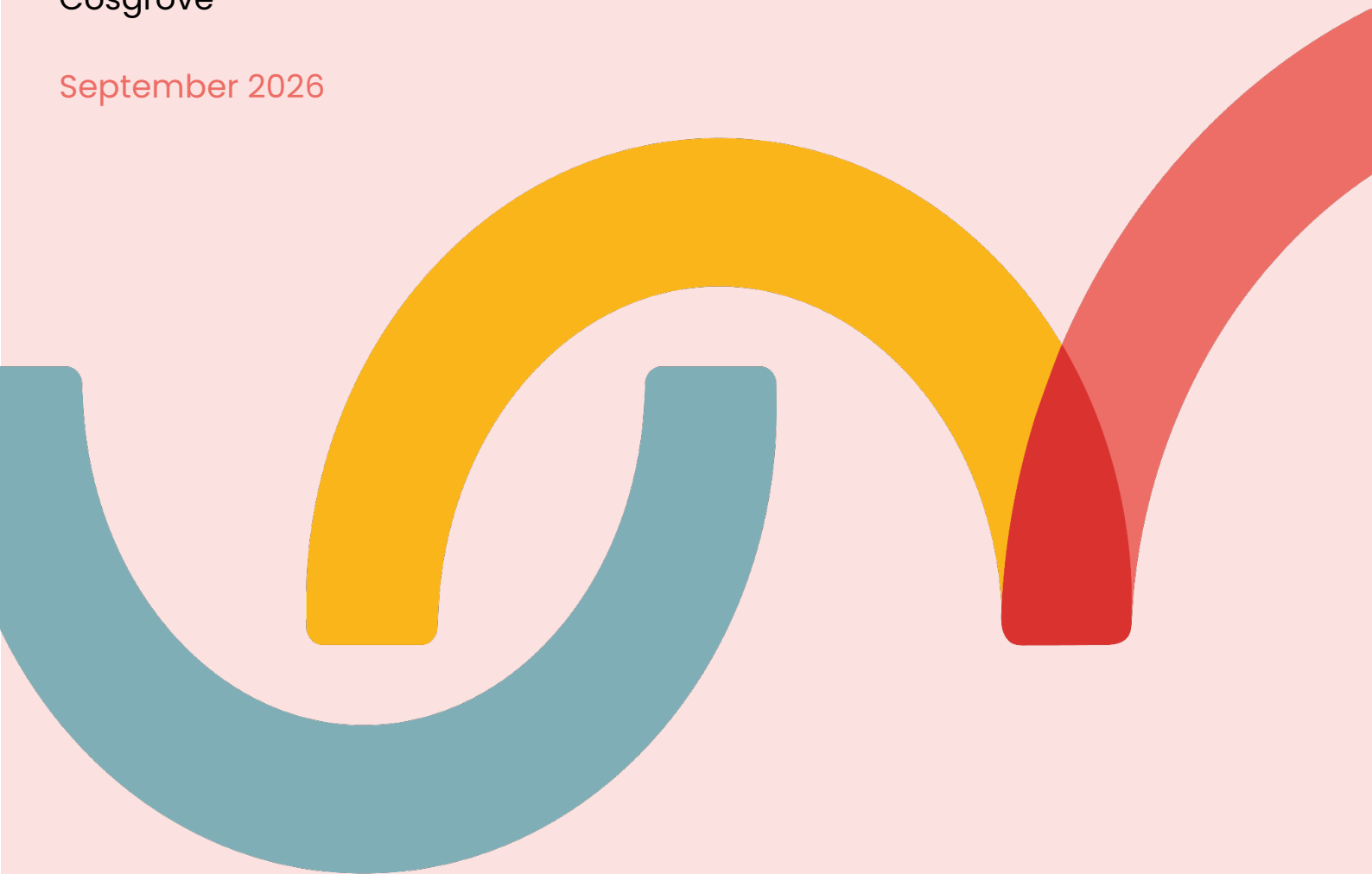


Policing's Response to Children's Exploitation in Drug Markets

Exploratory study report

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Glossary of Abbreviations and Key Terms

- **4P strategy:** A National Police Chiefs' Council policing strategy for tackling serious and organised crime. It is organised around four pillars: Prepare, Prevent, Protect and Pursue.
- **ACEs:** Adverse Childhood Experiences, potentially traumatic events in childhood such as abuse, neglect or household dysfunction that are associated with later harm and vulnerability.
- **ADHD:** Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, a neurodevelopmental condition characterised by persistent patterns of inattention, impulsivity and/or hyperactivity that can affect learning, behaviour and daily functioning.
- **Banking:** Internal bodily concealment of drugs. Also known as plugging.
- **BTP:** British Transport Police, the national police force responsible for policing the railway network and associated infrastructure.
- **Burner phone:** Disposable mobile phones used in drug distribution.
- **CAMHS:** Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services, an NHS service providing mental health assessment and treatment for children and young people.
- **CAWN:** Child Abduction Warning Notice, a police notice used to disrupt contact between a child and an adult believed to pose a safeguarding risk, but where the evidential threshold for charge is not met.
- **CCE:** Child criminal exploitation, the involvement of children in criminal activity where they are coerced, controlled or manipulated for the benefit of others.
- **Chicken shop model:** A recruitment model used by exploiters in CSE or CCE contexts in which children are offered free food or gifts, often from takeaway shops, as a means of creating emotional dependency or debt.
- **County line:** A branded drug supply telephone number used to distribute drugs across geographical areas.
- **CID:** Criminal Investigation Department, a specialist branch of the police responsible for investigating serious and complex offences. CID officers typically work in plain clothes and focus on building cases for prosecution.
- **CPS:** Crown Prosecution Service, the public body responsible for prosecuting criminal cases investigated by police.
- **CSE:** Child sexual exploitation, a form of abuse where children are manipulated or coerced into sexual activity.
- **CSJ:** Centre for Social Justice, a UK think tank focused on tackling poverty and disadvantage through research and policy recommendations.
- **Cuckooing:** The takeover of a vulnerable person's home by exploiters for the purpose of drug supply, storage or criminal activity. Also referred to as home-takeover.

