in the case of children.

There is currently no definitive definition of a trafficked victim either. The National Referral Mechanism is a single framework centered on victim identification and referral to appropriate support. First responders (which may include police, immigration authorities, local authorities and certain NGOs) can refer all suspected victims of trafficking to a Competent Authority for a decision on whether the individual is a victim of trafficking. A multi-agency Competent Authority is based in the UK Human Trafficking Centre (UKHTC). The UKHTC will act as a central point of contact for all agencies likely to encounter victims (e.g. NGOs, police, Immigration authorities, local authorities).

A first responder needs to complete a referral form recording their encounter with a potential victim. Sufficient information needs to be included to enable a decision on whether the subject has 'reasonable grounds' for being treated as a victim of trafficking. A reasonable grounds decision includes 'I suspect but cannot prove'. General indicators of a potential victim's behaviour, circumstances and responses to questions will assist in the assessment. Conclusive grounds decision follows reasonable ground decision and confirms or negates the status of the victim of trafficking.

It is important to note that currently there is no process for halting criminal proceedings against children charged with drug related offences until a NRM referral is made and a NRM decision is reached. Also, the NRM decision has no official status in a criminal court, which makes decisions based on the criminal standard of proof 'beyond reasonable doubt'. The NRM process will provide a decision, on the balance of probabilities, advising whether an individual has been a victim of trafficking or modern slavery. In practice, it means that many children who are victims of trafficking and exploitation endure criminal proceeding, alongside processes to recognise them as victims. They may even be convicted of drug related offences despite later being found to be a victim of trafficking through NRM.

There are no statistics on how often the statutory defense is applied in case of children prosecuted for drug related offences. However, it is known though that in the latest year, the number of proven drug offences by children increased by 2% to just under 6,000 offences after having previously seen long term falls.³¹

The Modern Slavery Act also made a provision in Section 48 for child victims of trafficking to have access to Independent Child Trafficking Advocates (ICTAs), whose role it is to help children have a voice, support them through complex legal process and ensure that they have persistent help from the same person. An ICTA trial was conducted in several English local authorities from 2014 to 2015 and in 2016, the Government made a commitment to a full national rollout of the ICTA service across England and Wales. This has not yet happened. The independent review into modern slavery act stated that:

*'It is clear that the added value of ICTAs is threefold: as a service that is independent of all other public authorities; as a service that is a companion for a trafficked child, helping them to navigate towards a safer future; as an expert resource for public authorities when knowledge of child trafficking may be low and the need to ensure protection and care of a trafficked child is high.'*³²

This year, the government started rolling out a revised ICTA model that provides a continued one-to-one ICTA service for children without effective parental responsibility in the UK, while introducing a regional coordinator to support public authorities already working with children who do have effective parental responsibility in the UK. There are concerns that in practice children who are victims of trafficking who have parents in this country will be left without crucial ICTA support. This will make it difficult for them to navigate the complex safeguarding and law enforcement systems and secure the support they need.

Through our research, we will be looking at how children and young people experience child criminal exploitation through county lines model and how local agencies respond to children affected. The following two chapters present our findings.

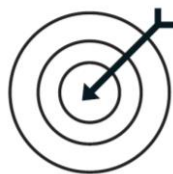
Chapter 2. Children's experiences of exploitation: From grooming to exploitation – learning from interviews with practitioners

The processes by which vulnerable young people are being criminally exploited are varied and often unique to each young person's situation. Yet the overall method that perpetrators across the country rely on is reflective of the methods employed in child sexual exploitation and abuse – through the process of grooming.

As with sexual exploitation and abuse, the grooming process often includes a number of stages, relating to the conditions outlined in the definition – including deception, manipulation, coercion and control. This section focuses on the grooming process that young people may go through, as told through our interviews with professionals both in local authorities and within our own practice base.

Any child can become a victim of exploitation. It is through the combination of factors that children become exploited, criminally or in any other way.³³ These factors include:

- The child's own vulnerability, for example having learning difficulties or simply through being a child.
- Vulnerability created by society, for example poverty, experiences of discrimination, lack of opportunities for young people, inability to access education.
- The presence or lack of protective factors in child's life, including the support a child can get from their family or local community.
- The proximity or access a perpetrator has to a child.



Target



Test



Trap

2.1. What do we know about children who are being criminally exploited

Through a review of available literature, secondary data sources and our own interviews with professionals working with young people affected by criminal exploitation across the country, we can piece together a picture of the children who are at risk, and try to understand what they are experiencing. The following sections discuss what we have found in relation to the different vulnerability factors and adversities children and young people being exploited are facing.

Age

Age is an important factor when looking at which children are affected by criminal exploitation. The age of the child is important in many respects, most notably by the distinction of criminal responsibility and the perception of victimhood.

In England and Wales, the age of criminal responsibility is currently 10 years old, while in Scotland it is eight. Till 1998, there was a legal presumption (known as 'doli incapax') that children aged under 14 did not know the difference between right and wrong and were therefore incapable of committing a criminal offence. However, the doli incapax presumption was abolished by Section 34 of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 and subsequently, children between the ages of 10 and 13 are treated in the same way as children 14 and over.³⁴

There have been a number of calls for this abolition to be re-evaluated, with the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child stating that the minimum age of criminal responsibility should be at minimum 12 years old.³⁵ This is also supported by a growing body of evidence in the developmental sciences that challenges the presumption of capacity through greater understanding of adolescent brain development.³⁶

The NCA reports that the majority of known victims of the county lines model fall within the age range of 15 to 17 years old.⁷ To explore this during our evidence gathering, we asked professionals the age of the young people they were working with.

The ages that were reported ranged from 11 to over 18 years old, with most reporting that the key ages that they were working with were from 14 to 17, which is reflective of official reports. There were a number of caveats to this that the participants in our interviews reflected on:

That most of the services (both The Children's Society and local authority based) were engaged to work with children over the age of 10, and secondly that after age 17 the young people invariably transition into adult services.

'We won't have worked with them under the age of ten because the way our service works are 11 plus, but they have disclosed that their exploitation certainly started before the age of 10'

The Children's Society Practitioner (London)

'Our oldest child is 17. We've had a couple of children who've transitioned to the age of 18, so we're working with the adult safeguarding board to look at transition and arrangements.'

CCE Specialist (Area 3)

As highlighted in the first quote above, even though young people may be engaged with services when they are 10 or older, their exploitation began at a much younger age. However, as this will have been below the age of criminal responsibility, it will not be recorded in the same way and often not identified at all, and therefore support has not been provided. We know anecdotally from our own services that exploitation is happening to younger children and so within our evidence gathering we asked about whether there were any known cases of child criminal exploitation involving children under 10 years old. We asked this within our survey of police staff. The majority of the respondents said that they we're not aware of any children under the age of 10 being identified as victims of CCE, though five individuals from different police force areas reported that they were aware victims under the age of 10.

'On one occasion a child of 8 years old was suspected to be a victim of CCE '

Policy Survey respondent (62).

We also asked in our interviews with the professionals whether they were aware of cases involving children under the age of 10. Half of the local authority areas that we talked with reported that they did not currently have any known victims under the age of 11 or 12 years old. Two local areas were aware of/believed that there were victims under the age of 10 at risk of or being exploited in the area. One local authority reported that they were working with a victim as young as seven.

'When we have multi-agency meetings we hear of other people who've been working with nine-year olds, eight-year olds.'

The Children's Society Practitioner (London)

In our interviews with practitioners from our own services supporting victims of exploitation, all were aware of cases of children younger than 10 years old experiencing exploitation.

Age is an important issue in relation to the perception of victimhood, a theme that will be discussed throughout this report. It is reported that children exploited in relation to the county lines model are predominantly over the age of criminal responsibility, and are mostly between the ages of 15 and 17 years old.⁷ But even when exploitation is evident, there is still an attitude that these children are complicit in their own criminal exploitation. At the same time, there is a lack of recognition of the issue affecting younger children, and so the opportunity to identify and offer help earlier to children under the age of 10 is being missed.

'We have had referrals for kids as young as eight but average age 14, 15, 16 and some 17 year olds where it's more entrenched, and obviously the older they get the harder it is to encourage them or persuade them, to engage in more pro-social kind of stuff and the harder it is to get a response from Children's Social Care when they're 16 and 17.'

Area 6

The tangled web of autonomy and choice, and how to unpick it, is something that is explored in the following sections of the report. In those sections we discuss the vulnerabilities children experiencing criminal exploitation are facing before and during their exploitation.

Gender

Like age, gender is another significant factor that plays into the narrative of how children and young people are identified and treated as victims of criminal exploitation. We know that criminal exploitation is happening to young people of all gender identities, though the majority that are currently being identified are reportedly male.

According to official reports, 91% of individuals recorded as 'associated with county lines' are male.⁷ This is perhaps unsurprising as crime, and specifically organised crime, has historically been dominated by men.⁹ Therefore, is it logical to suppose that if boys and men are more likely to be engaged in criminal activity, they are more likely to experience criminal exploitation?

Studies into access and introduction into criminal networks has found these processes are often enacted through male dominated networks, in which female participation is often temporary and peripheral.⁹ It therefore makes sense that in an environment that has a majority male cohort, the victims too will be male.

Yet social, cultural and historical contexts that have developed to understand crime and offending affect whether these boys and young men are seen as victims of criminal exploitation. The majority of research into crime and criminal behaviour has focused on men as perpetrators, and the drivers and determinants that lead to their offending behaviour. They are rarely seen as a victim.³⁷

Meanwhile girls are often lost in the narrative around child criminal exploitation. There are few studies that have examined female offending in relation to gangs and organised crime.^{38,39} Though we know that girls are victims of CCE, they are still in the minority of identified cases. What has yet to establish is whether this is because girls are peripheral to the structures that are behind these offences or whether in the identification process of CCE, the criminal exploitation that girls are experiencing is secondary to other forms exploitation being identified – notably sexual exploitation.

This disparity between who is seen to be exploited within the county lines model and those experiencing other forms of criminal exploitation was further reflected in our interviews with professionals. When asked about the gender of the young people they are working with in relation to criminal exploitation, all professionals reported that it was predominantly males that they were seeing. However, in all areas participants talked about females and girls in relation to criminal exploitation and count lines activity.

Reflections from interviews on the role of gender

'We are seeing, is kind of, an increase in use of girls in gangs.'

Area 1

'I've got one young woman who's actively involved at the moment. And I'm sure there are a lot of them on the periphery that we don't know about. I think there are probably loads we don't know about.'

Area 2

'I think it's somewhere like 70–30 or 80–20. I think it's more 80–20 in terms of boys than girls. When we looked back at the history of some of those young people, we'd been

thinking that the girls had been victims purely of child sexual exploitation, and what was happening was that they'd always been involved in [that] and the child sexual exploitation had come as part of that. Yes, over here we have a few individuals in [CCE] that we're worried about who will target younger girls for sexual exploitation, but the majority have turned out – the girls who are being sexually exploited – have also turned out to be involved in [CCE], and that's been the predominant factor.'

Area 3

'We've had females linked with ['Gang'], females that were classed as ['Gang'] members. That female kind of moved to more kind of linking in with the [other area] nominals that were coming down. She was used a lot for recruitment'

Area 5

Within these discussions, what emerged was a difference in the experience of and types of exploitation, between male and female victims. However, this is not just a binary issue, as other gender identities were also identified and referenced as being targeted and identified as a potential risk factor for exploitation.

'I think one of our challenges is that other – at the moment predominantly it is males that have been identified. I'm not saying it doesn't happen with females. But I think males are always seen as, easily, readily seen as, a kind of offender or perpetrator and not a victim, so having it aligning it to CSE, where females are readily seen as victims, I think, I think helps, so they kind of – they sit across each other.'

Area 2

Another theme that consistently emerged was the intersection between gender, criminal exploitation and sexual exploitation. This was also mentioned in the interviews with our own frontline practitioners.

'I mean in terms of gender I think it's both, I think a lot of the girls that I work with in terms of criminal exploitation, there's a sexual element there as well in terms of, or an abusive relationship. So a young person I'm working with at the moment, she was sexually exploited, she's now in a 'relationship' with a male who is criminally exploiting her and their 'relationship' is still abusive but the exploitation actually now is criminal so I think it's entwined.'

The Children's Society Practitioner

As with age, where this difference lies is in how the young people are seen and treated in relation to exploitation they experience and the perception of their victimhood.

'I'd say there might be some differences with gender potentially because I do think girls are seen as more vulnerable than boys...so if I had a 14 year old female who'd been found with crack cocaine I think the police would be saying "is she being sexually exploited?" and think about all those vulnerabilities. Whereas I think if the police found a boy, a 14 year old boy, I don't think that would be their automatic response.'

The Children's Society Service manager

'In fact, very little evidence in the youth justice system of females, which is interesting because we are sure there are females involved but they're not coming into the criminal justice system.'

Youth Justice Practitioner (Area 2)

The relationship between criminal exploitation and sexual exploitation is explored in more detail later in the report.

Ethnicity

Within the narrative that has emerged around county lines and criminal exploitation, aside from gender, ethnicity is the factor that has the greatest association with who is seen as 'involved' in – though not necessarily as a victim of – this phenomenon.

There have been a number of commentaries on the association and over representation of specific ethnic groups within the criminal justice system for drug related offenses, including county lines.^{40,41} There are two ways this can be interpreted, as articulated by a practitioner in one of our interviews.

'The police will openly say it is heavily disproportionate, that's something the police aren't straying away from at the moment. Now I'm not going to say that's good or bad because if that's the case, and that ethnic minority is unfortunately being targeted and groomed then that's the case and we need to work with that. But if they are being targeted say by the police for stop and searches and things unnecessarily then that is the problem.'

The Children's Society Practitioner

This quote gets to the heart of the problem when looking at child criminal exploitation, county lines and ethnicity. Are we seeing more minority ethnic children in services and the criminal justice system because they are more likely to have been targeted? Or is it that they are more likely to be picked up by the police and the statutory services?

The NCA reported in 2017 that the nationality/ethnicity of individuals being criminally exploited in relation to county lines, was extremely mixed and varied by region. In our interviews with professionals across the country, we asked them about any trends they were seeing with regards to the ethnicity of the young people they were working with. Most reflected that the cohorts of children currently being seen were reflective of the demographic makeup of the area.

'Ethnicity-wise, again, the current cohort, I would say, are mainly white British, but that's because they're from a particular part of the city.'

Area 2

'So in the [X] part of [Area 5] it's a real mixture in terms of people's backgrounds, in terms of race, ethnicity. We've got eastern Europeans, kind of a whole range of, you know, young black men, white men, young men. It's quite mixed and it's quite varied. The individuals that are involved from [Y], that's a much more kind of stable community where you've generation upon generation upon generation of families that've always lived in that area, whereas [X] it's much more, the community is much more organic. Lots of people, lots of different communities living within that area. So I think that's then reflective of that gang.'

Area 5

'Ethnicity predominantly white although [Area 6] has a more diverse community in the south of the city and we're seeing quite a lot of young people being exploited in that area. So I'd say that they were predominantly Black and Asian young people but for the rest of the city, the north of the city is a predominantly white area so yes predominantly white.'

'Yes in terms of ethnicity I'd say, I suppose as my work as a practitioner I've worked in different areas and the ethnicity has very much been reflected to kind of the general population. So like in Essex there's a lot of young people who're white British, whereas in London we've had more kind of black minority ethnic young people. So I wouldn't say that there's been a specific trend around ethnicity I'd say it's been more reflective of the kind of race ethnicity within that local area.'

The Children's Society Practitioner

In our interviews it was clear that professionals working with the young people did not necessarily see that ethnicity was a specific risk factor in their areas, as the children at risk of or being criminally exploited were reflective of the young people in the area. There were however some who felt that they were seeing a disproportionate number of certain minority ethnic children, most notably from a custodial point of view.

'Ethnicity...that's a really interesting one because we have a disproportionality problem within our caseload, in that there is overrepresentation of black young men generally in the caseload, and particularly in the custodial numbers.'

Area 2

'The trend in the young people coming through our referrals at the moment we do not have any Caucasian referrals.'

The Children's Society Practitioner

The children referenced by the professionals we interviewed would be children that have received intervention and support from the local authority where their home is, not necessarily where they were being exploited.

Young people with special educational needs and learning difficulties (SEN)

As previously discussed, one driver of risk to children and young people from criminal exploitation derives from the fact that (generally) they have yet to attain the capacity to understand situations in the same way as an adult would. They lack the factual and contextual information necessary to make informed decisions. This imbalance of power is highlighted within child criminal exploitation definitions. Because of their age, children and young people are perceived by potential exploiters as being easier to exert power over. And those with a learning disability can be perceived as even easier to exert power over, and thus even easier to influence and control.

