

Summary Report

Child Criminal Exploitation (CCE)

in the Context of Drug Markets:

Safeguarding Challenges and Prevention
Approaches in the South Inner City



Key message: CCE does not happen suddenly.

It develops over time — through early exposure, familiar people, and small tasks, then grows through pressure, belonging, and lack of alternatives.

Strong relationships, trusted adults and access to safe, structured supports can interrupt this pathway and support young people to resist involvement.

Acknowledgements

We would like to express our thanks to the South Inner City Drugs and Alcohol Task Force for their support regarding this project, and for the guidance and support provided throughout the process.

We thank all stakeholders who took part in the surveys and consultations for the research.

Finally, we thank all the young people who took part in the focus groups and creative sessions.

2 - Summary of the Report

The full report examines child criminal exploitation in the context of local drug markets in Dublin 2 and Dublin 4. It shows that exploitation is often visible in everyday community life rather than hidden from view.

The research shows that involvement typically develops over time, beginning with exposure and progressing through contact, small tasks and increasing involvement. However, not all young people who

are exposed to these environments become involved in exploitation. The findings suggest that consistent engagement with youth services, schools, sports and trusted adults plays a key protective role. Young people who remain connected to these supports are more likely to resist involvement, highlighting the importance of early engagement and sustained relationships.

The report argues that CCE should be understood first as a safeguarding issue. This is particularly important where children may be viewed as offenders rather than recognised as experiencing harm. Many children who appear to be involved in criminal behaviour are also being manipulated, pressured or controlled for the benefit of others.

Across the findings, the strongest protective factors were trusted adults, youth workers, safe and welcoming spaces, consistent support over time, and access to opportunities outside the immediate local environment.

3 - What young people need readers to understand

Involvement is rarely just about individual choice. It is shaped by poverty, peer pressure, exposure to drugs in the area, family stress, lack of safe activities, school disengagement and unmet support needs.

Even when a young person knows something is risky, this does not mean they can act on that knowledge, this does not mean they can easily step away. Fear, debt, pressure from peers, belonging and lack of alternatives can all keep them involved.

4 - Methodology

The study used a mixed-method approach so that the research could capture both the bigger picture and the day-to-day realities of local communities.

Method	What was done	Why it mattered
Walking audits	Researchers observed in Dublin 2 and 4, including residential areas, commercial spaces, and public spaces, transport routes, youth gathering points and service locations.	This showed how the physical environment – including visibility, lighting, movement and supervision – shapes risk and safety.
Stakeholder interviews	Semi-structured interviews were carried out with 15 stakeholders from youth services, Gardaí, education, healthcare, community organisations and statutory services.	These interviews provided frontline insight into how CCE happens, how it is recognised, and where responses work or break down.
Youth focus groups and storytelling sessions	Sessions took place across three youth centres, with young people aged roughly 9 to 18. Discussion focused on safe and unsafe spaces, peer pressure, runaway scenarios, help-seeking and local environments.	This brought the voices, awareness and lived experience of young people into this study.
Online stakeholder survey	Eight stakeholders completed an online survey using both multiple-choice and open-ended questions. Responses were analysed thematically and descriptively.	This added measurable patterns on awareness, training, risk factors, protective factors, collaboration and recommendations

Main message

The evidence shows that child criminal exploitation develops over time. Children may be exposed early, often through familiar people and places. Small tasks can lead to deeper involvement. At the same time, trusted adults, youth services and safe spaces can protect young people.

Findings

15 stakeholder interviews	We interviewed 15 people from youth work, Gardaí, education, healthcare, community and statutory services.
8 survey respondents	The survey adds local views on awareness, risk, protection, training, confidence and service response.
3 youth focus groups	Young people were engaged across three services
3 Walking Audits	Environmental audits were completed in Dublin 2 and 4

Analysis

The findings show a clear pattern in how involvement develops:

1

SEEING IT
AROUND
THEM



Children see drug activity, violence or older teens involved in crime in their streets or local areas.

2

GETTING
CURIOUS



They become curious. They ask questions and want to know more.

3

BEING
APPROACHED



An older person or peer takes an interest in them. They give attention, gifts, or offer easy money.

4

BEING
PRESSURED



The child feels pressure. They might be threatened, tricked or made to feel like they have to agree.

5

DOING
SMALL TASKS



They start with small tasks like carrying messages or holding drugs or money.

6

GETTING
TRAPPED



It becomes harder to stop. They may feel scared, loyal, or like they will get into trouble if they leave.

KEY POINT:

Exploitation does not happen overnight.

It builds step by step.

Early support, strong relationships and safe spaces can help stop it before it goes too far.



1 - Exposure starts early

Stakeholders described exposure to drug-related activity from very young ages, sometimes from the late primary school years. The strongest prevention message in the report is that support needs to begin before patterns of involvement become established.