- **DDTRO:** Drug Dealing Telecommunications Restriction Order, a court order that requires a communications provider to take specified action to prevent or restrict the use of communication devices in connection with drug-dealing offences.
- **DfE:** Department for Education, the UK government department responsible for education, children's services and safeguarding policy.
- **DFU:** Digital Forensics Unit, a police unit specialising in the recovery and analysis of digital evidence.
- **Elder:** A senior individual within a criminal network who exercises authority over younger members, often directing activity, enforcing rules, or acting as an intermediary between higher-level organisers and children.
- **Enforcer:** An individual tasked with maintaining control within a drug network, often through violence, intimidation or the recovery of debts.
- **Going country:** A term used to describe children being sent to different towns or regions to transport or sell drugs.
- **Graft houses:** A term used to describe residential properties used for the storage, preparation or sale of drugs.
- **Grooming:** The process by which exploiters build relationships of trust, dependency or fear to facilitate criminal exploitation.
- **HMICFRS:** His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services, the body responsible for inspecting police forces and assessing performance. Also referred to as HMIC.
- **Holidaying:** A term used to describe the short-term relocation of children by exploiters to coastal, rural or out-of-area locations to sell drugs, often in rented properties such as short-term lets or holiday accommodation.
- **ICTG:** Independent Child Trafficking Guardian, an independent advocate for children who are potential victims of trafficking, ensuring their best interests are represented across agencies.
- **KPI:** Key performance indicator, an operational measure used to assess policing performance, such as arrests or line closures.
- **LCG:** Localised crime group, a loosely organised local network involved in criminal activity such as drug supply, exploitation or antisocial behaviour. These groups may operate below the threshold of recognised organised crime structures.
- **Line controller:** A higher-level organiser responsible for overseeing one or more drug supply lines, often removed from day-to-day activity and insulated from direct possession or risk.
- **Line holder:** An individual responsible for managing a drug supply telephone line, including coordinating orders, directing runners and maintaining contact with customers.
- **NCA:** National Crime Agency, a national law enforcement agency responsible for tackling serious and organised crime.

- **NCLCC:** National County Lines Coordination Centre, a Home Office-funded initiative coordinating intelligence and disruption activity relating to county lines drug supply.
- **NFA:** No further action, a police outcome indicating that no prosecution or formal intervention will be taken.
- **NHS:** National Health Service, the UK's publicly funded healthcare system providing universal access to medical, mental health and community health services.
- **NPCC:** National Police Chiefs' Council, the body responsible for national coordination of policing policy and strategy.
- **NRM:** National Referral Mechanism, the UK framework for identifying and offering legal protection to victims of modern slavery and trafficking.
- **OCG:** Organised crime group, a structured group involved in serious criminal activity such as drug trafficking or exploitation. From a policing perspective, the definition of a group as an OCG is dependent on the Organised Crime Group Mapping process.
- **ONS:** Office for National Statistics, the UK's official statistics agency responsible for collecting, analysing and publishing national data on population, economy and society.
- **ROCUs:** Regional Organised Crime Units, multi-force policing units targeting serious organised crime across nine regional areas in England and Wales.
- **Runner:** A child or young person used to transport drugs, money or weapons, often between locations or directly to customers.
- **Running a line:** The act of managing or operating a drug distribution telephone number used to coordinate supply.
- **Party lines:** Telephone numbers used to market and sell drugs that are typically associated with recreational use rather than heavy physical dependency (for example, cocaine, MDMA, cannabis or ketamine).
- **Pop-up parties:** Short-term gatherings or events organised by exploiters, often used as sites for drug distribution, recruitment or exploitation.
- **PRU:** Pupil Referral Unit, educational provision for children who cannot attend mainstream school due to behavioural or other needs.
- **Plugging:** Internal bodily concealment of drugs, also known as banking.
- **SEN:** Special Educational Needs, learning-related needs that require additional educational support to help a child access and engage with education.
- **SEND:** Special Educational Needs and Disabilities, a framework recognising children requiring additional educational support.
- **Sitter:** A more senior young person or trusted individual who takes over, or moves into, the home of a cuckooed person in order to manage local drug distribution. From that address, the sitter oversees activity within a particular area, including directing runners, storing drugs or money and maintaining control over supply.
- **SOC:** Serious organised crime, complex criminal activity involving coordinated networks engaged in offences.

- **SRO:** Sexual Risk Order, a civil order applied to those at risk of sexually harming others. Its invocation is not dependent on prior convictions.
- **STPO:** Slavery and Trafficking Prevention Order, a civil order restricting the activities of convicted traffickers with the aim of preventing further offences and harm.
- **STRO:** Slavery and Trafficking Risk Order, a civil order designed to prevent modern slavery and trafficking offences, which is not dependent on prior conviction.
- **Taxing:** The orchestrated theft of drugs, money or personal belongings by exploiters to create debt and exert control over children.
- **TOCGs:** Transnational organised crime groups. In this report, TOCGs refer to international criminal networks that operate across borders and are linked to, or work in conjunction with, national organised crime groups. These groups are typically involved in large-scale drug trafficking, exploitation and other forms of serious organised crime.
- **Trap house:** A residential property used by exploiters or drug dealers as a base for storing, preparing or selling drugs. Often associated with the exploitation of vulnerable adults or children.
- **USG:** Urban street gang, a loosely structured group, typically youth-led and territorially or socially embedded, involved in criminal activity including violence, drug supply or exploitation.
- **YEF:** Youth Endowment Fund, a charitable fund that invests in and evaluates programmes to prevent youth violence and improve long-term outcomes for young people using Home Office funding.
- **YOT:** Youth Offending Team, a local authority multi-agency team that supervises children in the youth justice system and coordinates interventions to reduce offending and support safeguarding.
- **YJS:** Youth Justice Service, a local multi-agency team responsible for supervising and supporting children involved in the youth justice system.