In 2018, there were 564,883 children between 10 and 17 years old that had an identified special educational learning need that was recognised. Based on pupil-level data collected through the school census, this equates to around 15% of all children of these ages.⁴²

There has been significant research into the experiences of young people with SEN in relation to child sexual exploitation, which outlines the multiple factors that increase the risk these young people face.^{43,44,45,46} The factors that are taken advantage of in the context of sexual exploitation are mirrored within criminal exploitation and County Lines.

One issue raised during our interviews was around cases of young people who were suspected victims of CCE having an undiagnosed learning difficulty or educational need that had not been picked up by education. This reflects what has previously been documented in relation to sexual exploitation.

‘So a lot of people talked about finding young people with learning disabilities being really, really vulnerable, so we’ve experienced young people who have got a diagnosed learning disability. Also I’d kind of argue that the majority of your young boys and young men have an undiagnosed learning need and that predominantly has been because they’ve been out of education, they might not have been in education long enough to have the right assessment. For example we’ve had young people who when we have got hold of the assessments at their most recent PRUs their reading age is very low, their cognition is very low, but they’ve been interviewed for 60 wraps of heroin or cocaine and you think “how have they gone through that interview process when their reading ability and understanding is that of a seven year old?” So I’d say that there is kind of, that is a vulnerability but yes we have seen people who have actually got a learning disability but I’d say a lot of its also undiagnosed learning disability.’

The Children’s Society Service Manager

This concern was also echoed in the interviews with professionals from participating local areas, which saw special educational facilities specifically targeted.

‘We’ve got one school in [Area 2] which is a school for children with additional needs. They are disproportionately becoming involved. The vulnerable are not necessarily able to understand the risks in the same way as other young people. Not to say that that would prevent them from being exploited, but I think they’ve got an additional kind of vulnerability there to be kind of led along this path.’

Area 2

‘And I think what we find is that by the time they get to us, or they get to the youth justice service, these are children that haven’t had educational psychology assessments, they’ve not had mental health input.’

Area 4

'We know that young people that we work with are most, more likely than not to have speech and language difficulties.'

Area 5

'ADHD comes up a lot because obviously people are self-medicating with cannabis and that's leaving them vulnerable to run up drug debts, so I've had that with about three young people.'

Area 6

There are questions about how these young people are treated within the system – if a full evaluation of their needs is not understood, as with the issue around age and capacity, there are questions as to how these young people are treated and their victimisation understood. As with sexual exploitation, the young people themselves are unlikely to identify the risks and indicators of criminal exploitation.

As already reported, there is a significant lack of available evidence on the scale of this problem or an exact oversight of which young people are at risk. If further information is recorded in the future, hopefully we will be able to gain a better understanding of this issue as more data emerges. From our own investigation, though the true scale has yet to be established, there are certain characteristics and themes that were consistently mentioned in relation to young people and criminal exploitation.

2.2. What do we know about the children experiencing CCE: Societal factors

So far, we have discussed some of the characteristics of young people who have been identified as victims of criminal exploitation that services are working with. And while certain characteristics are associated with an increased likelihood of prevalence within this cohort, these young people are not exploited merely because of their age, their gender or their ethnicity.

Neither are these young people vulnerable only by the distinction of exploitation – there are a host of vulnerabilities and circumstances that these young people have experienced, and are still experiencing, in their lives that put them at risk of exploitation. This may include proximity to perpetrators or organised criminal groups, or lack of protective factors in child's familial or friendship networks.

It is also important to note that though we discuss the factors and vulnerabilities on their own, in almost all circumstances there will be multiple complex vulnerabilities that are affecting the young people who are experiencing criminal exploitation.

'It's known that young people that are open to the youth offending teams have often got multiple problems and they may well be excluded from school, they may well be known to social care, either as looked after or a child of need, or the child protection plan, or if they are not arguably they could be and [due to] their speech language communication needs, so there's quite a few different ways that they are vulnerable.'

Youth Offending Professional – Area 5

Looked after children, children in need or on child protection plans: Children and young people in the care of or who are known to the state

One cohort of young people that are known to be at significant risk of exploitation are children in the care of the local authority or already known to social care. Young people in the care of the state are particularly vulnerable, not exclusively because they are in the care of the state (though this can be an exacerbating factor), but because of the experiences and situations that led to them being taken into care in the first instance.

At 31st March 2018, there were 47,040 young people aged 10 to 17 in England who were recorded as being looked after.⁴⁷ As already reported, there is no consistent data on the number of children who are experiencing or at risk of criminal exploitation, and though we know looked after children are especially vulnerable we wanted to know whether local authorities were recording whether the children in their care were at risk of criminal exploitation.

Therefore, we sent freedom of information requests to all local authorities across England and Wales, aiming to identify if local authorities are recording information on looked after children and young people who are at risk of criminal exploitation, and whether or not this information was retrievable.

Out of the 142 local authorities who responded, 33.8% said their local authority records information on the number of looked after children who are classified as 'at risk of criminal exploitation' – 54% of these could retrieve the data.

For those who said they could retrieve this data, we asked how many children who were a) subject to a child in need plan b) subject to a child protection plan or c) a looked after child at 31st March 2018, did the local authority consider to be at risk of child criminal exploitation in relation to county lines. Out of the 29 local authorities who said they could retrieve this data, only eight local authorities actually responded with data. These numbers are particularly low and so not possible to examine at this time.

We also asked the professionals in our interviews about trends and vulnerabilities they were seeing in relation to the cohorts they were working with, and whether a young person's care status was a factor. In almost all cases, our interviewees acknowledged the risk posed to children that were in the care of the state, with perpetrators specifically targeting children's homes to groom young people.

But it is not just the criminals who are targeting these children that are an issue. It has been reported that looked after children are overly represented in the criminal justice system. The Prison Reform Trusts reported in 2016 that *'around half of the children currently in custody in England and Wales have been in care at some point. While 94% of children in care in England do not get in trouble with the law. However children in care in England are six times more likely to be cautioned or convicted of an offence than other children.'*⁴⁸

'We've lots of conversations with the police around you know they'll say – "this young person, they're not staying at their accommodation can't you breach them?" And again [we're] very good at bringing people down, and being clear about criminalising people for stuff that wouldn't happen if they were at home. You know they wouldn't be asking us to do that if they were living with their parents.'

Area 4

Professionals reflected that once young people have had state intervention they are held to different standard than their peers, and that incidents would be handled differently depending on whether the young person was living at home or not. This is reflective of findings reported by the Howard League for Penal reform, which found:

*'Children aged 16 and 17 living in children's homes are at least 15 times more likely to be criminalised than other children of the same age.'*⁴⁹

The experience of young people at point of intervention/identification is discussed later in this report including the different journeys and responses young people who are criminally exploited are experiencing – whether looked after children or not.

Exclusions, Alternative Provisions and Pupil Referral Units: young people not in mainstream education

One factor frequently referenced is the relationship between exploitation and a young person being out of mainstream education – whether this is in alternative provision, a pupil referral unit or permanently excluded. There are a number of ways that excluding a young person can increase their vulnerability to exploitation. However, as with looked after children (not that these are mutually exclusive), the journey a young person goes through does not begin with a permanent exclusion. Exclusions are a symptom of larger issues that, for whatever reason, have not adequately been addressed in a young person's life.

There has been much discussion around the role that exclusions play in increasing the vulnerability young people face, specifically in relation to criminalisation. The process – labelled the '*school to prison line*' – was highlighted by a group of students in London during the summer of 2018. They brought attention to this 'journey' by publicly highlighting this issue by using a mock map of a tube line. The stations on the line represented the stages a young person experiences and these 'stops' included internal exclusions, permanent exclusion, transfer to an alternative provision, eventually ending in a cycle of offending and institutionalisation.⁵⁰



Each school has its own code of conduct or behaviour policy that all children enrolled are required to follow.⁵¹ Alongside this is the disciplinary procedure that children who infringe on these rules face – both while in school and in certain circumstance outside of school. Under English law, teachers have statutory authority to discipline pupils whose behaviour '*is unacceptable, who break the school rules or who fail to follow a reasonable instruction*' (Section 90 and 91 of the Education and Inspections Act 2006).⁵²

This authority allows for school exclusions. The process by which a child is permanently excluded from education should be quite stringent, as outlined in the Department for Education's (DfE) Statutory guidance.⁵³ There are a number of steps that legally should be taken to ensure that every child has access to an education, with permanent exclusions being a last resort.

We know that some groups of pupils are disproportionately represented in the school exclusion process.⁵⁴ Research from the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) has found that they are twice as likely to be in care, four times more likely to have grown up in poverty, seven times more likely to have a special educational need, and 10 times more likely to suffer a recognised mental health condition.⁵⁵

In the annually reported data by the DfE – boys and children with SEN are over represented in exclusion data, accounting for almost half of all permanent and fixed period exclusions in 2016/17. This has been further supported in the recent Timpson review of school exclusions (2019).⁵⁶

'Lots of young people are excluded from school or sent into PRUs. They're on part-time timetables...where there's no real monitoring or structure and it enables them then to be out and about a lot more where they can be targeted. Many of those young people are quite vulnerable anyway because, actually, for some of them engagement in a mainstream school isn't easy. Some of them may have some form of learning disability, speech and language difficulty, but it's not necessarily been picked up correctly and they've not been offered the right support within a mainstream environment to enable them to engage in that.'

Area 2

An excluded child is at risk of exploitation as they are more accessible to those who would take advantage and exploit them. Even if a young person is placed in a pupil referral unit, this in itself can be a vulnerability, as PRUs are known to be targeted by perpetrators seeking to exploit children.

'Most people I know are aware, even children, that the difference between a mainstream and a PRU. So to a groomer or a perpetrator that's quite a lot of intelligence when choosing a child to victimise, because to them why would you go to a mainstream school full of A children that can probably read and write better than yourself and express themselves when in harm a lot better than yourself as a perpetrator? Why would we target them when we've got a nice demographic over here, how they would see it, of children that don't really communicate well, haven't really done very well in school and not even schools can deal with them. So to a groomer that's quite an easy target because it's already showing you've been removed from society and put into an alternative society. So to me that's like a target on your head if you're a child that attends a PRU.'*

The Children's Society Practitioner

School exclusions and alternative provision were also a key trend reported by professionals in the local authorities we spoke to – both as a predictor of grooming but also as a barrier to support.

'And I think that element of young people who get excluded from schools is a really significant part because, actually, we don't recognise the vulnerability around them and then they go off into an environment where, actually, they're just prime target.'

Area 2

'94% of those children are in alternative education settings, which is something that we're looking at, because it's really, really concerning.'

Area 3

'Well there's probably a few characteristics that overlap and we may have some or all of them, so being excluded is definitely one of them. They have been placed in alternative provision people referral units are equivalent down here, so being on part time education timetables, not necessarily attending what they are meant to attend, even if they do they are only on part time timetables. They have got a lot of time on their hands.'

Area 5

As with other factors identified in relation to CCE and exploitation, being excluded from school is not necessarily causative of exploitation. However increasingly the evidence indicates that it is a major contributing factor to the increased risk facing vulnerable young people – in both physical and material ways – by enabling access for perpetrators. It also affects the young person's own sense of self and status, which can also increase the risk level. There is evidence that criminal networks do target young people who have been excluded from school because of this, which is discussed in the following section. The role that schools can play in disrupting exploitation and supporting young people will be discussed in Chapter 3.

Young people living in poverty

The Children's Society has published a significant amount of research investigating the impact that poverty has on the lives and well-being of children.^{57,58} Poverty, again, is not causative, but can be a risk factor for child criminal exploitation.

In the years 2017/18 there were an estimated 4.1 million children living in relative poverty across the country – meaning they were excluded from the activities and opportunities enjoyed by the average person because their family income was below 60% of the median household income after housing costs. There were 2.8 million children living in 'severe poverty' because their family income was below 50% of the median household, and 3.7 million children were living in absolute poverty – meaning their families could not afford basic needs like food and clothing. Of the children in relative poverty, 70% were from families in which at least one parent was working.⁵⁹

Poverty increases the risk to young people by depriving them of the things they need to fit in with their peers, and at its most pervasive, it can put children in a position of extreme destitution and need.

'I think that's one of our biggest concerns. I think our really deprived areas are our biggest concerns because for some young people, we've had it with gangs for years in [Area], where, actually, if somebody is going to give you food and clothes when you're not getting it at home, well, you know, what's our argument to say don't do that? You know? If you're starving and your family are starving, and I think one of the youth workers once quoted to me that an eight year old said he was going out grafting and when he challenged the mother about this she was like, well, we need money. You know? If that's kind of your bread and butter and that's what you're learning every day why would you say no?'

Area 2

While all of the professionals identified deprivation and poverty as risk factors to young people in their areas, one emerging trend identified was the number of young people who were possible victims of CCE that were unknown to social care and who came from comparatively affluent backgrounds.

'I think the media can portray and what we see is there's young black males and it's from poverty and depravation and I absolutely get that that's what we're seeing in the media but when you're actually working on the ground, actually what you're seeing is young children from private school are being targeted, there's no age limit.'

The Children's Society practitioner

'There are people from other homes and other backgrounds who are also being targeted from wealthy homes, you know, that go to very good schools, and they might have other vulnerabilities around them. They might be socially isolated for whatever reason, they might be being bullied and somebody comes up and identifies that. We had one young man, actually, who came from a home, you know, where his mum was absolutely doing everything she ever could – she was ringing the police, when he was going missing. She literally did everything. She even locked him in the house because she didn't want him getting out and he jumped from a second-floor window, I think, and broke his leg. You know? So it isn't – it's a mix. It's not just a case of these are all children who are being neglected or deprived; it's a really broad mix of young people. But I would say schools and things like that are probably one of the biggest vulnerability factors.'

Area 2

The role of family relationships

The last vulnerability factor to be considered is the role that family and parents play in exposing young people to the risk of exploitation. In most cases, strong family relationships are a protective factor for young people, however in the case of criminal exploitation these relationships can themselves be a risk factor. We heard in our interviews of cases where young people became exploited due to vulnerabilities of drug dependant parents, older siblings who are being criminally exploited and also extended family networks involved in criminal behaviour.

'Quite a few of them have grown up witnessing domestic abuse and more of them they have lost in terms of absent parents, sometimes bereavement and parental separation and different parent figures coming in and out of the house and then obviously that leads to mental health attachment difficulties and witnessing traumatic events during their early years that they struggle to process and are struggling with the after effects of. They are a concern of ours. And obviously that's not true for everyone, you know we are hearing that some young people who are getting involved in county lines are from, not from that background, they are sort of from more stable families with, they are better engaged with education.'

Area 5

'We've got families where the children have been brought up in families where they are part of criminality networks already, so you've got – that's immediately a vulnerability because they've already got – they're being brought up to do this work. So I've got young people who've been brought up in these established crime families as well as being victims, they are then going out and recruiting other young people – from an early age, and creating a lot of fear in the community. I've had a young person whose mum was blind and was really quite vulnerable herself and he ended up having to store huge amounts of drugs in the house. So he was definitely targeted over his particular set of – there's no adult to protect him. And I think that's what you see. It's parents who are, for their own issues, not going to tell someone to leave the kid alone or, you know, or put up any fight; I think they're looking for people who are going to be easily turned on to doing this work, and no one's going to say get off my kid, or are you mad?'

Area 6

All the aforementioned risk factors contribute to the exploitation of young people, and are issues being faced by young people up and down the country. All the aforementioned risk factors contribute to the exploitation of young people, and are issues faced by young people up and down the country. Rarely will they be experiencing these adversities exclusively. Fortunately, many young people facing disadvantage will not be criminally exploited. So how does a child already facing difficulties become trapped in the web of county lines and criminal exploitation?

2.3. How are children targeted?

Not every young person experiencing adversity will become exploited, and neither does exploitation happen in isolation.

Grooming can happen over a number of phases – the first stage in the process is the ‘targeting’ phase. This is where perpetrators target young people by identifying a need or a want that is otherwise unmet in a young person’s life. This may not purely be material or monetary, it can often be a relational need that isn’t being provided by others in the young person’s life.

Grooming can happen in any number of scenarios, though often a start will coincide with a young person facing some form of adversity. This adversity will be identified by perpetrators and taken advantage of, which may not be picked up by the young person. Once the targeted young person has been identified, there will be some form of initial contact between the young person and the perpetrator, which initiates the grooming process.

The professionals we spoke to reported increasing concerns with perpetrators targeting primary school aged children. There were reports of incidences where perpetrators observe and scout for children perceived as being ‘naughty’ – those children who are already pushing societal expectations and boundaries (e.g. throwing stones through windows) or who are perceived to be ‘easily convinced’. Other perpetrators will focus on specific vulnerabilities, such as alternative provisions, which are seen as a ‘prime recruitment grounds.’