2 - The environment matters

The environment shapes risk and safety. Drug activity was described as visible in flat complexes, stairwells, parks, laneways and busy streets. The report shows that risk is shaped by place, lighting, supervision, movement and whether trusted adults are present.

3 - Grooming often happens through known people

Young people are often not approached by strangers first. Contact can come through older peers, family connections or adults they already know. Small rewards such as money, food, clothes, status or protection can make early involvement feel normal.

4 - Vulnerability is shaped by wider conditions

Poverty, family instability, visible drug activity, pressure to have money or status, unmet additional needs, school disengagement and lack of safe spaces were all identified as drivers of vulnerability. The report makes clear that these are everyday conditions, not isolated issues.

5 - Leaving becomes difficult over time

Once involvement grows, leaving becomes much harder. Fear of consequences, peer pressure, debt, loyalty, belonging and the absence of realistic alternatives can keep young people trapped, especially older teenagers.

6 - Strong relationships protect

Trusted adults, youth workers, positive peer groups, supportive schools, youth clubs, recreation spaces and joined-up services were consistently highlighted as the strongest protective factors.

7 - Systems are not fully aligned

The report and survey both point to the same system gaps: inconsistent understanding of CCE, limited training, pressure on services, difficulty recognising exploitation when a child is also offending, and weak coordination pathways.

7 - Recommendations

The recommendations below keep the direction of the full report while presenting it in a clear, streamlined format for readers who need to understand the practical next steps.

1- Start earlier: Prevention should begin in late primary school and early secondary school, before involvement becomes embedded.

2 - Use a shared safeguarding approach: Respond to CCE as a safeguarding issue, not only as youth offending.

3 - Create clearer pathways: Create clear referral pathways and

coordinated responses across services.

4 - Train the workforce: Staff and volunteers need practical training on warning signs, grooming, coercion, contextual safeguarding and how to avoid criminalising children.

5 - Invest in trusted adults and youth work: Consistent youth workers, outreach staff, mentors and community Gardaí can make a major difference.

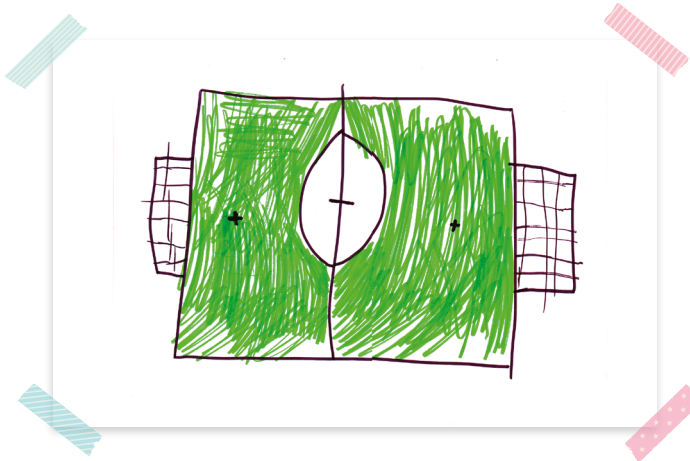
6 - Expand safe spaces and structured activities: Young people need youth cafes, clubs, sports, arts and recreation spaces that are accessible, safe and welcoming.

7 - Support families as well as young people: Family stress, addiction, poverty and unstable living conditions need practical support, not just crisis response.

8 - Improve school-based prevention: Strengthen early identification and support within school settings, particularly in relation to attendance, engagement and emerging vulnerability. This includes: stronger links between schools, youth services and family supports use of Home School Liaison and pastoral supports early intervention where patterns of disengagement begin to emerge consistent, relationship-based approaches rather than punitive responses

9 - Reduce long-term vulnerability: Address the wider structural conditions that increase vulnerability, including poverty, social disadvantage, unmet additional needs (including delays in assessment and access to support), and school disengagement. Responses should focus on early intervention, consistent support and improved access to services that can respond to these overlapping needs.

10 - Build trust in services: Children are more likely to seek help when adults are consistent, fair, respectful and clear about support.



Final message

The findings are clear:

children and young people involved in local drug market activity should not be viewed only through the lens of offending. Many are being groomed, used and harmed.

Prevention works best when children and young people have trusted adults, safe physical environments and accessible spaces, consistent support and real alternatives. These include access to youth services, sports and recreation, education and training pathways, and opportunities to build identity, confidence and belonging outside of drug-related networks.

A strong response requires both immediate safeguarding and sustained investment in communities.

Child criminal exploitation in this context is shaped by relational, environmental and structural factors, reinforcing the need for responses that go beyond individual behaviour and address the wider conditions in which young people are growing up.