Executive Summary

Background

Child exploitation within drug markets has become one of the most significant safeguarding and criminal justice challenges facing police forces in England and Wales. Over the past decade, policymakers and operational policing have focused heavily on the county lines model, emphasising the movement of drugs across geographical boundaries and the exploitation of children and vulnerable adults into supply chains. The rapid growth of the county lines drug market model has significantly transformed contemporary drug supply across the UK. Emerging evidence suggests that organised drug markets are altering, often becoming more rooted in local communities and increasingly shaped by digital technologies. County lines drug market exploitation continues to occur through long-distance supply arrangements, but also through neighbourhood-based networks and the cross-border recruitment of locally resident children. They increasingly draw upon online drug distribution systems that continue to be underpinned by coercive social relationships, blurring distinctions between victimisation and offending. These developments raise important questions about how exploitation is identified, recorded and addressed within policing systems.

At the same time, there is growing recognition that some groups of children are more likely than others to become involved in county lines drug markets. Children involved in drug markets are more likely to report experiences of poverty, care instability, school exclusion, trauma, neurodivergence and mental health needs than children in the wider population. Understanding how these factors relate to children's involvement in drug markets and how police respond to them is important for improving safeguarding and reducing harm. Police responses to county lines and drug market exploitation have also changed significantly in recent years. Dedicated taskforces, intelligence-led disruption strategies and enhanced partnership working have improved the capacity to close drug supply lines and arrest individuals directly involved in drug distribution. However, questions remain about the extent to which these approaches reduce exploitation in the longer term, disrupt higher-level organisers, or prevent the criminalisation of children whose involvement is shaped by coercion, constraint and unmet need.

This study was designed to address these challenges by providing a comprehensive analysis of how drug markets operate, how children are recruited and harmed, how police forces respond in practice, and what reforms may be required to better align policing and safeguarding objectives.

Methodology

The research used a mixed-methods design, combining quantitative and qualitative methods, which included:

- 62 qualitative interviews with police officers, safeguarding practitioners and national stakeholders. These interviews explored the structure of contemporary drug markets, policing responses, safeguarding practice and children's experiences of exploitation.
- Quantitative analysis of data from the Children, Violence and Vulnerability Survey 2025, a nationally representative survey of 10,835 children aged 13–17 in England and Wales. From this dataset, an analytic subsample of 1,476 children reporting indicators of involvement in drug markets was developed (Youth Endowment Fund, 2025). These survey data capture self-reported experiences and are not limited to children who came to police attention through arrest.
- Analysis of police-recorded data covering 2,258 arrests of children aged 12–17 for drug supply-related offences across two policing regions between 2020 and 2025. The police dataset includes only children who were arrested and records subsequent outcomes, such as no further action, safeguarding referrals, diversion or prosecution. It does not capture children who received safeguarding responses without arrest.
- 21 biographical interviews with young people who had previously been involved in drug markets.

Together, the interviews and quantitative datasets enabled an analysis of exploitation, policing practice, practitioner decision-making and children's experiences of drug market exploitation.

Key Findings: Structure of Drug Markets and Exploitation of Children

The findings suggest that organised drug markets operate through diverse, versatile and layered organisational forms rather than a single, fixed county lines model. Police accounts describe several structural arrangements, including traditional long-distance distribution networks, the cross-border exploitation of locally resident children and highly localised supply systems embedded within neighbourhoods. Increasingly, markets also operate through digital infrastructures, with children recruited not only as runners but as recruiters, online facilitators and debt enforcers. These markets rely heavily on the recruitment of children experiencing a range of unmet needs, including poverty, care experience, neurodivergence and mental health difficulties. Quantitative findings show that exploitation is strongly concentrated among children reporting additional vulnerabilities. Within the analytic survey sample, 42% reported diagnosed neurodivergence, 36% reported diagnosed mental health conditions and 44% reported special educational needs (SEN). These figures are substantially higher than national estimates, where approximately 15% of children are identified as neurodivergent, around 20–23% have a probable

mental health condition, and approximately 21% of pupils in England are recorded as having SEN (Department for Education, 2024; National Health Service England, 2023). Recruitment also begins early. Sixty-three per cent of children reporting involvement were aged 15 or under, and qualitative evidence shows pathways into exploitation frequently began around age 12, often in contexts shaped by school exclusion, poverty, neighbourhood violence and service withdrawal.