Young people may also be targeted because of a family connection, whether due to vulnerabilities of parental figures with substance abuse issues (such as in the instance of cuckooed adults) or due to familial links to the groups or organisations that are running that line. Familial links may be older siblings – or in some instances whole family networks – in which the criminal behaviour and experiences are inherently normalised.

The nature of the grooming will vary and change depending on the context, often in relation to where the young person lives, whether that’s a city, suburb, town or even a rural village. As with CSE, grooming for child criminal exploitation can also occur entirely online.

Online grooming

It is well recognised that grooming does not require physical contact between child and perpetrator.⁶⁰ As has been seen with sexual exploitation, perpetrators utilise digital methods as a means of targeting, grooming and controlling their victims. In the case of CCE, criminal groups are using social media to openly advertise the monetary incentives of becoming involved with their specific group.

Digital technology also plays a role in the model of criminality that is county lines – as the line refers to the mobile number the users contact to obtain the substance – these are then relayed to the young people through online means.

'We know that young people are targeted through online forums like Instagram where they might be, so yes targeted through that and basically told to meet at a random spot which is the site. So this is where they're going to be get picked up by, and they only get the screen name of the person that's coming to pick them up and then they'll get taken in a car and taken to the trap house or something.'

The Children's Society Practitioner

Social media and digital technology are being used in a variety of ways in the context of the criminal exploitation through county lines model. Examples shared by practitioners included children being monitored through Snapchat or apps that allow geo tracking, the use of Airbnb to find temporary base from which to deal drugs, and online banking for money laundering. These may be anecdotal examples but they need to be considered in the context of preventing and disrupting this type of exploitation.

Targeting through popular music

An element that has emerged that is relevant to 'county lines' is how it may be portrayed in music or how youth activity that has no association with criminality, such as music video production, can be hijacked by criminal groups to manipulate young people into criminal exploitation.

Drill/trap music was specifically mentioned in interviews with professionals due to its perceived 'glamorisation' of the 'lifestyle' that is associated with drug culture, and also because it is seen as popular with 'gangs' who are involved in drug distribution.

'Well in [Area 4] I think it is the drill music. That's been used quite a lot to portray quite a glamorous lifestyle, lots of money, popular. They've got...a good presence on social media. In terms of the county lines'

Area 4

'So I think was becoming...the issue around urban street gangs was becoming more prominent in [area]. The two groups were kind of getting into drill music, so children in other schools in other parts of [area] and [area] were talking about these groups.'

Area 4

The real life examples like that of Daniel Olaloko -- a drill rapper known as Trigg T, who in October 2018 was sentenced for conspiracy to supply Class A substances, reportedly relating to county lines activity – contribute to professionals' concerns.⁶¹ On the one hand, professionals worry about the role this music may play in normalising certain lifestyles among children. On the other hand, there are concerns about the lack of understanding among professionals about popular culture that young people are involved in, and how to help young people navigate and understand it.

'In terms of young people and professionals there's a big problem there in that disconnect because drill music is not even a word really associated with drugs, it's just a platform or a genre used to glamorise it of some sort but nobody knows what it is. So then to talk about the slang used in that drill music i.e. OT which means out of town, if a child tells you they're doing country that means they're not in another country but they're across, they're out of their city doing unsolicited drugs. This is all there in popular culture; most songs now have these themes going through them that while most songs are of a certain genre so we'll go with the drill and the grime.'

The Children's Society Practitioner

This is not a new phenomenon, there is a history of assumed and perceived links between youth subcultures and crime.⁶² There have also been many examples where cultural tastes of younger generations were questioned by those who are older and concerns raised about the potential widespread impact music may have on behaviours and outlook of young people.

This report does not analyse the relationship between exploitation and music genres. However, as music often plays an important role in children's lives it is important to avoid jumping to conclusions about how children critically assess what they consume, and to recognise criminal exploitation as the key issue and the ways in which criminals will hijack all possible routes to manipulate children including popular culture.

2.4. Young people's experiences of exploitation

What happens to a child once they are groomed?

Criminal groups expend significant effort in identifying young people, insinuating themselves into their lives and their social networks, isolating them from what may be protective influences and grooming them to facilitate the needs of the criminal organisation and the perpetrators involved.

The grooming stage is often the start of the manipulation faced by young people. Through the grooming process, perpetrators offer and provide the young people with something they need or want. This might be material things needed because of poverty and deprivation or items wanted such as trainers or phones the young person desires as a means of obtaining status within their own social groups. These things are provided by the criminal groups/perpetrators, as the young person has no other legitimate means of obtaining them.

However, in addition, young people often report that the criminal group is also providing relational support – a comradeship, a family (which may otherwise be absent), a sense of identity and belonging. Young people who have in some way been marginalised by society will be at greater risk of this.

After the time and money that criminal groups and perpetrators have invested into their targets they often will want to test whether the young person will be 'trustworthy', profitable and not pose a risk to them or the larger organisation. This can lead to a 'testing' phase alongside the grooming process where the young person is groomed to achieve 'minor' tasks that may seem inconsequential to the young person but lead to a rapid escalation in demand and risk.

Although the risk to the young person is already present, at this point they may often begin to believe that they have the trust and respect of their 'elders'. In our interviews with professionals about the experiences they were hearing about from young people, one story consistently appeared. When on the periphery of the criminal group, they may be asked to carry or hold something of value – as a sign of trust. At this point, the young person will be robbed or jumped and unable to pay or give the item back, placing them in debt with the perpetrator. Unbeknownst to the young person these robberies are often contrived by the criminal groups as a way of debt bondage.

What may start as a relational attachment – with the young person being made to feel important to the criminal group and reinforcing a negative and harmful relationship – then escalates quickly to servitude and experiences of violence, with the young person under the control of the criminal group. This is also known as being 'trapped'.

Table 2: Illustrative examples of the escalation in demands placed on young people

<i>'Mate if you keep watch for us there's a note in it for you.'</i>	<i>'I need to transfer some money, I'm going to put £2k in your account and you get £100 when you transfer it on.'</i>	<i>'You need to take this package and hold it for me until I ask for it back.'</i>	<i>'We've heard X is out shouting his mouth – go teach him a lesson.'</i>	<i>'X is hanging about in this location – go take him out at this time.'</i>
<p>The testing phase will often start with minor asks (such as keeping watch) as a way of initiating the young person, with the offering of financial compensation and testing loyalty and trustworthiness.</p> <p>During our interviews, many professionals reflected that this was common practice for the criminal groups grooming younger children.</p> <p>We also heard how through the county lines model local children in more rural locations were being initiated by urban street gangs.</p>	<p>Another way that the criminal groups are exploiting young people is through using their bank accounts to launder the profits from the sale of the substances.</p> <p>This aspect can occur entirely online, with no direct contact between the perpetrator and the young person.</p> <p>This creates additional difficulties in then identifying the origin of the money and wider criminal involvement.</p>	<p>Criminal groups often demand that the young people and vulnerable adults they have groomed and are controlling hold onto packages of drugs, cash and weapons to deflect suspicion away from known suspects.</p> <p>In our interviews we heard many stories of young people being forced to carry weapons and drugs for the criminal groups – or hiding them for elders.</p> <p>There are a number of associated offences related to this, and the effect of this is evident not least in the recent increase in knife related crime.</p>	<p>As the testing phase escalates often young people will be required to use violence as test of loyalty – either by enforcing within their own network (peer on peer abuse) or against a competitor in retaliation.</p> <p>Violence is a well-used tool deployed to coerce young people, but it's also used as a control mechanism of the criminal group.</p> <p>While young people will be instructed to instigate acts of violence for the benefit of the organisation, they too are at risk of being victimised by other young people or the 'elders' within their own criminal group.</p>	<p>The criminal groups will also use the young people to enact specific and targeted acts of violence as a means of distraction and evasion.</p> <p>Especially prevalent in London, we heard how criminal groups orchestrate an act of violence at a specific location to draw emergency service and police attention to one end of a borough while using the time to move product/cash/weapons out to another location.</p> <p>The risk to the young person is of minimal consequence to the group – in this instance the violence is instrumental and entirely targeted at the young person.</p>

Trapped

In the county lines model of criminal exploitation young people are being used to traffic the substances around the country – which may involve having to ‘plug’ or ‘stuff’ packages within their own bodies. The young person is then trafficked by the criminal group to the end market place. That is quite clearly a form of sexual violence perpetrated against the young person.

In our interviews we asked the professionals how these young people were being moved, and how far.

Missing

Incidences of going missing are one risk indicator that is closely linked with the experiences of children and young people who are being criminally exploited is.⁶³ We know there are a range of reasons why children and young people go missing, however there has been little research to date on understanding the links between missing episodes and child exploitation.

Police define a missing person as ‘anyone whose whereabouts cannot be established will be considered as missing until located, and their well-being or otherwise confirmed. All reports of missing people sit within a continuum of risk from ‘no apparent risk (absent)’ through to high-risk cases that require immediate, intensive action’.⁶⁴

NCA guidance highlights that persistently going missing as a potential indicator that a child or young person may be being criminally exploited in relation to the county lines model.

In our interviews, professionals and practitioners identified a strong relationship between young people who had missing episodes and county lines activity, reporting a number of trends that they were seeing.

When ‘county lines’ started to gain attention, the young people who were being identified had been missing for long periods, in some instances months – often only being found during police raids of cuckooed properties (also known as ‘trap houses’) with many being located outside of their home area.

‘We know it’s the children that are being exploited are going missing because they have to go missing to carry out the role that they’re doing.’

Area 2

The process for reporting a child as missing is a crucial safeguarding tool, as one of our practitioners highlighted during our interview.

‘The missing process is huge because a missing child is looked for! So the moment that child is reported their picture goes somewhere, to a police record, police officers will then look for that child and find them – potentially in unfortunately a drug house or a situation or on the way, if that child’s not reported missing they’re not even known as an issue.’

The Children’s Society Practitioner

One issue that was flagged during our interviews was that in many cases children, and specifically older children, are not being reported as missing. This may happen due to neglect in families or because parents and carers are fearful of repercussions from criminal groups if

they report their children as missing to the police. These young people are ‘hidden missing’ and are only being flagged when they come into contact with police.

There are conflicting issues that parents are facing around trusting their child for example when they believed their child was staying with a friend when in fact they are being trafficked to an unknown location by a criminal group.

The children themselves face barriers to seeking help while missing. One of these was the the risk of arrest they face if they disclose what happens to them.

‘It is avoidance because they’re worried about being arrested. So if you’ve got a child that’s criminally exploited, they’ve also got the fear of arrest as well as us.’

Area 2

Another issue that professionals flagged was the changing nature of the exploitation that they were seeing. While there are incidences of young people missing for extend periods, many reflected that they were seeing increases in the frequency of missing episodes.

‘We had one child who was missing for 49 days. He’d been put in a trap house; he was house watching and he wasn’t able to leave; he’d been held against his will. Now what we see is children who are regularly going missing for shorter periods of time. It’s dependent on whatever that young person is asked to do, will depend on how long they’re missing for.’

Area 3

The criminal organisations and individuals who are exploiting children are perceptive to efforts to disrupt their business – as soon as a trend is identified by authorities, they shift the model. This was reported by practitioners across the country, with a trend of ‘shift work’ emerging – with young people going missing for short periods of time to complete the tasks demanded of them. We heard reports of children acting out in school so that they were excluded to be able to attend a shift – the fear of repercussion for not complying with their exploiter greater than that within school.

‘We had a case where the young female would go to school not in the correct uniform – so school would send her home without informing the parents and then her exploitation would take place from going home from school to home.’

‘We were having children who were kicking off in school, leaving school – because they then had to do their graft shift – and the consequences of kicking off and leaving the school were much less than turning up to do their shift where they would be physically injured.’

Area 3

These children are also ‘hidden missing’ and may come to the attention of education professionals through being absent from school. As highlighted by the research conducted by The Children’s Society into return home interviews for missing children, some areas now develop practice to ensure that these children are identified and offered return home interview and support they need.⁶⁵

Trafficked

A major feature of the county lines model of child criminal exploitation is the movement or trafficking of young people. This was originally categorised under the NCA's description as young people being moved from urban hubs such as London out to rural areas, with the areas being designated as importer or exporters based on the direction that the young people travelled.

From our practice base, we were hearing of young people being trafficked hundreds of miles, from every part of the county as a means of facilitating the expanding businesses of the criminal groups.

'They're being transported as far as they need to go at this point. Where the need and the demand for the drugs are, so wherever these perpetrators have their lines or have the most successful lines, mobile phone lines and business.'

The Children's Society Practitioner

In our survey of police professionals, we asked *'To what extent do you agree that child criminal exploitation, in the context of county lines, in your area is linked to human trafficking?'*

67% of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed that human trafficking was linked to the criminal exploitation they were seeing.

Though trafficking is seen as key feature in identifying county lines activity, the use and understanding of the term can be confused. Historically, when trafficking is discussed, it is in the context of international movement of people between countries. Although county lines activity is included under the Modern Slavery Act, there is still disagreement in the interpretation of what is seen as trafficking in relation to child criminal exploitation.

In our interviews with professionals we were interested in exploring this element of the young people's experience: where were young people being taken, and how were they getting there?

All participants were aware of cases where children from their own local authority were found significant distances away, often only coming to their attention when contacted by the police force they are found in.

'So the young man I mentioned being in the south west, I think he was there for six months before we knew about him, but he was being monitored by a police operation down there and he was 16.'

Area 2

It was more complicated when talking about when young people from other local authorities who had been trafficked into areas, as their cases would be the responsibility of their home local authority.

'There's an issue with the reporting and the recording of that and who's seeing who and things like that. And a lot of these young people are hidden – aren't they?'

Area 2

'One of the key things that's always been a concern for me is that we get children that are trafficked into our area from large urban cities and we are a receiver of those children. The first point that we knew that they were in our area was when they were picked up in drug raids.'

One of my concerns was about, “well, how do we know where OCGs are operating?” Because they operate out of multiple towns across the country.’

Area 3

We also discussed how young people were being moved. There has been significant focus on the use of trains and public transport as a means of moving young people across the country. However, as already highlighted, as soon as a trend is identified the criminal groups change the pattern of behaviour.

‘I think modes of transport – I think that’s something we’re still really trying to understand, because that’ll be something we’ll look at in terms of disruption, but train lines, using the trains. So tickets are being provided or being basically told to turn up to the train station and someone will be waiting for them and then they’re taken in a car and taken to a trap house.’

The Children’s Society Service manager

‘Hire cars. Trains and taxi drivers who are paid off the meter. Now whether or not that means the taxi drivers actively involved, or whether they are just you know, kind of covering their eyes and their ears. With this child, a taxi was sent back for him on a particular day and then he would just then be transported back. I assume there was arrangements in place because I understand that the kids are bringing the cash back from all the drugs they’ve sold, so I would imagine.’

Area 6

The changing trend observed by professionals extended beyond just the modes and method of transport, to who they were seeing being transported.

‘At the moment there’s still the emphasis that young people are trafficked to a county line location. I think that what will happen is the potential possibility of actually the recruitment base has been different, because of the attention that’s been given from a media point of view on county lines. I think the gangs and kind of criminal enterprises and people who’ve exploited children will change their kind of tactics a little bit.’

Area 1

This change in tactics has already been observed in other areas across the country. In our interviews we heard of a changing trend whereby children and young people were being trafficking within a local area rather than being moved to another location.

‘We definitely are seeing young people coming here from other areas and that’s the kind of scenario I described. Where they get arrested and then they are in custody and they have to come back to [London borough] where they came from, but kind of hearing that there’s more recruitment of local young people, but I am not exactly sure how that’s happening and how organised it is.’

Area 5

‘So we see children being exported around the area, but we don’t tend to see many going out of county. Sometimes they do, that’s when they’ve then been in London with gang nominals, but we’re seeing less of that.’

Area 4

Experiences of Violence

'One of the things that young people talk about the most is the amount of violence there is.'

The Children's Society Practitioner

There are many different manifestations of violence that young people experience; it is a consistent feature that afflicts the lives of young people who are criminally exploited. As previously discussed, violence is used during the grooming process as a control mechanism, to ensure that young people are compliant to the demands of the criminal group.

During our interviews with professionals, we asked them about their knowledge of the levels and types of violence that young people are facing. They described young people facing extreme levels of physical violence, psychological violence in the form of threats and extortion, and experiences of sexual violence.