The findings indicate a clear divergence between patterns of involvement in drug markets and patterns of criminal justice response according to race, ethnicity and gender. Race and ethnicity were associated with important patterns of involvement and criminal justice outcomes. Self-report data indicates that ethnic patterns of involvement broadly reflect population distributions across England and Wales (Office for National Statistics, 2022). However, police-recorded arrest data in London shows Black children accounting for 51% of suspects, alongside higher rates of prosecution and lower rates of safeguarding outcomes. This highlights substantial ethnic differences between self-reported involvement and police-recorded arrest and outcome data. Gender is also significant. While boys were overrepresented, accounting for 61% of the involvement sample, girls comprised a substantial minority at 39%. This contrasts with national youth justice data, where girls typically comprise a much smaller proportion of the caseload, accounting for around 14–15% of children cautioned, sentenced or supervised by youth justice services, suggesting that girls constitute a much larger proportion of children reporting involvement in drug markets and exploitation than is reflected in official youth justice statistics (HM Inspectorate of Probation, 2024). Police and young people's accounts indicate that girls are frequently involved in less visible roles, including storing drugs or money, facilitating recruitment or being exploited through coercive relationships. The findings further indicate that children reporting mental health, educational, social care or neurodevelopmental needs were disproportionately represented among those reporting involvement in drug markets.

Key Points

- Drug markets are complex, combining local, national and digital structures.
- Children play an essential role in the business models of offenders operating across a broad range of drug markets.
- Exploitation is heavily concentrated among children with unmet needs.
- Recruitment and exploitation commonly begin in early adolescence.
- Boys are overrepresented, but girls form a substantial and often under-recognised minority.
- Children are exposed to significant levels of violence and harm in drug markets.

Key Findings: Policing Responses and Their Perceived Effectiveness

Policing responses are strongly shaped by enforcement-led disruption strategies, particularly through dedicated County Lines Taskforces. Officers widely described these approaches as effective in producing rapid arrests, line closures and visible reductions in supply activity. However, qualitative evidence shows that these strategies are also perceived as strategically narrow. Performance frameworks prioritising measurable outcomes such as arrests or line closures can limit the extent to which policing focuses on upstream disruption of exploiters or sustained safeguarding engagement with children. Criminal groups are adapting by insulating organisers from prosecution risk and increasing reliance on online communication and distribution. Administrative outcome data illustrates how these dynamics affect children. Among male suspects, 62% were charged or prosecuted, compared with only 10% receiving safeguarding-related outcomes. While girls were somewhat more likely to receive safeguarding responses once arrested, enforcement remained the dominant outcome for both genders. Older adolescents were more likely than younger children to experience charge or prosecution, although these differences may also reflect variation in offence type, prior contact with the criminal justice system and other contextual factors. Twenty per cent of children aged 12-13 received safeguarding responses, compared with only 7% of those aged 17-18, demonstrating a shift from protection towards punitive responses as children grow older. Police professionals also identified systemic constraints, including fragmented cross-force responsibility for trafficking investigations, delays in digital forensic processes and limited capability to respond effectively to online drug markets.

Key Points

- Enforcement-led disruption dominates current policing responses.
- Safeguarding outcomes are relatively uncommon.
- Criminalisation increases sharply with age.
- Operational effectiveness in disrupting supply does not necessarily translate into protection from exploitation.

Key Findings: Recognition of Intersecting Vulnerabilities

Neurodiversity, Mental Health and Special Educational Needs

The study finds that children reporting disability, mental health needs, SEN and care experience were more likely to report involvement in drug markets than would be expected from population estimates. Disability and additional needs are highly prevalent in the self-report data, where 42% of children reported a diagnosed neurodivergent condition, 36% reported a diagnosed mental health condition and 44% reported identified SEN. By contrast, neurodiversity information was

recorded in only 15% of arrest cases and mental health-related information in only 14%, highlighting a substantial gap between children's reported needs and what becomes visible within police recording systems.

Care Experience

Care experience shows similar patterns. Within the police-recorded arrest data for children involved in drug markets, care status was recorded in only 14% of cases, indicating that this information is largely absent from police systems. Of those cases where care status was recorded, 38% of children were identified as care-experienced. Outcome data suggests that care experience does not reliably trigger safeguarding responses, with care-experienced children less likely to receive protective interventions than their peers.

Gender

Gender differences were also evident. While girls accounted for 39% of the self-reported sample of children reporting involvement in drug markets, they represented only 6% of police-recorded suspects. This disparity suggests that girls' experiences of drug market involvement may not be fully reflected in official enforcement data, although alternative explanations, including differences in roles, offending patterns and enforcement practices, cannot be ruled out.

Race and Ethnicity

Race presents one of the clearest differences between the self-report and police-recorded data. In the self-report survey, the ethnic profile of children reporting involvement in drug markets broadly reflected population patterns across England and Wales. By contrast, in the London police dataset, which comprised children arrested for drug supply offences, Black/African/Caribbean children accounted for 51% of suspects despite representing a much smaller proportion of the local population. Among those arrested, Black children were also more likely to be charged or prosecuted and less likely to receive safeguarding, welfare or diversionary outcomes.

Interpreting the Findings

These findings relate only to children who were arrested and therefore reflect post-arrest decision-making. The dataset does not capture safeguarding activity that occurs independently of arrest. These findings indicate that national policy and policing guidance increasingly recognise factors such as ethnicity, disability, mental health needs and care experience as relevant to vulnerability. However, the study found that information relating to these characteristics is recorded inconsistently within police data, limiting the extent to which

vulnerability can be identified and reflected in safeguarding responses and frontline decision-making.

Key Points

- Neurodivergence, mental health needs and SEN are highly concentrated but poorly recorded.
- Care status is poorly recorded within police data, but where information is available, care-experienced children appear to be substantially overrepresented.
- Girls are substantially involved but under-recognised in enforcement data.
- Substantial ethnic disparities are evident within arrest and post-arrest outcomes.

Key Findings: Required Reforms

The evidence indicates that improving outcomes for exploited children requires structural change rather than incremental procedural adjustment. Police professionals emphasised the need to move beyond performance systems centred primarily on disruption metrics and towards models that integrate safeguarding, organised crime investigation and vulnerability recognition. Interviewees consistently identified the value of embedding child exploitation within serious organised crime teams, improving cross-force ownership of trafficking investigations, strengthening digital policing capability and ensuring more systematic recording of vulnerability indicators. Young people's accounts further highlight the importance of sustained relational support, suggesting that policing responses are most effective when embedded within broader multi-agency safeguarding systems capable of addressing underlying harms.

Key Points

- Performance frameworks should prioritise protection alongside disruption.
- Participants expressed concern that enforcement activity may displace exploitation into new locations rather than eliminating it.
- Safeguarding responses should extend beyond individual children to address the wider social, environmental and market conditions that facilitate exploitation.
- Dedicated exploitation-focused policing structures are needed.
- Digital capability and cross-force coordination must improve.
- Earlier, relational and multi-agency safeguarding responses are critical.
- Greater investment in services outside of the criminal justice arena is required to ensure that vulnerability is less likely to translate into victimisation.

Conclusion

The findings of this study demonstrate that child exploitation within drug markets is sustained through the interaction of innovative criminal economies, multiple forms of social disadvantage and uneven policing responses. Organised drug markets are becoming more flexible in how they operate, are closely connected to local communities and increasingly rely on digital technology to communicate and coordinate activity. Within these systems, children play structurally important roles that extend beyond traditional conceptions of low-level involvement. The research shows that children drawn into drug markets are disproportionately likely to experience overlapping forms of disadvantage, including neurodevelopmental conditions, mental health difficulties, educational disruption, care instability and economic marginalisation. These vulnerabilities are closely associated with pathways into exploitation and with differences in how children are identified and responded to within policing systems.

While policing responses have become more sophisticated in disrupting visible drug supply activity, enforcement-led strategies continue to dominate practice. The findings show important differences in how children experience policing, including higher rates of criminalisation among older adolescents, lower visibility of girls within police-recorded data and significant racial disparities in arrest and post-arrest outcomes. The study also found that many vulnerabilities associated with exploitation, including disability, mental health needs and care experience, are recorded inconsistently within police systems, limiting opportunities for safeguarding and support. As a result, many children experiencing exploitation may not have their vulnerabilities fully recognised or translated into safeguarding and support responses. Improving outcomes for children will require a shift towards more integrated policing models that combine organised crime disruption with consistent safeguarding engagement and stronger multi-agency coordination. Enhancing digital investigative capacity, improving the recording of vulnerability indicators and aligning performance frameworks with protection objectives are likely to be critical components of this transition.

Ultimately, reducing harm associated with drug market exploitation depends not only on enforcement activity but also on addressing the factors that increase children's vulnerability to exploitation, including poverty, school exclusion, disability, care experience, unstable housing and exposure to exploitative peer networks. Strategies that recognise that children's involvement is often shaped by coercion, changing relationships and wider social circumstances, rather than viewing them solely as offenders, are more likely to support long-term disengagement from exploitation and improve life outcomes.

Chapter 1: Context and Rationale for the Review

1.0. Introduction

This project examines police responses to child exploitation in drug markets in England and Wales. It addresses growing concern that adult perpetrators are embedding children within local, national and transnational drug supply networks (Centre for Social Justice (CSJ), 2024; Coomber and Moyle, 2018; His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS), 2022; National Police Chiefs' Council (NPCC), 2024) and exposing these children to harm, violence, coercion and criminalisation (Children's Commissioner, 2019; Home Office, 2024; Independent Slavery Commission, 2020). The study explores how police identify and disrupt exploiters, how safeguarding decisions are made in practice, and why responses vary across force areas. This study addresses key evidence gaps by examining how police identify and disrupt adult exploiters, respond to drug-market harms involving children, and protect those at risk. Central to the project is an analysis of how intersecting characteristics, including race, disability, class, gender and care experience, shape inequalities in exposure to exploitation and in criminal justice and safeguarding outcomes. These factors shape children's additional vulnerability and influence whether they are treated as victims or offenders. By examining patterns of harm, discretionary decision-making and institutional practice, the research seeks to generate evidence-informed recommendations. These aim to strengthen child-centred policing and reduce the exploitation and criminalisation of exploited young people.

1.1. The Development of the County Lines Model in Drug Markets

The illegal drug economy in England and Wales has evolved through a complex interaction of local, national and transnational dynamics. Local drug markets are embedded within wider supply chains that continually adapt to social, economic, technological and policing developments (Coomber, 2015; Coomber and Moyle, 2018; Moyle, 2019). At the transnational level, transnational organised crime groups (TOCGs) import drugs into the UK, supplying organised crime groups (OCGs) based in major cities such as London, Birmingham, Manchester, Liverpool and Glasgow, which function as key hubs for national distribution (National Crime Agency (NCA), 2016; Robinson et al., 2019). These groups maintain distance from street-level markets to protect supply chains and reduce exposure to law enforcement (McLean et al., 2018).

Terminology relating to gangs and OCGs is, however, contested and often inconsistently applied in both policy and research. While law enforcement distinguishes OCGs through formal mapping processes, in practice, there is considerable overlap between different types of criminal networks. For the purposes of this study, distinctions are made between several types of groups. These include TOCGs involved in international supply, OCGs operating at national and regional levels and smaller localised crime groups (LCGs) that primarily operate regionally. Youth-based groups, often described as urban street gangs (USGs), are also included, as they now operate within county lines (Andell and Pitts, 2018; McLean et al., 2018; Thompson, 2019). However, the boundaries between these categories are increasingly blurred within the county lines model.