'In terms of the coercion and the manipulation, it's very much a grooming model in terms of the level of violence and fear that they'll perpetrate towards them. It will mean that they can't get out. They isolate individuals; they prevent them from accessing appointments, accessing education, even from their families. They will threaten the child's family, they then start grooming the younger siblings or there have been threats of rape towards female siblings of the children that they're exploiting.'

Area 3

'So it might the young person was threatened with a knife or a firearm, or the family are threatened or they might brick the windows of the family home. Young people have reported adults who are exploiting them might be particularly violent to another adult in front of a child so the child knows what that person's capable of – that's all part of the fear and the control.'

Area 6

The criminal groups use threats of violence against young people and their families as a means of controlling and silencing them. The depth of this control extends even when the young people are engaging with professionals.

'These young people have been groomed, been told not to trust professionals, been told not to talk, will be silenced through threats of violence, death, sexual violence.'

The Children's Society Service Manager

While young people who are criminally exploited are at risk of physical violence from the adults who are exploiting them, there is also significant risk of them experiencing retaliatory violence from competing criminal groups. As discussed in the previous section, violence has long been associated with the illicit drug market.^{66, 67}

During the course of our interviews, professionals recounted examples of the types of physical violence that the young people they work with were facing. This included in almost all interviews frequent mentions of stabbings or knife inflicted injuries, as well as cases of firearms being used against children, and acid attacks.

Disclosing the violence that they have experienced is difficult for young people, not just because of the psychological impact, but also due to the nature of the control they are under. This is even more so the case when the violence is of a sexual nature.⁶⁸

'So the CSE is a concern, the sexual violence that is linked with this type of activity is of concern.'

Area 4

'We've worked with young people who have been raped, who have been forced to commit sexual acts or be stripped naked or lots of different forms of sexual violence. But they're not going to come and be picked up and tell the social worker about it straight away because it's absolutely humiliating or they've been silenced or it's just generally difficult to talk about because we know that sexual violence is difficult to talk about.'

The Children's Society Service Manager

We know from our work that it is likely young people will experience more than one form of exploitation, and that there is significant overlap between criminal and sexual exploitation. As discussed previously, there are differences in who is seen as a victim in these cases, with male sexual exploitation not well understood or in some cases believed.

'The majority of the people that we support have experienced multiple forms of exploitation, so while criminal exploitation is perhaps the first form of exploitation that gets recognised, or they disclose about, the reality is that they have often experienced other forms of exploitation and abuse prior to that or subsequent to that. But that just may not come out initially, particularly where it's things like sexual exploitation and a high percentage of the boys that we work with later disclose having being sexual exploited or sexually abused as part of either control tactics from their traffickers or for commercial purposes as well as criminal exploitation.'

The Children's Society Service Manager

'Sexual exploitation and criminal exploitation come hand in hand. We hear about young boys being used frequently for criminal exploitation but often that doesn't mean that they're not being sexually abused. One thing that is used quite a lot with boys is it's kind of about this humiliation shame thing, where they'll be forced to touch someone, threatened with violence or you know be pictured kissing one of their friends or something and that will be used then as a way to control them. A gang says you know if you don't do what we say then we're going to post these pictures online.'

The Children's Society Practitioner

'There's also another young person that, so she was actually being sexually exploited but there were parts of the exploitation that were actually criminal.'

The Children's Society Service Manager

While for boys and young men sexual violence may not be seen as a primary feature, the inverse may be true for girls. During our interviews, professionals reflected on the difference responses that boys and girls receive when brought to authorities' attention for exploitation, with girls considered under CSE protocols and boys CCE. However, we know that there are likely to be elements of both forms experienced by children of all gender identities.

One form of sexual violence related to the county lines model of criminal exploitation is the forcing of young people to 'body pack' or stuff packages of the controlled substances into themselves (anally or vaginally) to traffic the substances. The risk to the young person is immense, as there are inherent dangers when holding packages of drugs within a body.⁶⁹

'They're asking very young children to insert packages inside themselves to transport drugs. They're using completely illegal and inappropriate methods but, actually, that's their business model.'

Area 3

The level of violence that young people who are victims of criminal exploitation are experiencing, as well as the experiences of trafficking and situations they are put in, have a serious adverse effects.

Trauma

'You will not understand child criminal exploitation without understanding trauma.'

The Children's Society Practitioner

It is well established that when a person experiences a traumatic or stressful event they are at risk of adverse psychological effects.⁷⁰ This was reflected on by professionals who highlighted the importance of understanding how the young people are affected by trauma, the effect that it has on their lives and how important a trauma informed approach is to engagement.

'You're just going to get that wall up, and actually it's the trauma that's associated with this, it needs to be handled really sensitively. So we don't want to be pushing young people but at the same time we do need to make sure that they start to understand what's been happening to them.'

Area 4

'They [professionals] need to be able to recognise and understand trauma to respond more effectively to those young people, because as statutory agencies, we're not trained in trauma, and we might see the young person as volatile or angry where, actually, there are other things going on. So I think our frontline staff need to be trauma-informed to respond to young people, because they are those young people who are at risk or have been exploited.'

Area 2

Understanding the lived experiences of young people who have been criminally exploited, and the vulnerabilities and experiences that increase their victimisation, is important. Without understanding the contexts of their situations, it is almost impossible to respond in an effective way. The following chapter explores the responses young people who are criminally exploited receive and suggests recommendations on what can be done to protect them.

Chapter 3. Responses to young people

In each child's life, there may be a number of different points at which professionals may intervene. In some cases professionals being able to identify young people who may be at risk due to their individual vulnerabilities or life circumstances – and offering adequate help – may help reduce their vulnerability and prevent their chances of exploitation. In other cases, spotting early signs of grooming and intervening with an offer of support could prevent a situation from worsening – and prevent the chances of grooming progressing into exploitation. The Children Act 1989 and the Working Together guidance (as described in Chapter 1) define how the safeguarding approach should work in practice.

Once the young person has – through coercion, control, manipulation and threats – become criminally exploited, not only is it more challenging to stop the exploitation but the legal framework becomes more complex as well. In such cases, safeguarding agencies need to work side by side with the law enforcement agencies to ensure that the child is seen as a victim and not as criminal. One way this can be ensured is through referring the child to the National Referral Mechanism.

Alongside responses to individual young people affected by county lines there is a need for all local agencies to work together to understand their local situation and take adequate steps to protect all children in their area.

In our FOI with local authorities and police, interviews with professionals in six local authorities and practitioners in our services, we explored how responses to individual children and local strategic responses to children affected by county line exploitation are approached. We considered what good practice is out there and what the barriers are to keeping children safe, disrupting and preventing re-victimisation. Our findings are presented in this chapter.

3.1. Local strategic responses to child criminal exploitation

Geographical spread of child criminal exploitation

Child criminal exploitation may seem like a recent phenomenon, but our survey with the police forces and interviews with professionals show that it is not that new. In our survey we asked whether police staff thought that criminal exploitation of children and young people through the county lines model was happening in their police force area.

90% of respondents reported that they believed child criminal exploitation was happening in their police force area.

* We followed this question by asking how long they thought criminal exploitation of children and young people had been happening in their police force area.

* N = 202 – respondents were from across 28 police force areas, plus British Transport Police and Regional Organised Crime Units (ROCU).

40%

of police felt that county lines had been prevalent in their police force area for

5 years or more

‘Child criminal exploitation has been potentially been happening for some time it’s just recently that this activity has been given a name.’

Two fifths of our respondents felt that criminal exploitation had been happening for more than five years, though as noted in the previous section, many felt that awareness had increased with the use of the new definitions. A fifth of respondents reported that they did not know.

‘This operating model has probably been ongoing for years but it is only now becoming prevalent/we are now becoming more aware of it.’

Police Survey 4

Models of CCE

In our survey we also provided the description from the National Crime Agency of a typical county lines model – used earlier in this report – and asked police staff whether they thought this description reflected what they were seeing in their own police force area.

80% of respondents said they either ‘agreed’ or ‘strongly agreed’ that the NCA description was reflective of what they were seeing in their area.

This question was followed up with an open question allowing the participants to elaborate on their option choice. Most of the participants that provided an answer reflected that the model described what they were seeing in their areas.

Other police staff disagreed with the description, reporting that the specification of ‘travel between the urban hub and the county market’ did not reflect trafficking that was occurring between major urban cities or within area trafficking.

‘It does not necessarily need to be an urban hub – it could be a village to village concern. It also can be carried out within schools and other localities. Therefore the definition can be limited to urban to county.’

Police Survey 73

‘The [Police Force] see anything that isn’t our area as “a County Force.” Within cities like London, Birmingham, Manchester, Liverpool there will be children who are being used to move and sell drugs, cash and weapons within those urban hubs or from one urban hub to another. A child who is exploited by a gang moving drugs, weapons or cash from one side of London or Birmingham to the other is no less exploited than one who goes to Swansea or Weston Super Mare, as an example.’

Police Survey 159

The issue of focusing specifically on and defining county lines as travel between urban and rural markets was also raised during our interviews with professionals. During the time frame that we conducted this research in, our participants reflected on the ways that 'county lines' had evolved. The methods that they were seeing were shifting from young people being trafficked out of urban areas to a greater focus on children being trafficked within the local areas, both in rural areas and within urban city hubs.

'We definitely are seeing young people coming here from other areas and that's the kind of scenario I described where they get arrested and then they are in custody and they have to come back to [London borough] where they came from. But we're kind of hearing that there's more recruitment of local young people, but I am not exactly sure how that's happening and how organised it is.'

Area 5

'So we see children being exported around [Area], but we don't tend to see many going out of county. Sometimes they do, that's when they've then been in London with gang nominals, but we're seeing less of that.'

Area 4

'Yes. We repeated the exercise probably a year or two later and we saw more of it happening across [Area] than outside the boundaries of [Area], if you see what I mean. So it seemed to be that it was happening but they weren't travelling as far. And now it's just we're seeing evidence of drug dealing in the city by children from the city across the city.'

Area 2

Local areas' understanding of the number of children affected by county lines

Despite CCE reportedly happening in the majority of areas, there is not yet a consistent approach to recording information about children identified and the number of children targeted or exploited by organised criminal networks. This observation is true in relation to local authorities as well as in relation to police. As one participant in interviews commented:

'Unless young people were hitting incident thresholds of being picked up by the police, being known to the YOT services – so they were actually ticking into the criminal threshold – then there wasn't a great deal of work being done to understand what the local problems were around that. And also about disrupting that as well.'

Area 1

Local authorities are required to collect a range of important information about vulnerable children in their area, particularly on children referred to them for help. In our FOI requests to local authorities we asked a number of questions exploring what data they are collecting to help them understand the risk of children being exploited for criminal purposes in their area. We also asked what specific data they were collecting, where available, to explore the number of children who may be at risk. In particular, we asked whether local authorities collect data and are able to retrieve data on number of children referred to the NRM, children identified as at risk of child criminal exploitation, children missing from home and care who are identified to be at risk of CCE, and also whether they were found outside their local area. As there is currently no systematic data collection on the number of children affected by CCE, the data we inquired about is the best proxy data for helping us understand the bigger picture on the scale and models of child criminal exploitation.

We asked local authorities whether they collect and could retrieve data on the numbers of children in their area who are at risk of CCE, looked after children who are at risk of CCE, and children missing from home or care at risk of CCE. We also asked whether they collect information about children missing from home or care who are found outside their local authority area. All this information can help local agencies piece together a picture of the risk of children being targeted for CCE in their area, and also monitor how many individual children are identified.

Table 3 shows the number of local authorities that responded, and whether they collected and could retrieve the data we asked about. Based on their responses, the overarching observation is that there is real lack of data in relation to children affected by child criminal exploitation. Across all the data sets we inquired about, about half of local authorities responded that they collected data but only around 1 in 5 of all local authorities reported that data is retrievable to be shared. The number of local authorities that provided us with actual data in the categories we asked is even lower (as is highlighted throughout this report).

Table 3: Number of local authorities that collect and could retrieve data related to children at risk of child criminal exploitation by data question

	Number of children identified at risk of CCE	Number of looked after children at risk of CCE	Children missing from home at risk of CCE	Children missing from home found outside LA boundaries	Missing looked after children at risk of CCE	Missing looked after children found outside LA boundaries
% of LA's recording information	37%	34%	40%	48%	40%	46%
% of LA's that could retrieve data	20%	18%	18%	22%	18%	23%
Number responded (n)	142	142	141	134	141	134

The findings about the lack of data collection do not come as a surprise. Although local authorities are expected to collect data on the number of children referred to them – or help assessments undertaken, factors identified in assessments, and decisions made about the provision of help to children and families – child criminal exploitation is not one of the issues that they are currently required to collect data on.

Some local authorities indicated that the risk of child criminal exploitation may be recorded in an individual child's file. But without appropriate data collection it is difficult for local areas to

assess the extent to which children are being targeted in their local area by criminal gangs to distribute drugs, and to ensure the commissioning of services for children and families affected through criminal exploitation.

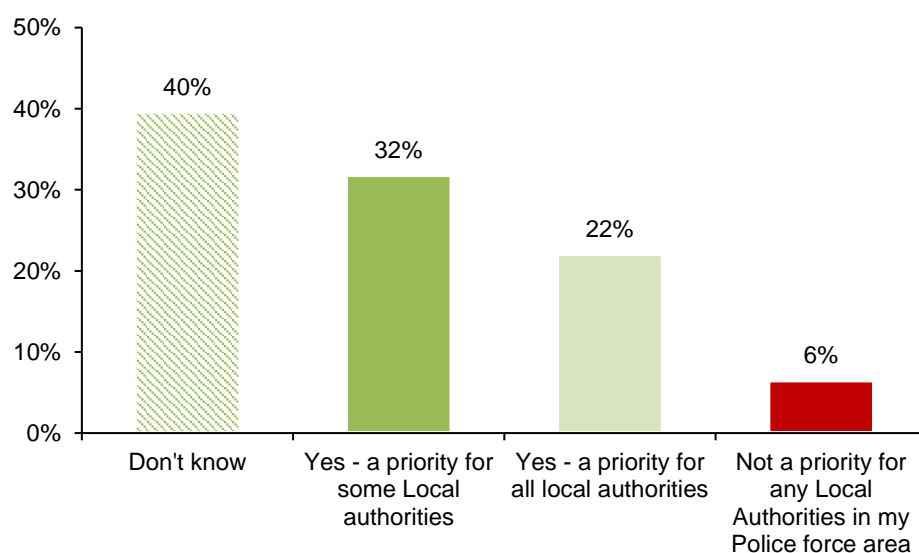
Local strategic responses

In addition to asking questions about what data local authorities collect to help them understand the scale of child criminal exploitation through county lines in their area, we also asked about local strategies, protocols or other policy documents that may help a local area address the issue.

In our FOI to local authorities, we asked whether they had a specific strategy, policy or protocol in place relating to CCE and/or county lines. Of the local authorities that responded (141) **50** said that they had a strategy in place or were in the process of putting a policy in place at time of responding. Of those that said they had a policy, **92%** were able to provide a copy for review by the researchers – three of these were from Welsh local authorities which responded stating they use the All Wales protocol.⁷¹ Seventeen of the protocols/strategies did not include a definition of child criminal exploitation, five of these were specifically focused on county lines and gang related activity, and two related to child sexual exploitation.

The responses from the police survey echo what the FOI responses from local authorities reveal in terms of inconsistency of strategic responses to CCE. Although 75% of police respondents 'strongly agreed' or 'agreed' that response to CCE is a priority for their police force, many commented that it is not necessary reflecting what they see happening across all the agencies in their area.

Figure 1: Police respondents' views on whether CCE is a priority issue in their areas (N=



'The [police force] covers such a huge diverse area and some local authorities appear to be more aware of criminal exploitation than others.'

Police response

'Not much is being done to address CCE, resources have been given to CSE (not enough though) but CCE is not really being looked at.'

Police response

'There is currently no specific provision from police or partners with regards the prevent/protect aspect of this work.'

Police response

'Whilst we talk about tackling it, there is a lot of reliance on partner agencies and we are continuing to let under 18s be exploited due to a lack of an agreed and effective way to manage/prevent it.'

Police response

Some police respondents also commented that while CCE may a strategic priority it does not necessarily translate into response on the ground. Children found with drugs are seen as criminals rather than treated as possible victims of trafficking or modern slavery, as there a lack of training for police staff who come into contact with vulnerable young people.

The inconsistency in local strategic approaches to tackling child criminal exploitation is a theme that is present in all of the findings.

3.2. Responses to individual children at risk or exploited by criminal gangs

A strategic response to CCE is needed alongside an effective response to individual children. A number of questions in our FOIs to police and local authorities aimed to understand how many children may be identified and what responses they receive – both safeguarding responses from children's services and in the criminal justice system. We asked questions about this in our FOI requests to local authorities and police, and in interviews with professionals, to understand the scale of response and how that response is being delivered to young people.