Historically, drug markets in the UK involving Class A drugs such as heroin and crack cocaine operated through multi-layered supply chains in which imported drugs passed through several tiers of distribution before reaching street-level dealers (Coomber, 2015; Moyle, 2019). Street-level supply was often carried out by drug users or small local groups, creating volatile markets characterised by inconsistent supply, police surveillance and disruption. While such arrangements persist in some recreational drug markets, the distribution of heroin and crack cocaine has been substantially restructured since the early 2010s. By contrast, other drug markets, particularly cannabis, tend to be less hierarchical and more localised, often operating at regional or local levels. However, these markets can overlap with county lines networks where OCGs diversify into multiple drug types and use shared distribution infrastructures to expand their customer base and increase profit. In an effort to expand market share and evade police surveillance and

detection, OCGs increasingly operated beyond local boundaries and utilised children to transport and distribute drugs (Windle et al., 2020). The county lines model consequently emerged thereafter as the dominant mode of supply. County lines refers to a model of drug supply in which organised groups expand beyond their local areas by using dedicated phone lines and local distributors to sell drugs in new locations (Coomber and Moyle, 2018; Home Office, 2024). Rather than relying on small, locally based street groups, supply has increasingly shifted towards larger networks that transport drugs across towns, cities and regions.

It is within the context of county lines drug markets that children become central to the business model, with young people often positioned as key actors in the distribution process. The exploitation of children using intimidation, manipulation and coercion is now central to county lines drug markets, given the ease with which they can be recruited and groomed into selling and distributing drugs (Cockbain et al., 2025; Home Office, 2024; NPCC, 2024; Setter and Baker, 2018). Violence within the county lines model is most commonly associated with intimidation, weapon-enabled robbery and sexual abuse, with children and vulnerable adults as targets (Coomber, 2015; Coomber and Moyle, 2018; Hall, A. 2020; Havard et al., 2021).

Since its identification in 2014, county lines has evolved beyond its original form. Research by Cullen et al. (2020) and Maxwell and Wallace (2021) highlights increasingly blurred lines. Locally based groups, often formed through existing USGs, LCGs or crime families, are adopting county lines practices. These groups replicate external gang activity while remaining geographically embedded within local areas. Violence and the exploitation of children are central to their operations (Pitts, 2020). The literature conceptualises this development as a shift towards greater organisation and market control. McLean et al.'s (2020) evolving gang model links USGs to organised crime. Harding's (2020) typology traces a shift from commuting and cuckooing to more complex, localised and diversified drug markets. However, this progression is not linear. Instead, groups adapt to local conditions and opportunities. Recent evidence suggests a shift away from traditional interregional county lines networks towards more localised forms of drug distribution, further blurring the distinction between county lines and local drug markets (NPCC, 2024; 2025).

Technological developments have played a significant role in this transformation, reshaping the organisation of drug supply and consumption (Moyle, 2019; Warburton, 2024). Mobile phones and social media platforms are widely used to advertise drugs, manage distribution and coordinate participants within the network (Warburton, 2024). Children are recruited to move small amounts of drugs from major export hubs and are sometimes tasked with the management of client lists and drug sales via a branded phone line (Holligan et al., 2020; Home Office, 2023). Platforms such as Snapchat, WhatsApp and Instagram now play a central role across some drug markets in rapid advertising, coordinating logistics, expanding into new areas and monitoring workers (Hall et al., 2023; NPCC, 2025; Warburton, 2024). Branded phone lines manage retail activity, direct and control runners, and advertise availability. Violence is sometimes filmed and circulated to intimidate rivals or control exploited individuals. Remote tasking, where older members direct younger associates through messaging apps, enables operations to function with minimal visibility (Storrod and Densley, 2017).

1.2. The Current Extent of County Lines Drug Networks

The estimated scale of county lines activity has grown considerably since it was first identified in 2014. In 2018, the NCA estimated that there were more than 2,000 deal line numbers operating over 1,000 branded county lines across 28 of the 43 police force areas in England and Wales (NCA, 2018). Recent estimates stand at over 6,500 lines (NPCC, 2025). Estimates of the number of children exploited in county lines tend to vary significantly and are likely to underestimate the true scale of exploitation. In 2023/24, the Home Office County Lines Programme recorded 14,500 children at risk or already involved in county lines (Home Office, 2025a). Similar numbers were reported in the NPCC Strategic Threat Assessment (NPCC, 2025) that identified 6,764 missing children as being involved and a further 11,600 children being at risk of involvement in 2024/25 (NPCC, 2025). However, both are likely to be underestimates. Figures from the Children's Commissioner (2019) suggest that around 27,000 children had experienced gang-related violence, 25% of

whom were unknown to services. While not all of these cases relate directly to county lines or drug market exploitation, there is significant overlap between gang involvement, serious violence and child criminal exploitation (CCE), indicating that the true scale of harm is likely to be substantially higher. Similarly, annual referrals to the National Referral Mechanism (NRM) for CCE are also likely to represent an underestimation due to the failure to identify victims and the role played by discretionary decision-making. The county lines model is significant not only because it sustains organised crime, but also because it extends criminality and harm by exploiting increasing numbers of children and adults with disabilities, neurodivergence, mental health needs and addiction problems (Cockbain et al., 2017; Spicer et al., 2020).

1.3. The Structure and Operation of County Lines Drug Networks

County lines groups exploit children's vulnerabilities, building trust through grooming and manipulation to force them into roles such as transporting drugs, cutting and bagging substances, holding or collecting money, or carrying weapons (NCA, 2018). Grooming tactics are used to secure compliance and mirror techniques used in child sexual exploitation (CSE), such as building trust through gifts, food and offers of protection (Children's Commissioner, 2021). Once trust is established, groups may stage a mugging, forcing the child into debt bondage and continued compliance through threats of violence (Moyle, 2019; Whittaker et al., 2020). The structures children become exploited in tend to be rigidly hierarchical, with coercion operating at every level. Senior figures operate at a distance to reduce their risk of detection, while exerting control and extracting profitability from the layers beneath them.