Safeguarding responses from local authorities

For children to receive a safeguarding response they need to become known to children's services in their area.

In our FOI request to local authorities we asked how many children were either subject to child in need plan or subject to child protection plan or a looked after child at 31st March 2018. We also asked whether the local authority considered the child to be at risk of child criminal exploitation in relation to county lines.

The majority of local authorities responded that they do not collect that data or that they could not retrieve that data due to it being recorded on individual files. Of the 29 local authorities that said they could retrieve this data, only eight local authorities responded with data. Although this sample of local authorities is very small, it provides an interesting insight into the numbers of children identified and the safeguarding responses they receive. Across the eight areas that presented the data, 77 children were identified as being at risk of CCE through county lines. Of those, 46 children were identified as a child in need or a child on a child protection plan, (meaning that they lived at home with their family or carers) and 31 children were in the care of local authorities. Of 31 looked after children, seven were in placements outside their local authority area.

Alongside the lack of data, there are also concerns that the current thresholds for social care interventions are so high that many children are simply slipping through the net of services without any intervention whatsoever.

Children can also become known to police and local authorities when they go missing from home or care. Local authorities are required to offer each child a return home interview after their missing episode. A return home interview is a conversation with a trained professional to help them understand the reasons for the child going missing and to discuss with the child what support they need.

We asked local authorities for data on children missing from home and care, including whether children are found outside local authority boundaries and if missing children are identified at risk of CSE, gang involvement, CCE and trafficking.

Table 4. Children missing from home or care (n=11)

	Number of males missing	Number of females missing	Number of missing episodes for males	Number of missing episodes for females	Average number of episodes per male children across LAs	Average number of episodes per female children across LAs
Children missing from home	1962	1801	3948	3561	1.9	1.8
Children missing from care	722	528	4309	3611	5.7	6.3

Only 11 local authorities could provide data on both children missing from home and from care. The data on missing children demonstrates that children missing from care are going missing more frequently and are overrepresented in missing statistics.

The data on the number of children identified to be at particular risk was supplied by a small number of local authorities, so it is not possible to present the bigger picture across the country. However it did show variations between the local authorities, and variations between the categories of risk in respect of children identified.

Law enforcement response to young people

Young people who are exploited by criminal gangs are likely to come to attention of police as well. If they go missing from home or care, they will be recorded as missing by the police and police will take actions to find them.

But young people may also come into contact with police when stop and search is conducted or when they are arrested by police for possession of drugs, or for possession of drugs with intent to supply to others.

Through our FOIs we asked police to share with us data they collect on the number of young people who they come into contact with due to issues that may be linked to child criminal exploitation related to county lines. Thirty two police forces responded to our request, but not all of them were able to provide data – either because the data was not be available, easily retrievable or available for the period of time we asked about.

Arrests of 10 to 17 year olds for drug related offences

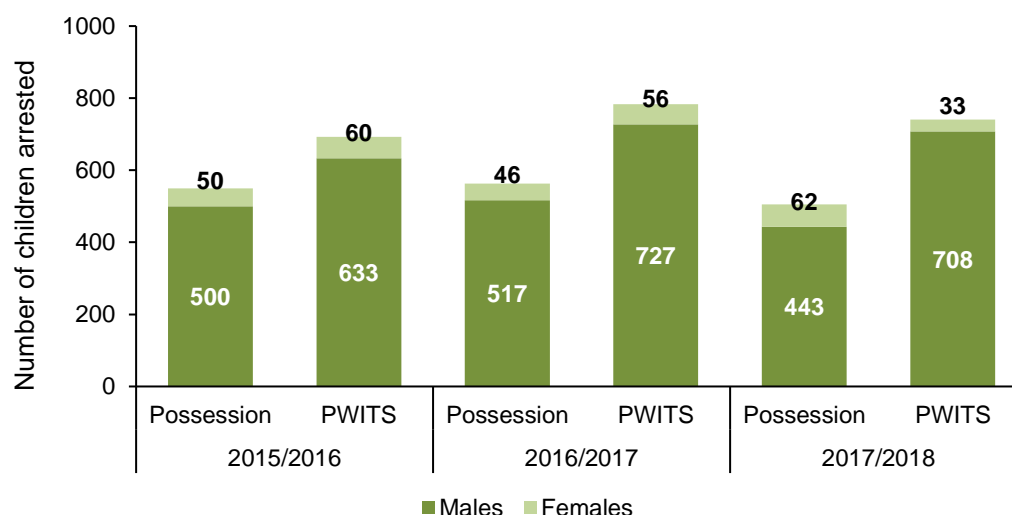
Comparison of data on arrests for 'possession with intent to supply Class A drugs' and arrests for 'possession of Class A drugs' shows that more children are arrested for possession with intent to supply. It also shows that the increase for 'arrest for possession with intent to supply' is more than the increase for 'possession'. This data shows a steady increase year-on-year in the numbers of young people 10 to 17 (inclusive) arrested for possession with intent to supply Class A drugs.

Table 5: Number of children arrested for possession of class A drugs or for possession of class A drug with intent to supply (n = 18 including the London Metropolitan police)

No. of Children aged 10 to 17		15/16	16/17	17/18	Change from 15/16
Arrested for Possession of Class A drugs	Forces across E&W (excl. Met police)	231	251	254	10%
	Total	551	564	477	-13%
Arrested for Possession with Intent to Supply Class A drugs	Forces across E&W (excl. Met police)	338	462	505	49%
	Total	673	786	770	14%

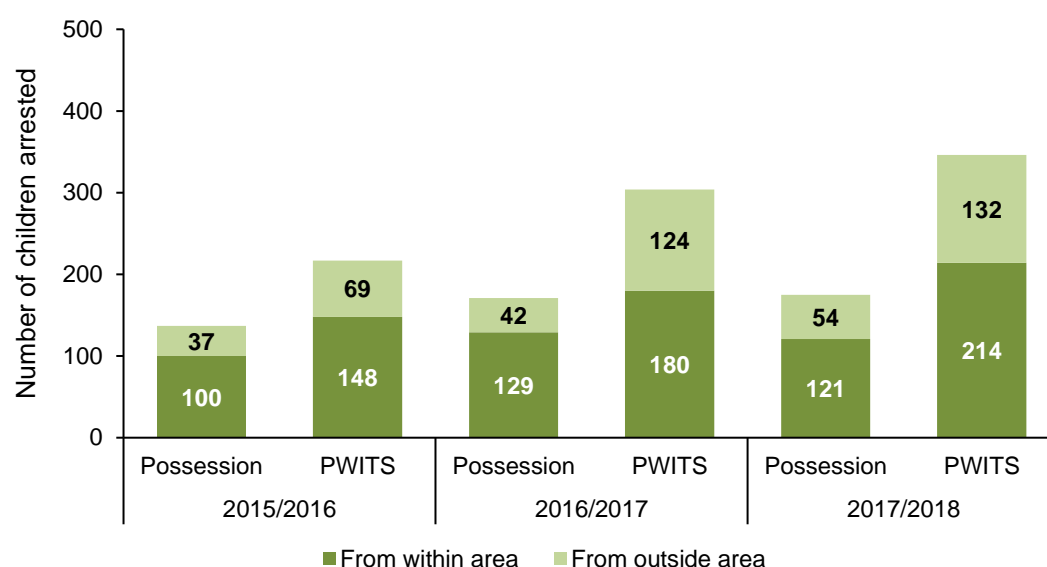
We also asked for the number of boy and girls aged 10 to 17 arrested (see Figure 2). The data shows that although a small number of females were arrested, the majority of those arrested were males.

Figure 2: Total number of children arrested with intent to supply or for possession of a Class A by gender (n = 18 – including the Metropolitan police)



A smaller number of police forces could provide data on children aged 10 to 17 who were arrested for possession of drugs with intent to supply who were living outside their police force area. The data shows an increase in both the number of children arrested living within the police area, and those who live outside the police area. Although this data is not specifically related to criminal exploitation it is the best proxy data available and it seems to confirm what we heard from practitioners about the number of children who are exploited within their local areas as well as trafficked from other areas in the country. Police forces that responded could provide information on the place of living for most cases where 10 to 17 were arrested.

Figure 3: Total number of children arrested with intent to supply or for possession of a Class A by gender who were living within or outside police force area (n = 11)



Around a half of police forces that responded to our FOIs could also provide information on the nationality of young people 10 to 17 who were arrested. The data suggest that majority of them were British.

Table 6. Nationality of young people arrested for possession or possession with intent to supply (n=16 including London metropolitan police)

		15/16	16/17	17/18
Arrested for possession of class A drugs	British young people	91%	89%	90%
	Non-British young people	9%	11%	10%
Arrested for possession of class A drugs with intent to supply	British young people	87%	83%	88%
	Non-British young people	13%	17%	12%

We asked police forces how many of the young people arrested for possession with intent to supply had an additional 'vulnerability flag' on their record. We gave examples of CSE, missing, trafficking and CCE.

Nine police forces provided information on the number of children arrested with additional vulnerability flags across the three years requested.

In 2015/16, only four of the nine police forces reported that they had identified young people who had additional vulnerability flags when arrested for possession with intent to supply – this increased to seven police forces in the subsequent two years. In reality it is likely to be a higher number as there is not consistent approach to flagging vulnerabilities. At time of asking, the majority reported that there were no specific flags for identification of criminal exploitation.

'This information is not specifically recorded. There is no flag to record 'child criminal exploitation.'

Police FOI response

Only one force could provide information on numbers of children and young people who had been arrested for PWITS who had an additional vulnerability flag for CCE. Other forces recorded that young people arrested had other vulnerability flags but not specifically for CCE.

Flagging of data on any vulnerabilities is poor across all police forces, but very few police forces have CCE vulnerability flagging in place.

Responses as to why data on the number of children who are identified as possible victims of child criminal exploitation through the county lines included:

'CCE is not a warning or flag type. No separate flag.'

'There is not a flag on the system to generate reports concerning aspects of your request and a manual analysis of each record will be required to ascertain any relevance.'

Stop and search

We also asked police forces for data on stop and searches conducted involving 10 to 17 year olds, including how many of these were based on the suspicion of the possession of a controlled substance.

Of the total 32 responses, only half of forces could provide data on the number of children and young people who had been stopped and searched and the gender of those children.

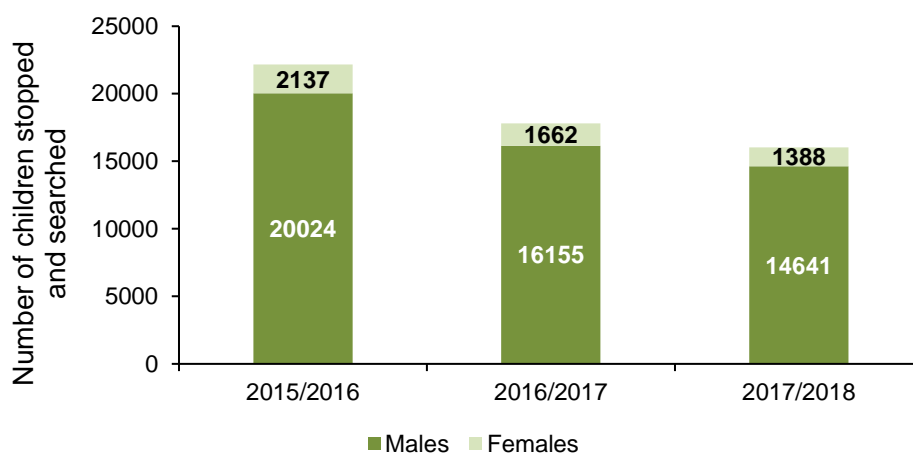
Around a third could provide data on whether these children were from out of the police force area and whether any offensive weapons were found on children stopped and searched because of drugs.

Table 7. Numbers of children aged 10 to 17 who were stopped and searched (n=17 including London metropolitan police)

No. of Children aged 10 to 17		15/16	16/17	17/18	Change from 15/16
Stop and Search	Forces across E&W (excl. Met police)	8225	5291	5313	-46%
	Total	22242	17848	16109	-28%

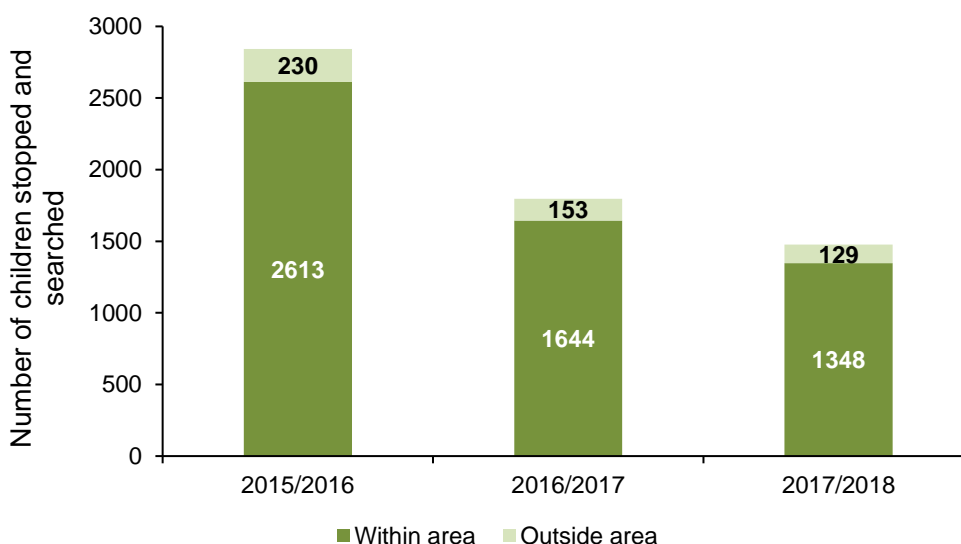
The data shows that from 15/16 to 17/18 there was a decline in the number of children aged 10 to 17 police stopped and searched, reflective of what has been documented nationally.⁷² Data showed that the majority of those that the police stop and search were boys.

Figure 4: Number of children stopped and searched by gender (n=17 including London metropolitan police)[†]



Again, a smaller number of police forces could provide data on children aged 10 to 17 who were stopped and searched by whether they were living outside their police force area. The data shows around 1 in 12 young people police stopped and searched were from outside the police force area.

Figure 5: Number of children stopped and searched by where they lived (n=8)[‡]



[†] Gender was not reported in all cases, there were 81 missing for 2015/16, 71 missing for 2016/17 and 80 missing for 2017/18

[‡] Location was not reported in all cases, there were 526 missing for 2015/16, 123 missing for 2016/17 and 121 missing for 2017/18.

In forces that record the number of stop and searches where firearms or offensive weapons found, between 0% to 2% recorded that an offensive weapon or firearm was found. Table 8 shows that despite the total number of searches decreasing over three years, there appears to be an increase in the numbers found in possession of a weapon – potentially suggesting the link to youth violence.

Table 8: Stop and searches undertaken with children 10 to 17 year olds and the reason given 'drugs' where offensive weapon or firearm found (n=9 including Metropolitan police)

	15/16	16/17	17/18
Number stop and searches	18379	15198	13438
Total offensive weapons or firearms	235	313	314
% where offensive weapon or firearm found	1%	2%	2%
Increase from 15/16 to 17/18	+34%		

Missing children

We asked police forces about the data they hold on children who go missing from home or care. Not all police forces could respond providing the data we requested. In most cases, this was due to data not being collected in relation to the categories that we asked about, as there are big differences in how data on missing children is recorded across the police forces.

The data from police forces on missing children painted a similar picture to that provided by local authorities, suggesting that children in care are more likely to go missing more frequently and to be found outside the boundaries of their home local authority. The average length of missing episodes for children found outside their local authority was longer for children who were missing from home in comparison to children missing from care.

Table 9: Children missing from home and care in 2017/18

	Number Missing from home	Number Missing from care
Total number of missing episodes for males 10-17	20589	6234
Total number of missing episodes for females 10-17	18275	5155
Total number of males	6642	1114
Total number of females	5938	1009
Average number of episodes per male	3.1	5.6
Average number of missing episodes per female	3.1	5.1
Number of police forces responding [§]	12	11

[§] Different police forces were able to provide data for children reported missing from home and for children reported missing from care.