- At the top of the hierarchy are high-ranking criminal associates who rarely leave their home regions, often referred to as elders, and who oversee supply chains, personnel and finances.
- The second tier comprises line holders, who coordinate local operations and control the phone lines through which drug orders are placed and distributed. These roles are typically occupied by older associates, with children and young people more commonly positioned in lower-tier roles such as sitters and runners.
- Beneath them are sitters, regional managers responsible for transporting drugs to target locations and coordinating local operations, typically operating from properties secured through home-takeovers (Butera, 2013; Coomber and Moyle, 2018; Macdonald et al., 2024). Older children who have demonstrated their compliance and trustworthiness as runners can be progressed to sitters and/or collectors.
- At the lowest level are runners, a role commonly occupied by children. Often working 12-hour shifts to enable line owners to maintain a 24-hour service for consumers, children are recruited through manipulation to transport, sell and deliver drugs, sometimes through the use of cuckooed properties secured through home invasion and the manipulation and enslavement of vulnerable adults (Coomber and Moyle, 2018; Macdonald et al., 2024; Spicer et al., 2020).

STRUCTURE OF A COUNTY LINES ORGANISATION

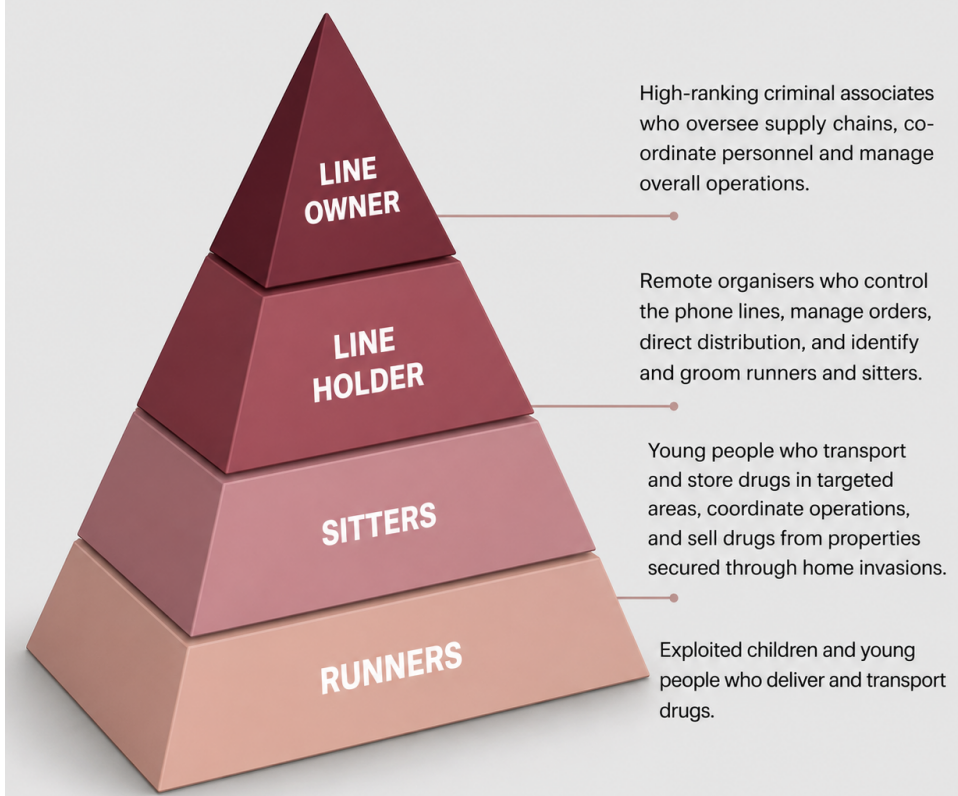


Figure 1: Structure of a county lines organisation.

1.4. The Exploitation of Children With Unmet Needs

The county lines model increasingly relies on the exploitation of vulnerable individuals, including children and adults, to transport, store and distribute drugs, thereby insulating higher-level organisers from risk (Holligan et al., 2020; Home Office, 2024). Children most at risk have experienced vulnerabilities, such as poverty, trauma, mental health issues, school exclusion and unstable living conditions, and are frequently targeted because they lack safety or support (Youth Justice Legal Centre, 2018). Such experiences therefore increase the likelihood of further harm from exploitation, including coerced engagement in criminal activity, victimisation and psychological trauma (Walsh, 2023; Walsh and Cunningham, 2023). Some children, particularly those with drug dependencies, are targeted by county lines gangs and initially engage voluntarily, viewing the work as mutually beneficial, before being drawn into coercive cycles of debt, exploitation and violence (Coomber, 2024).

A central feature of the county lines model is commuting, the movement of small quantities of drugs by children across urban, rural and coastal areas, often facilitated through the trafficking of children. This is closely linked to holidaying, where children are posted in short-term accommodation to distribute drugs, and cuckooing, whereby the homes of vulnerable individuals are invaded by county lines groups to establish local distribution bases (Macdonald et al., 2024; Moyle and Coomber, 2018). Victims of cuckooed homes are typically socially and economically marginalised, including those with disabilities or drug dependencies (Spicer, 2024; Whittaker et al., 2020). Sitters may initially befriend victims before subjecting them to sustained control, effectively confining them within their homes and normalising emotional, economic and physical abuse (Macdonald et al., 2022; Spicer et al., 2020; Spicer, 2024).