Only four police forces could report how many of the total number of missing from home young people aged 10 to 17 were found outside of the police force boundaries. Of those that could respond, they reported that 137 (4%) of children missing in those areas were found outside their area.** For children missing from care, they reported that 82 (11%) of children missing from care were found outside their areas.††

National Referral Mechanism

As explained in Chapter 1, the National Referral Mechanism is currently the main way for victims of trafficking and modern slavery to be identified. Although child criminal exploitation is not one of the national categories of data gathered on NRM, reports from the NCA suggest that there was a huge increase in the number of children who are criminally exploited by county lines gangs. Currently the number of children referred to the NRM because of CCE is included in data on modern slavery cases through forced labour (as explained earlier in this report).

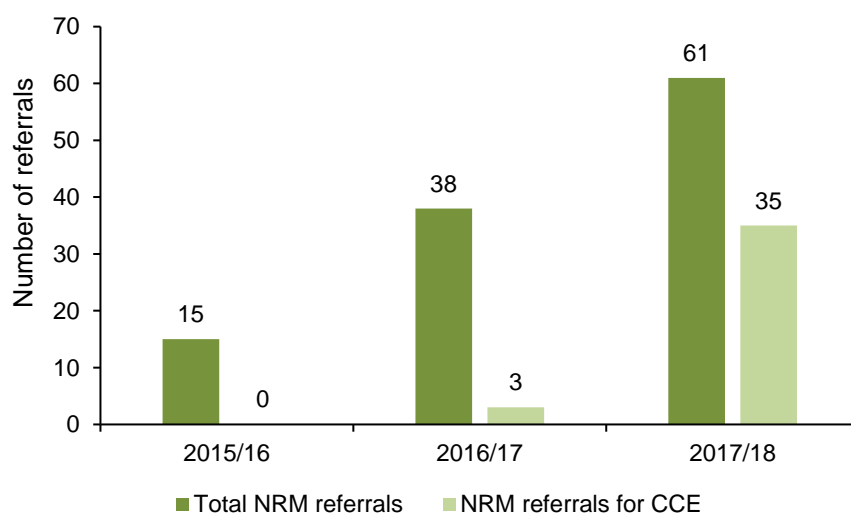
To help us understand whether data on CCE cases of children referred to the NRM is available at the local level, we asked both the local authorities and police a number of questions about referrals they made.

Local authorities recording of CCE exploited children referred to the NRM

We asked each local authority if they record information on the number of children under 18 who have been referred to the National Referral Mechanism for criminal exploitation. We asked if this information was retrievable from 1 April 2017 to 31 March 2018.

Out of the 144 local authorities who responded, 41% said they record the data and 30% said they could retrieve the data (39 LAs), but only 17 provided the data we asked for. This sample is too small to build the national picture, but it does show (Figure 7) that the awareness of the NRM is growing among local authorities as more children are referred to the NRM and more children are referred due to CCE.

Figure 6: How many children under 18 did your Local authority refer to the NRM in the following periods of time.



** out of 3362 children reported missing

†† out of 760 young people who were missing)

Most local authorities were unable to provide a break down into gender or nationality in FOI responses. Some reasons why local authorities were unable to provide data on NRM referrals were:

'NRM referrals are completed by local police force.'

'Youth offending team record this.'

'Recorded in individual's record so unable to retrieve within cost limit.'

Professionals able to tell you if asked, but this is not flagged on the respective electronic record.

Police referrals to the NRM due to CCE

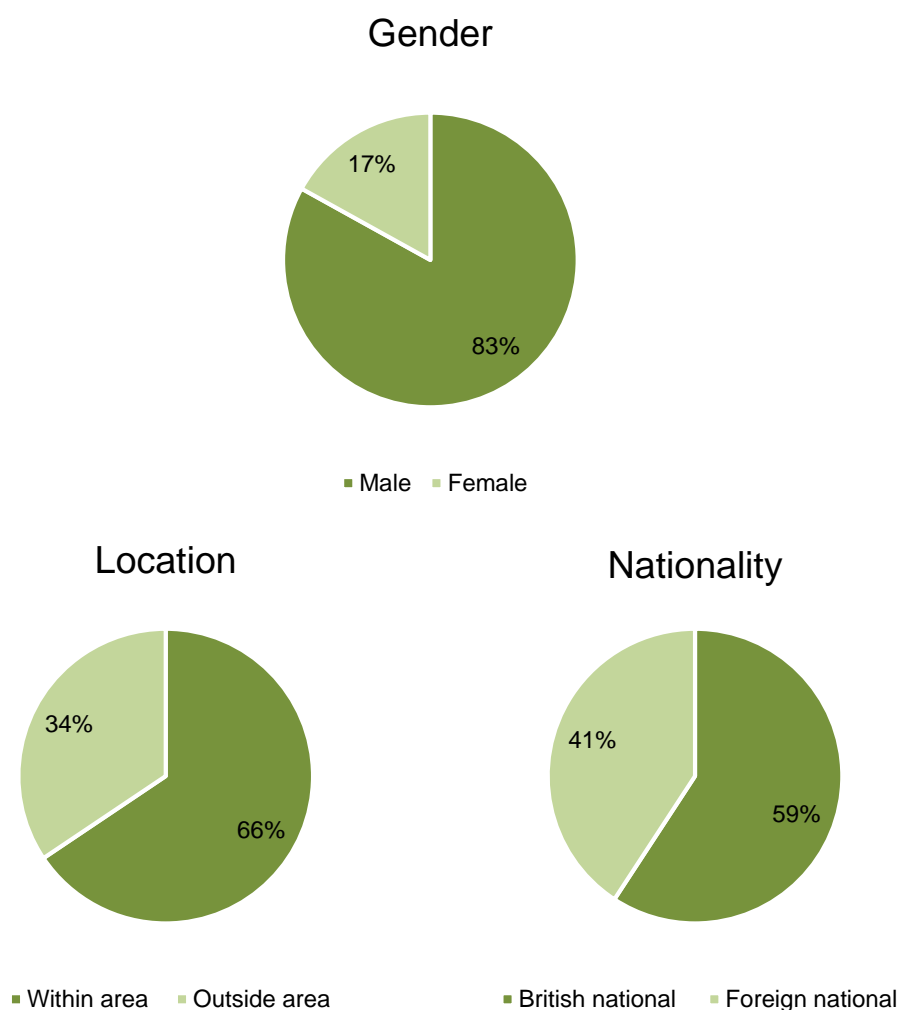
We asked police forces if they record the number of NRM referrals made for minors and if this data was retrievable specifically for criminal exploitation. Fourteen out of the 32 forces who responded to this question said they record numbers of NRM referrals made for minors (44%). The remaining forces didn't respond to this question, suggesting that this information is not easily retrievable. No forces said that they do not record the number of NRM referrals made.

Eg 'Information relating to the National Referral Mechanism would be held within working sheets of police reports. In order to ascertain whether a victim was referred to the NRM, a manual review of all crimes relating to your request would be required. This would exceed cost limits under FOI.'

The forces were asked how many referrals were made for children aged under 18 for suspected victims of criminal exploitation in the year 2017/18.

Across 12 police forces that provided data, 126 referral in total were made to NRM due to suspected child criminal exploitation. One hundred and eighteen of them had gender data recorded – 98 were referrals for males and 20 for females. In eight cases gender data was not recorded.

Figure 7: NRM referrals by gender, location and nationality for CCE (n = 11)



Police forces made more referrals for children living within their home areas – although around 1 in 3 referrals for children to the NRM due to CCE are for children living outside the police force area. Six out of 10 referrals were for children who are British nationals and 4 out of 10 were for children who were not British.

In the six police forces that provided information on reasonable ground decision 60 out of 93 referrals made received reasonable grounds decision – about 65% of cases. Five police forces provided information on conclusive grounds decisions: 75 referrals were made and of them 11 received conclusive grounds decisions (15%).

3.3. What is needed to disrupt child criminal exploitation: Professionals' views on barriers, opportunities and examples of good practice

There is not one simple solution to child criminal exploitation, including child criminal exploitation through county lines model. Interviews with professionals identified a number of issues that need to be addressed in relation to this crime. Some of these issues were presenting as barriers that slow down the response, others offered an insight into changes areas are making and approaches they have developed to ensure that children received the support they needed. These barriers and solutions are presented in this section.

Attitudes and common language

Across the areas and within the group of professionals who engaged in this research there was clear consensus that children exploited criminally, including through county lines model, are victims of exploitation. Yet at the same time, the interviewees reported how often they have to go against the tide of negative attitudes to these young people to ensure that they are recognised as victims.

Some of the attitudes were seen as arising from the way children and young people are portrayed in local and national media.

'How our children are seen. The local press doesn't do an awful lot to support the view of them as victims; I don't think the national press does, really.'

Area 6

In other cases, the barriers arose from the lack of common language that can be shared across different local agencies and across the borders of particular police or local authority.

As part of our evidence gathering for this report, we asked about the definitions related to child criminal exploitation, and specifically through the county lines model locally, and whether any other terminology was being used. The adoption of a common definition for criminal exploitation of children that encompasses the county lines model, was seen as an important step to help challenge some preconceptions about these children.

'I think it places the emphasis on a young person in terms of being a victim and also being exploited rather than what I think has previously historically been a view that, actually, these are young kids who are actually engaged in criminal activity within their own right. I think that it's helpful in that context. And also I think that there is a little bit of confusion sometimes around county lines.'

Area 1

Professionals interviewed and respondents to the police survey mostly referenced the definitions of CCE and county lines as discussed earlier in this report. Other terminology used was that from the Modern Slavery Act 2015 referring to 'forced labour', 'CSE' and 'Dangerous Drug networks'.

Responses we received also highlight a number of different issues in relation to how definitions are used and interpreted.

The first of these issues was the lack of a statutory definition of child criminal exploitation that encompasses all different types of exploitation, including CCE through the county line model. For example, several of the 50 protocols, policies or strategies on CCE referred to the fact that there is currently no statutory definition. Of the 50 documents, 17 did not include a definition of child criminal exploitation, five of these were specifically focused on county lines and gang related activity and two related to child sexual exploitation.

Of the policies that did include a definition, the majority were either using the Home Office definition outlined in the Serious Violence strategy, or a variation thereof. Though these variations did not explicitly reference coercion, control, manipulation or deception, they did emphasise the imbalance of power.

‘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 readily become involved. Child criminal exploitation is typified by some form of power imbalance in favour of those perpetrating the exploitation and usually involves some form of exchange (eg carrying drugs in return for something). The exchange can include both tangible (such as money, drugs or clothes) and intangible rewards (such as status, protection or perceived friendship or affection). Young people who are criminally exploited are at a high risk of experiencing violence and intimidation, and threats to family members may also be made. Gangs may also target vulnerable adults and take over their premises to distribute Class A drugs in a practice referred to as ‘cuckooing’.[‡]

One definition expanded the criteria to include vulnerable young adults:

*‘Child criminal exploitation relates to any activity where a child, or vulnerable young adult up to the age of 21 (if they are also care leavers or accessing a service from the Children with Disabilities team), is coerced, groomed, incentivised or threatened to become involved in criminal activity where they are too fearful to refuse the activities requested of them.’*⁷³

Interviews with professionals suggest the definitions that currently exist need to be implemented with appropriate training and awareness-raising among professionals in all agencies, as they are open to misinterpretation. Every individual we interviewed for this research said that they were aware of the definition outlined in the Serious Violence Strategy, with the majority of respondents reporting that this was the definition used within their local authorities own CCE/county lines strategy.

‘We fought heavily to have child criminal exploitation as a definition because we see that as the encompassing problem in county lines – just one big element of that.’

Area 2

While all participants in the research agreed that children forced or coerced into criminal exploitation are victims, they were concerned that it was not always seen that way in practice. Participants felt that this was partially because of how definitions were interpreted – for example, they may be interpreted as being applicable to vulnerable children only, or focusing excessively on the exchange that is supposed to take place.

‘I think criminal exploitation almost suggests that it’s particularly kind of like vulnerable groups and I think actually it could potentially be anybody. There is obviously an

[‡] Definition used by multiple local authorities.

imbalance of power but I think in my experience some professionals can see this as children making choices [if they are not seen as vulnerable].'

Area 4

'Sometimes professionals who haven't got a big insight into what criminal exploitation means might actually lose some of the understanding around it. It's not necessarily in exchange for something, it could just be a sense of kudos or it could be a sense of fear. I think people sometimes – professionals – might struggle with looking for a tangible exchange and the exchange isn't always tangible and I think that we struggle a lot with children's social care, social workers and the police in terms of identifying criminal exploitation. I think they're quite good now at identifying sexual exploitation, but there's still this perception that in some cases it is a choice and the young person is offending through choice and that's a daily struggle for us.'

Area 6

'In terms of the criminal exploitation I think that it talks about an exchange, which I don't think is necessarily the case. I don't think it is a matter of – I think to me that kind of implies a kind of transaction where someone, a young person, might think I want this and therefore I'm going to do this. To me it implies a sort of conscious decision that "In order to achieve the thing that I want I am going to do this". So kind of being really informed and able to make a really informed choice.'

Area 2

'So I think it's really important to be – to create the notion of exploitation because when you link it to crime or organised crime, there's something automatically in terms of people's internal value base that say they're less deserving because they're already involved in crime. And when you move that baseline in terms of not really their choice, not really had an upbringing which gives them a choice in the first place, but, from the point in which they're engaged or trapped or whichever word you want to use, very, very little choice.'

Area 3

In relation to county lines language, concerns were expressed that it is misleading as the model is changing and many children are now not going outside their local authority but are exploited locally.

'I don't think they're not trying and I don't think it's a lazy approach, I just think there's a lot of gaps and until we have a set definition of what county lines is as well it's hard to say "Is that child a drug dealer? Is that child a victim?" We have nothing in place to tell us how to go about that.'

The Children's Society's Practitioner

Availability of resources to respond to children

One of the themes coming from interviews with professionals was the recognition that very often children and young people are not identified early enough so that exploitation can be prevented or stopped from escalating.

'We recognise that if we're going to get ahead of this, legislation's got to help us. Okay? Make it more difficult. Disruption has got to make it more difficult and we've got to recognise, the community has got to recognise, schools have got to recognise, that these

kids are at a risk earlier. Because we're going to get a better chance of pulling them away if they've only done one deal – or they've only been working a week or, you know, it's their first opportunity into it. That's where we feel our best opportunities are. And that bit in the middle – well, not the bit in the middle but that bit where they're established is really difficult.'

Area 3

Some of it was down to professionals' understanding of signs of child criminal exploitation but the lack of resources was also quoted frequently.

'One of the other things, since the crash and since the cuts we are dealing with – within this building and within YOTs across the country, we are dealing with the most disadvantaged, damaged, destructive young people, distilled, effectively distilled into this very, very potent grouping, right, of young people. Years ago, we had a whole range of different young people that we were working with so you could be working with this young person and he's got some particular problems or issues that you can rectify by way of counselling or just the amount of time that you've spent with the young person or positive role modelling with the young person or the opportunity to, I don't know, play a game of pool, to engage, "How's your mum doing?" do you know what I mean? "Has she now got over that heart problem that she had? Did she get the operation? Blah, blah, blah." And know the kid right at that end of the spectrum, that will prevent some of this stuff further down the line. Whereas now we've got these – we've got a smaller, much more potent group that we work with, and these people in the police and elsewhere in this organization, because this is a multi-disciplinary organisation, it is that extra bit sometimes to actually think "Hold on, this is a child first, you know what I mean?" He's not just a street robber, he's not just a whatever the offense he's committed.'

Area 6

Professionals were conscious that young people may be groomed and criminally exploited for a variety of reasons – from the need to have a sense of belonging somewhere for young people who may not get it at home, to material rewards that matter a lot if young people or their families struggle financially. Professionals having the resources to offer young people something meaningful – such as the opportunity to have long term support and relationships with the same worker, or the chance to take part in activities that they love – would require a greater level of resourcing than is currently available to services.

'We don't have the resources to actually take them out and offer them something, a lot of my young people, that sense of belonging, smoking cannabis, we can't remove that and replace it at the minute, it's hard with the resources available.'

Area 3

Often professionals reported having to rely on referrals to youth activities available in their area as one of the approaches they take to ensure that young people have access to positive activities.

'[Name of organisation] they're starting up a biking club, so every Friday they're going to go on the bikes because they're interested in bikes. They're looking at stuff like that, I know [another local organisation] have got a new thing coming I've just been told about, about free running, you know the walls? So referring them into anything that's available like that, where it can take up some of their free time.'

Area 6

Where areas became better at identifying young people at risk, they also needed more resources due to the higher demand for services.

'What at the moment the challenge is, is we have become so much better at identifying our problem, what we have to catch up with now is having the resources to meet that need. So before we thought we were doing quite well, well that's because we didn't know enough and now we know more we realise that we're not doing so well because actually the capacity to really work intensively and I think that's the key to working with exploitation. It's persistence and intensity of the work, not visiting once a month or once a fortnight, really building relationship. Capacity is an issue.'

Area 5

Professionals in interviews also acknowledged the other side of criminal exploitation – the demand for drugs which is fueling the exploitation itself. A public health approach to reducing demand was seen as needed, both in terms of national policy and in the context of services.

'The other thing as well is that I've been thinking about this for quite a long time, really. It's about central government side of things as well. Other thing I think is absolutely needing to be looked at, from a political and a social point of view, is that they address the demand in relation to drugs as well. So what we see is that we see a lot of the political drive is about things like tough on crime, criminalising and also about, you know, tackling drug use and drug dealing and things like that. And I think that the thing which needs to be acknowledged and the thing which needs to happen from a very political perspective, including a public health perspective is around tackling the demand. So the reality is that there are lots of people demanding drugs on an ongoing basis, which is then actually fueling the issues around county lines dealing and is fueling the issues around the exploitation of children. That needs to be dealt with and I think that there needs to be a much more coherent political strategy to deal with that and I just don't see that. The booze culture: that's been addressed, smoking is declining. And either because they have been a coherent, politically-driven message that has actually been well embedded and, actually, this is exactly the same problem, but I don't see anything being done about that. And the problem is all the emphasis is on police to employ enforcement rather than, as I say, the demand of it. So it's people on the weekends wanting to do cocaine, smoke crack, stuff like that.'

Area 1

Legislative framework for tackling child criminal exploitation

Complexity of legislative framework and how it is interpreted locally was also often mentioned as a barrier to identifying child victims of criminal exploitation and ensuring that they receive adequate support.

Safeguarding legislation in place was reported not be sufficiently flexible in terms of responding to complex safeguarding issues like child criminal exploitation.

'So central government policy around responding to kind of the more modern – the more modern environment of safeguarding. So a lot of the legislation that we have in relation to child protection and safeguarding kids is predicated on the idea of interfamilial abuse – ie that the risk is from people, family members, that the child knows. Our systems in a traditional way are set up like that, and our legislation and our powers that we can apply to in court are set up on that basis. I think that the things that we've struggled with, but I think I'm using that term collectively with local authorities – is that we don't have any powers to do anything other than

sometimes do things like share parental responsibility with parents, and, actually, that's not always an effective way of working with adolescents. So I think that it's required local authorities to have a much more creative approach to it.'

Area 1

The lack of a child criminal exploitation definition in the Modern Slavery Act was reported to create an additional hurdle in practice in relation to children being seen as victims of this type of exploitation.

'I think from my understanding, from what I've been told, is that there's a bit of a challenge with the Modern Slavery Act in that it wasn't designed to really deal with criminal exploitation from this perspective. And there's something to do with the terminology around forced labour, which is what it often comes under, that it's very difficult to prove that it's forced labour. This is what's been described to me as some of the challenges around it. So the actual legislation itself isn't fit for purpose.'

Area 2

There were also concerns raised that children who are criminally exploited are also experiencing other forms of abuse that would not necessarily be seen as criminal offences, or even as safeguarding issues. One of the examples included children being forced to carry drugs inserted in their bodies. There was confusion reported on whether this can be seen as a child abuse issue, particularly if a child is seen as voluntarily doing it himself or herself.

'People talk about plugging as young people transporting drugs inserted into their bodies and I don't know whether we are saying that is a form of child abuse, so inevitably if they are doing that then they have been victimised, but I don't know whether we are necessarily immediately seeing that as a safeguarding concern.'

Area 1

Professionals wanted to see more emphasis that child criminal exploitation and experiences that constitute child criminal exploitation are all seen as safeguarding issues. The lack of focused safeguarding guidance from central government was seen as a gap.

'While it is a case of modern slavery, it's a child safeguarding issue so we have, child sexual exploitation has been a real focus and we talk about policies and guidance, that comes from the DfE. Anything we've got around criminal exploitation either comes from the Home Office or it comes out of modern slavery legislation. Actually, that should be driven from a safeguarding perspective, from the DfE pushing this as it being a safeguarding issue.'

Area 2

Professionals also discussed the importance of effective disruption tools for police to ensure early disruption and prevent things from escalating. They recognised that with regards to child criminal exploitation it may be difficult to rely on parents who will be fearful of criminals exploiting children. One example that was mentioned related specifically to Child Abduction Warning Notices, which police often use to disrupt a situation where an adult may be encouraging a child under the age of 16 to go missing or harbouring a child during missing episodes. A parent having to sign a Child Abduction Warning Notice was seen as counterproductive.

'I don't think we should be asking parents to go and sign an abduction warning notice against an OCG where they might live two streets away. That's just not acceptable at all.'

Area 2

Another issue raised by a number of participants was in relation to sentences for perpetrators who exploit children. Law enforcement response to perpetrators was seen as one of the factors that might make the involvement of children less attractive to criminals, whether it relates to specifically recognising child criminal exploitation as an aggravating factor for sentencing purposes, or creating an offence of grooming and sending a signal to perpetrators that coercion and control of children is going to be treated seriously.

'What I would want to happen is the Sentencing Guidance Council or Legislator, make a law, or make guidance that says if you are captured as an adult alongside a young person committing the same offence or connected to the offence, that you get extra on your sentence because you're effectively grooming that child. That would have various benefits as well if it actually kicked in. One, in terms of, particularly if that child's being a referred person to the National Referral Mechanism, that's even more powerful. The big advantage would be, you would disrupt the ability for criminal gangs to recruit new members. Also when young people who are entrenched in criminal gang networks become 18 and become an adult, they will have to start distancing themselves from the other people, if they continue to offend they'll have to distance themselves from the people they were offending with, the children that they were offending with.'

Area 6

The NRM as a mechanism to identify and offer support to victims of child criminal exploitation

The use of the NRM to identify child victims of trafficking was not always reported as a straightforward or clear process where British child victims of child criminal exploitation were concerned. One of the issues discussed was around misunderstanding of what 'trafficking' means in the context of modern slavery. Mistaken belief that trafficking only occurs when children are trafficked across the national borders was seen as a barrier in identifying British children who are victims of trafficking.

'There may be a tendency to think of trafficking as young people being trafficked from somewhere outside of the UK into the UK rather than children around the UK. So I think we still have a bit of work to do on that.'

Area 5

It was also reported that NRM decisions are not always speedy enough, both in the context of the law enforcement process the child may be subject to, and in the context of exploitation itself.

'Often it can be quite long. And the other thing as well is that what we find is that a young person's situation is normally much quicker than the time for the NRM response. And often what we've found is that sometimes by the time the NRM are getting back, the situation is very much changed for that young person.'

Area 1

Concerns were expressed that the NRM is not being used in relation to all the cases where it is needed and that as it does not usually result in any additional support for children, children's services do not see it as a valuable process.

'The National Referral Mechanism being used for the cases where child criminal exploitation is suspected? Not as robustly and as frequently as it needs to be if I'm honest with you.'

Area 5

'I also think the NRM is a form-filling exercise for some social workers where they don't see what additional resource or support they get from it. Because as a local authority it's your responsibility to provide response to that child. You're dealing with that response. That's just a form; it's a bit of paper, as far as they're concerned. And I appreciate if you come back with the positive grounds, that can assist in certain circumstances, but the majority of CCE ones are coming back negative.'

Area 2

Earlier in this report it was highlighted that there is still a lot of confusion about how NRM referrals are made and who can make them. Some FOI responses from local authorities responded that police do NRM referrals in their area, while others took a proactive position in relation to coordinating and recording NRM referrals. The lack of knowledge around how the NRM process needs to be used to identify children at risk of exploitation was highlighted as an area that needs to be addressed.

'I think potentially you've got a workforce who doesn't understand the NRM. You've got a whole workforce, a police force, that might not get it – a Government that might not get what it was there for. So, recently, there was an example the boy who went back to [area], he was bailed back to [area] because he went "no comment" and there was no complaint against him, even though he'd stabbed somebody four times. That boy went back. So we're talking to workers at [area] who were social work staff and said you need to fill an NRM. And they said "what's an NRM?"'

Area 3

Training for professionals

Alongside the need to raise professionals' awareness of the issues the CCE definition refers to, participants in this research also highlighted that more comprehensive training for professionals is needed to enable them identify and help children exploited criminally, including through the county lines model.

Such training needs to include focus on different types of criminal exploitation, the legislative framework, the NRM referral process and understanding of trauma children experience. The lack of training was often highlighted in interviews.

'I've sat in rooms with social workers and asked "have you done trauma training or anything linked to county lines from a victim basis?" and they either don't know what I mean or they've said no.'

The Children's Society Practitioner

Participants in the research particularly highlighted how training is needed to change attitudes to how boys are responded to when they are identified to be criminally exploited.

'I think for boys we get a really different response as well, so sometimes I'll set a strategy meeting and it's said "if we're talking about a young female right now what would you be saying" and they're like "oh" and we're like "why are we not doing that for a young male?". We see really different responses once we've gone out and trained professionals'.

The Children's Society Practitioner

Professionals also highlighted the lack of understanding of the use of technology in how children are groomed and exploited criminally. There is a gap in knowledge among professionals of a generation not that familiar with the use of technology, and so opportunities to identify children at risk are missed.

'The generational gap. So it's all fun and games asking us to be astute with social media, but we have to understand that there are social workers maybe over the age of forty which kind of missed this technological shift or got a bit older whilst it happened that aren't going to be as astute. And as I said technology is heavily being used eg YouTube to glamorise it, phones, county lines the phone line – it's in the name. These things, yes we've got a big problem that we're not prepared, I don't feel, as a local service to deal with from my experience. Believe they don't really know how to tackle it, I don't believe enough is being done, they're not spotting the signs.'

The Children's Society's Practitioner

Multi-agency working to map, identify and safeguard children

One of the central themes from interviews with practitioners was that tackling CCE is a job that requires a coordinated response across different agencies in the same area, and across different areas.

'This is really simple, but when you have a network that gets it, when you have a network that's all singing off the same hymn sheet that that child is a victim of trafficking and criminal exploitation it works well. Because we've got a network that's sharing information, we've got a network where we can do disruption work – so we might want to place calls on adults that they're associated with that we don't know, we might want to use different disruption techniques. When we've got a network that works like that together and that we have regular strategy meetings when the child is missing, that's when it works – which is just basic social care practice that should happen but often doesn't. And I feel like we're often orchestrating that, we're often pushing and pushing the network to respond properly to the safeguarding concern.'

Some of the examples mention what is being done by some areas that help tackle CCE. These examples included contextual safeguarding work, vulnerability assessment trackers, and local mapping.

'Good contextual safeguarding work, so they are looking at risks outside of the family home, so that helps solve the issue where parents are seen as the enemy when they are trying to protect their children...a vulnerability assessment tracker, so they have young people who are at risk to county lines, and then they do casework and diversionary work with them, so that's quite good... quite good at mapping and also about holding strategy meetings'

The Children's Society Practitioner

Participants spoke about the importance for agencies to build shared understanding of the scale of the issues in their area.

'[Data mapping] is something that we worked really hard on because it's really difficult to pull on that. That includes our missing cohorts, our cohorts of young people who are at risk of child sexual exploitation, also child criminal exploitation as well. Also that we collate a lot of data regarding young people who aren't necessarily involved within social services but could be involved with other partner agencies such as youth offending teams and could be even school exclusions. Our performance reporting is something which then gets scrutinised by our members. Instead of us actually from a top-down perspective just telling partners what the local picture is, we are pushing a lot more pressure back on partners to actually use strategic MACE as a forum for them to raise issues and thematic issues that they're seeing within their respective organisations. But that's something that's a little bit in its infancy at this point in time.'

Area 1

They also frequently highlighted that across different agencies there needs to be an agreed approach to how children are identified, risk assessed and supported.

'One young person who we think had been involved in criminal exploitation, probably in fear of violence, refusing to go to school, lots of issues within the family because of the upset being caused with the parents around how the behaviour of the young person had changed and just generally a really difficult situation. The young person was actually made subject of a child protection plan and I heard yesterday at the [multi-agency meeting focusing on children at high risk] that they have formed a really positive relationship with the new social worker. There'd been a change of social worker when the case went from assessment to the care, the longer term team and [the young person] made a really positive relationship, is now wanting to get back into school, is not going missing. And that really was just generally through good multi-agency working and engagement with the young person. So nothing outstanding, but it's worked for that young person. What I'm doing at the moment is on our system what we've not been able to do up to now is track the change in risk for young people. But we've built a reporting mechanism now where in the future I will be able to monitor levels of risk – so where it goes up and where it comes down and how long young people have been at significant risk. And if it goes up I'll be able to interrogate why the risk has gone up, but if it comes down I'll be able to interrogate why it's come down.'

Area 5

An agreed approach is also needed in relation to children who are found by police in the possession of drugs.

'What would happen is if the police found a young person in possession of a high quality of substances, for example, they would refer it to us because the police actually tell us about every contact they have with any child. So at the moment we receive a notification of any contact with children, so we would know about it. If it fell into that category where a young person was found with a high quantity of substances we would then complete a Child In Need assessment, but also an exploitation assessment. And if it came out as moderate or significant we would then have a conversation with our colleagues in the police to moderate that. So then there's a multi-agency discussion around, is it really that or is it higher or is it lower? And then we work from there.'

Area 5

'I've asked the police to consider when a young person is in custody for that sort of offence that they use the screening tool. They may not use...it's still a fairly significant document...but they at least have something that prompts them to think about, "well hang on a minute is somebody...is there an adult here that we should be more concerned about who's exploiting this young person? Or is there another young person exploiting this young person?" Rather than just focus on "oh we've got a young person who's been found in possession, let's think more widely about it." If they don't we will, but we want them to start thinking that at an earlier stage. Because quite often the young people are in the police view out of hours when we're not around so much. So we're working on that, so we've got a very good understanding of the police work around criminal exploitation, but some of the police officers on the street that are picking up these young people, we just want to make sure that they are absolutely considering exploitation when they are working with these young people.'

Area 5

A coordinated approach between agencies/cross border was mentioned by participants as one of the issues that is currently not working well. But this needs to work as children are often found in area different to where they normally live. This is relevant to children missing from home and was also mentioned in relation to children in care of local authorities who live in a placement outside their home area.

'It's really difficult at the moment because we might have areas that really understand it, but a young person might be found in an area that has no clue and they're going to be responsible for doing the interview and the charging of that child if they're going to be arrested if they're found to have drugs and stuff. So to tie all that together, so that if you've got a young person in one borough but found in an area in the eastern region and they're being arrested and interviewed the communication is just shocking. The rescue and response team, the National Coordination Centre should be picking some of that up now, which I hope to see an improvement.'

The Children's Society Practitioner

Professionals encouraged others to see the situation from a young person's perspective at the point of arrest and during the young person's return to their placement. They highlighted how disjointed systems do not work to address the needs of young people and risks they experience.

'So that young person's just had drugs taken off them, money taken off them and the risk to that child is huge but there's lack of – because sometimes if they're found overnight as well and they're remanded you know potentially till the morning, these agencies aren't all talking, the computer systems don't all talk which we know is an issue. So there's massive loopholes and actually that child could be so at risk at that point of arrest – especially if they've had things confiscated from them. And then we just go "right they're just going to go back to that placement now we'll let duty know who" then two hours later you might get through to your social worker who then maybe is out and then get back to your placement and within that time anything could've happened or that child could've gone missing again.'

The Children's Society Practitioner

Information sharing between agencies was mentioned as important both from the point of view of building intelligence about children at risk, and for relationship building in the area.

'I think one of the good things that we've got here, always had at the YOT, and are encouraging everybody else to have, is a high level of intelligence sharing. The more information you share with the police, the better opportunity they've got, and then the better relationships that you build with the police.'

Area 3

Complexity of responding to young people

Finding the right way to respond to young people who are targeted or exploited criminally is challenging. Participants talked at length about how there may not be one solution that suits all. Instead there is a need to develop an approach that puts a child at the centre, enables them to gain trust in professionals and develop resilience to move away from child criminal exploitation.

'Like many local authorities, we had a screening tool that we were using. The screening tool was kind of predicated on the idea of identifying factors of harm. And what we wanted to do was to actually look at providing an intervention that was based on an idea of actually addressing some of the intrinsic and environmental vulnerabilities that a young person can go through – and also to be looking at ways of strength and resilience through working with those vulnerabilities, to then potentially prevent a young person actually, in terms of push factors, being pushed into environments that they can then be exposed to – predatory, exploitative behaviours and coercive control. So we've moved to a position where we wanted to absolutely view exploitation as much more of a continuum rather than as separate siloed issues.'

Area 1

'It's about finding out what the kid wants and needs and how we can support that.'

Area 6

Focus on children involves helping them resolve the issues and helping them develop resilience and strengths.

'We are professionals and our children can build too much reliability on us to save them. And whilst the work that we do is absolutely great, some of the work that's been done previously hasn't necessarily built inner strength in our children. You know? The ability for them to be able to steel themselves. Because it's kind of this rescuer syndrome, isn't it? Where we sweep in and we protect them, but we do bugger all to put them in a better position to safeguard themselves in the future.'

Area 3

Participants in the research shared examples from their practice highlighting how helping young people build skills is one of the aspects ensures long term positive outcome for young person.

'I can think of one case in particular. A young person with quite serious learning difficulties and a huge list of criminal activities, many of which we would say were done under exploitation, where you have been to custody. The period in custody – this sounds really bad because I'm going to say the period in custody worked really well, because it did. It helped to stabilise him; it helped him to get education. And then the resettlement plan worked really well in education.'

Area 2

'We're tasked with running the risk register so all these young people on the risk register, they regularly get reviewed. Obviously we're trying to stop young people offending in the future and if the best way to stop them offending in the future is to give them, I don't know, a suit of armour in terms of safeguarding, and give them skills, and knowledge, and understanding that they're being exploited, that will stop them offending in the future.'

Area 6

Developing trust in professionals is very difficult for children exploited through country lines as they may find the experience of being exploited by gang and the prospect of going to prison equally terrifying.

'They have never been known to youth justice before, they are just terrified about what's going to happen, so the work is centred around supporting the child and the family through that process, which is often really difficult. I think trust in a relationship is the biggest, the absolute biggest factor in supporting these kids. I mean we do kind of like regular home visits and we keep in contact with them. We would have conversations with the family, you know, if they'd, quite often families would be totally in shock, you know they won't realise that criminal exploitation even happens. So we would kind of have conversations with them around that, talk about the importance you know of reporting missing episodes and stuff like that.'

Area 6

Addressing the issue of a child's fear of criminal groups who exploit them, and a co-ordinated approach across all agencies involved to disrupt that relationship, was seen as a crucial part of the safeguarding response. A disruption plan becoming part of a safeguarding plan was seen as an important approach to safeguarding.

'We have a very focused discussion around understanding the links between perpetrators and victims, and also then having a robust plan around disruption – so what we are doing collectively as a group to disrupt it. This is involving police. This also involves education in schools and health services, sexual health nurses, and mental health services as well. So, what we try to do is that we're looking at disruption and also looking at whether or not there are any barriers that we can overcome in terms of access to either services or support for the family.'

Area 1

When building relationships it often takes a long time to help young person overcome the distrust of children's services and understand that the situation they are in is exploitative.

'That's one young person who has said "mum isn't interested", he's the youngest in the family and it's a really sad case actually in terms of his home life is really negative. So him getting that, not attention, but us putting that effort in and showing him that we're all here and supporting him in different ways but together, I think that's worked for him. That's why he's actually looking at moving out of the family house, he's agreed, we took him to get supported lodgings. He's looking at moving in with someone else to make that family relationship better for him and that's the one who said the other day, he's finally realised the people he was associating with aren't good for him. And I think that's just being literally – because it's been 18 months of all three of us putting all the work in with him – having just the general

conversations, doing all the criminal exploitation work and helping him to understand. That's the main thing, just having the time to do it.'

Area 6

'I think some success is just getting people to speak to us or to engage with us, because that wouldn't happen. Whether or not we can encourage them to take a different role in life – so go to college, do something they're really interested in, and stick to that – and maybe be able to give them the tools to be able to say to people "I'm doing this, now, actually," and still be in the communities but not at risk and not drawn back into it.'

Area 2

One of the concerns that participants raised was how difficult it was to keep children safe as many of them remain indebted to the gangs and are threatened, as often perpetrators of CCE are walking away without any punishment.

'We have examples where we've worked with social work and the police to move children out of the area, to protect them. We've had children move abroad where, you know, the risks to them were so big and their parents could see that, and we've helped and supported them. So we've helped to protect children in that way.'

Area 2

'Keeping them safe and their family, not just around court, but there's times when what we know is that the police can support moves, they can support this if we know about these we can advocate, and we can have conversations with the police around it. So doing all that we can around the exploitation and everything surrounding it as well. So education, I think education is a massive thing, so if we can, or education and employment if we can get them into this actually it's a disruption from the exploitation that's going on. So I think it's about sometimes looking at the wider picture. I think sometimes it's seen as "well you need to get the perpetrator locked away". The likelihood of that happening unfortunately, it makes you sick but unfortunately it may not happen – but there's lots of other ways that we can support that young person and actually is it us that wants the person locked away, to that young person what might be important is safety. So reminding yourself what it is that they want.'

The Children's Society Practitioner

One way of keeping children safe – moving them out of their local areas – came up in conversations with professionals. Concerns were raised that although it may be perceived as a rational safeguarding choice it does not necessarily make children and families safer – and at times can also put other children at risk in the new areas.

'What seems to happen is when we can't safeguard our young people or when other local authorities can't safeguard their young people, they put them all in the same place. So you're putting them all in the same place where you're increasing the risk. You're putting other young women and men who are at risk in the system in the same place and it's not really thought about and we put more children at risk. We need to really be vigilant and have a look at that issue.'

The Children's Society Practitioner

Building the strength of families and communities to keep children safe was perceived as the approach needed to tackle CCE. Better working with parents was seen as one of the key elements of the safeguarding approach to children exploited by criminal groups. It was mentioned in respect of parents having information that services need to consider in order to keep children safe, and also in respect of addressing inequalities experienced by families that lead to children becoming vulnerable to exploitation.

‘At the moment parents get such limited responses. It's just really horrific what they, and everything we know about CSE, how they're blamed. They're left out of decisions, they're not taken seriously, they're crying out for help, you know all that kind of stuff. So how key the parent is for intelligence because they're with the child so much more, if we can empower the parent then we're going to have a better response. Parents need support. There's work to be done with the community, better awareness, but if I had a magic wand I'd want to get down to the real, underlying structural inequalities that underpin all this – which I know is changing huge, huge things but that is huge. If we don't tackle those things we're going to constantly firefight I suppose, but I know that's a massive wish list.’

The Children's Society Practitioner

Tapping into the power of communities to keep children safe was another issue coming up in conversations with professionals.

‘What we recognise is that the people in the community, one of the things that keeps people safe is that somebody says to an individual “I can keep you safe. Whatever is happening for you, you can talk to me.” And so we've stopped thinking of ourselves as the fixers, because we know they're probably out there. There's somebody in the community – whether it's an aunt, an uncle, just a community member who's bothered – that they might. So there's a recruitment campaign going to take place as part of that. So we're going to recruit the mentoring champion to recruit mentors and actually release a story to the community about why we're doing this.’

Area 3

Chapter 4. Conclusions and recommendations

The issues raised by this research are complex and require action from central and local government, police and other agencies. What we learned suggests that currently the response which children criminally exploited by organised crime groups receive from national and local agencies is not sufficient. It suggests that criminals are ahead of the game when it comes to identifying vulnerable children and targeting them, and that professionals' intervention is coming when exploitation is already taking place.

This research shows that despite the pockets of good practice across the country, children may experience a real postcode lottery in terms of the response they can expect to receive.

Some of the issues we discovered are due to child criminal exploitation being perceived as a relatively new phenomenon. Many areas are still trying to work out their local strategies, map the level of need and decide how to act. With only 50 areas out of 141 that responded to our FOI reporting that they have a strategy in place to deal with this horrible abuse of children – and only 1 in 5 collecting data that can help with understanding the scale and pattern of CCE in their area – there is still a long way to go.

The emerging variations in how local areas perceive and respond to child criminal exploitation seem to be driven not by learning from what the best practice is, but through the lack of coordinated national strategy on the issue. The steps taken by central government through introduction of the Serious Violence Strategy (which includes a definition of child criminal exploitation and of county lines) and creation of the National County Lines Coordination Centre are seen as positive. But these steps are not sufficient to drive a consistent safeguarding response to children who are exploited through the county lines model across the country. The lack of a statutory definition of child criminal exploitation and/or coercion and control of the child is contributing to confusion around identification and support for children who are being exploited to supply drugs.

The complex legal framework, which allows children to be seen and treated as offenders first and as victims second – if children are lucky to have access to professionals who can advocate for a NRM referral to be made – seems not to be on the child's side. The lack of clarity in judiciary processes of how a NRM referral should be considered and timed in relation to ongoing criminal prosecution of children for drug related offences does not help with making children's experiences of the law enforcement agencies more positive. It was concerning that none of the professionals we spoke to in our services or in external agencies mentioned ICTA's role in safeguarding children. This is despite some of the areas being those where ICTA services currently operate. The limited availability of that service – and recent changes to the ICTA framework that will make ICTA service even less available – is concerning in the context of difficulties with identifying children and victims of CCE that are reported in this research.

What this research also shows is that professionals on the ground are working against the tide. It appears that presently most children are identified at the time when the criminal groups have 'trapped' children in exploitative situations, when it is more difficult to safeguard them. Capacity issues for services to intervene earlier need to be considered, both in terms of resources available to children's services, and in the context of how contextual safeguarding is working in practice. Both generously these issues were referred to by professionals in this research, and it is clear that current strain on social services cannot be reversed without a significant injection of funding to build up services' capacity to intervene early. It is also paramount that the contextual safeguarding response is given greater prominence in national policies and in local responses. This would ensure that exploitation by people outside a child's family is addressed as consistently across the country as currently happens in relation to abuse and neglect within the family.

One of the key conclusions of this research is that child criminal exploitation, including through county lines model, is an ever-evolving issue. As professionals become more responsive to identifying children, criminals adapt their tactics to make it less possible for children to be identified. That is why it is very important that the definition of criminal exploitation stays broad and does not get associated with one particular model.

It is also important that children's experiences are put at the centre of assessments under the Working Together guidance, and that these assessments happen at different 'reachable' moments as a child becomes visible to law enforcement, education or other services. A 'reachable moment' could, for example, be at the point a child's school attendance changes or there are concerns about their behaviour. Or it may be at the point when a child is found in possession of weapon when stopped and searched by police, or when they are arrested for drug related offences. All these instances should be red flags for safeguarding services – and they require a quick response (as already happens in some of the areas examined for this research).

This research showed that in the last three years there has been an increase in instances where children were found in possession of offensive weapons. Although the numbers are small, the increase is an issue of concern – particularly in the context of the rising number of knife related incidents and youth violence across the country. The current response to children who are found in possession of offensive weapons is mostly focused on law enforcement, with the recent legislation – the Offensive Weapons Act 2019 in Section 14 – making it easier to order young people to stop carrying knives and comply with other conditions imposed on them. Research is needed into why children are carrying knives and to what extent the issue is associated with criminal exploitation. But, as this research shows, a law enforcement response on its own may not be able to make young people stop carrying weapons, especially when it comes to the county lines model. Professionals participating in this research were clear that a long term, coordinated safeguarding response that addresses the issues in a child's life (including poverty and inequality of opportunities), nurtures children's and families' resilience to exploitation, offers meaningful alternatives to offers made by criminal groups and helps children feel safe and protected, is the approach needed to address the issue.

Professionals were also clear that more needs to be done to disrupt activity of those who target children for exploitation. The law enforcement response against those who groom and criminally exploit children is not the subject of this report. But, as professionals suggested, it is important to understand how many exploiters are successfully prosecuted, what makes for successful prosecution and whether the length of sentences they receive – including for drug related offences – act as a sufficient deterrent against criminals targeting children.

Responses to child criminal exploitation must be holistic, addressing presenting factors such as a child going missing from home; abuse and violence, such as a child being forced to carry drugs within their body; and trauma-informed, to take into account the impact of this horrific crime on a child's mental health and emotional well-being. Children should be supported for as long as it takes for them to build trusted relationships with professionals and recover. No longer can child exploitation be met by disbelief and criminalisation. We have a world-leading child protection system – it's time to put it to work, because we owe our children more.

To address the issues raised in this research we believe that the following steps should be taken.

Recommendations

The law must be clarified to ensure that children who are groomed, coerced and controlled into committing crime are seen as victims of abuse and exploitation.

- The Home Office should amend the Modern Slavery Act 2015 to include the definition of child criminal exploitation. We believe that such definition would ensure that there is a common understanding among criminal justice and safeguarding professionals of the experiences of children who are exploited. This will help with prosecution of individuals, and the non-prosecution of exploited children.
- The Home Office should consult on a new criminal offence outlawing the practice of making a child insert and carry drugs within their body. For the purposes of clarity and consistency, this new offence should be introduced via an amendment to the Sexual Offences Act 2003.

All government departments and statutory agencies in England and Wales must be clear about their role in identifying and disrupting child criminal exploitation, and fully understand their role in responding to victims.

- The Department for Education and Home Office should jointly lead the development of a cross-departmental strategy for England, backed up with changes to relevant statutory guidance, to ensure that professionals working with children are clear about how to respond to child criminal exploitation.
- Strategy and guidance should cover all types of criminal exploitation, including exploitation through county lines. It should also:
 - Outline the safeguarding response expected of each statutory agency.
 - Outline the expectation that every local authority and police force across England will have a strategy to respond to CCE.

- Require the development of multi-agency CCE ‘disruption plans’ as part of child in need and child protection plans for children experiencing or at risk of CCE.
- Ensure that when a child is arrested or found in possession of drugs or weapons a child protection assessment takes place.
- Require a child in need assessment at the point of permanent exclusion from school.
- The Welsh Government should introduce a cross-departmental strategy to ensure that social care, education, health and youth justice all actively consider how they can identify child criminal exploitation, respond and ultimately prevent it.
- The Welsh Government should instruct the All Wales Child Protection Procedures Review Group to ensure that the All Wales Child Protection Procedures, the All Wales Protocol for Missing Children; the ICT Child Protection Protocol; the All Wales Practice Guidance for Safeguarding Children Who May Have Been Trafficked; and the All Wales CSE Protocol; to ensure that guidance, procedure and practice reflect the full spectrum of child criminal exploitation and are up-to-date with emerging trends in child exploitation.

In response to the complexity of child criminal exploitation, statutory agencies must have access to appropriate resources to identify and support victims.

- The Department for Education and Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government should urgently address the shortfall in children’s social care funding that is set to reach £3.1billion by 2024/25. Reinvestment in children’s services should be focused on supporting local authorities to reinstate early help and early intervention services, including youth services.
- Eligibility for support as a child victim of human trafficking must be universal. The Home Office should commit to making ICTAs available to all children who require them, including children with effective parental responsibility. The support should be long-term and cover transition to adulthood to ensure that children are not revictimised as they reach adulthood.
- The Welsh Government should adequately invest in children’s services.

There is a need to improve data collection to better understand the scale of the issue and inform resources allocation, and consequently better response to children at risk of CCE.

- Markers for child criminal exploitation should be introduced on police and children’s services systems to ensure consistent identification of children who may be at risk. This includes the introduction of such marker on the Missing Persons Database which is currently being developed.
- NRM data should be recorded for children who are victims of child criminal exploitation alongside children sexual exploitation and other forms of exploitation, to allow agencies to build a good national picture of the scale of the issue and the responses that children receive when NRM referrals are made.
- Governments in England and Wales should introduce a new category of ‘child criminal exploitation’ in relevant data collections by local authorities on children who are referred or receiving help from children’s services.

There are steps that local agencies – such as children’s services, safeguarding partnerships, police and others – can undertake now to start improving identification and response to children who are criminally exploited.

- The introduction of new local safeguarding partnerships in England should be seen as an opportunity to better understand CCE at a local level and ensure that multi-agency arrangements are structured in a way to identify and respond to CCE. New local safeguarding partnerships should undertake assessment of how many children are at risk of child criminal exploitation in their areas, and produce local strategies to address the issues.
- Regional Safeguarding Children Boards across Wales must develop strategies to respond to child criminal exploitation, and ensure that the implementation of the All Wales Protocols and Guidance best responds to CCE.
- Local authorities in England and Wales should ensure that training is provided to the social workforce on the issues of modern slavery, trafficking and referrals to NRM.
- Police forces in England and Wales should establish a protocol with councils in their police force area that a child being arrested with drugs and/or weapons will result in a child protection assessment under S.47 of the Children Act 1989 or S. 21 of the Social Services and Well-being Act 2014.
- Police forces should play an equal role in developing and owning local CCE disruption strategies.

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The Children's Society and our supporters have been there for vulnerable children and young people for more than 130 years.

We believe that every young person should have the support they need in order to enjoy a safe, happy childhood.

That's why we run services and campaigns to make children's lives better and change the systems that are placing them in danger.

Together with our supporters, we're improving the lives of children today and long into the future.

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