Social media also plays a central role in grooming and coercion, recruiting children into county lines through online relationships (Home Office, 2023). Broadcast messaging is a tactic in which drug offers are sent to large numbers of contacts via social media or messaging platforms, often advertising quick money. Under this scheme, a young person becomes trapped in debt-bondage after drug deliveries are purposefully sabotaged by suppliers (Atkinson-Sheppard et al., 2025). Social media portrayals of fast money and success stories from county lines glamorise otherwise unattainable lifestyles for children who are economically excluded (Maxwell, 2024a; Shaw, 2024). As Irwin-Rodgers (2019: 593) argues, young people's obsession with 'publicly displaying the money and material possessions acquired from involvement in drug dealing masks, and is driven by, a deeper sense of anxiety and inequality that permeates their lives.' Exploited children may therefore be groomed into believing they have agency and choice and may come to construct their own identities as entrepreneurial actors rather than exploited victims (Søgaard and Salinas, 2025; Windle and Briggs, 2015).

There is broad agreement across academic, grey and third-sector literature on the factors that increase a child's vulnerability to exploitation. These encompass a range of contextual harms operating at individual, family and societal levels (Children's Commissioner, 2019; Moyle, 2019; Walsh, 2023). Exposure to these experiences increases the likelihood of further harm through exploitation, including victimisation, criminalisation and psychological trauma (Walsh, 2023; Walsh and Cunningham, 2023). Individual vulnerabilities linked to exploitation include trauma and adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), mental health difficulties, neurodivergence or disability, and drug dependency (Barker et al., 2025; Caluori et al., 2022; Moyle, 2019; Spicer et al., 2020). At the family level, risks include poverty, housing instability, parental absence, mental ill-health, neglect, abuse and substance misuse (Children's Commissioner, 2019; Spicer, 2019; Children's Commissioner, 2021). However, not all families fit this profile; Dando et al. (2023) highlight how assumptions of dysfunction can be misleading and contribute to parent-blaming. Conversely, pro-social relationships within families and with practitioners can be protective, and interventions that strengthen these relationships may build resilience (Conway-Turner et al., 2020; Maxwell and Wallace, 2021; Neaverson and Lake, 2023). Risk intensifies when individual and family vulnerabilities intersect with, and are compounded by, institutional failures, such as school exclusion, delays in Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) access, youth justice involvement and the disproportionate criminalisation of some minority ethnic groups, which reduce support and increase susceptibility to exploitation (Fawell et al., 2024; Spicer et al., 2020). School exclusion is a key pathway, removing a potential place of safety, creating periods of unsupervised vulnerability, and clustering at-risk young people in alternative provision where exploitation may be facilitated (Maxwell and Wallace, 2021; Windle and Briggs, 2015). Children already experiencing exploitation may be further harmed when agencies misinterpret their circumstances (Lloyd et al., 2023).

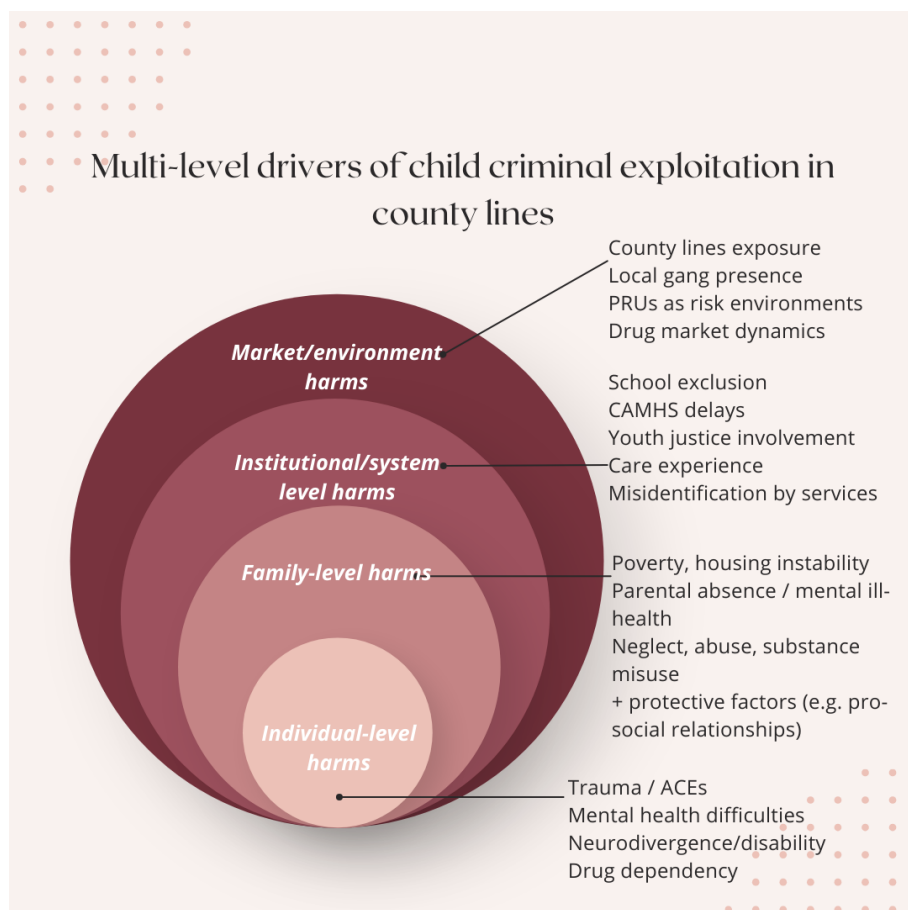


Figure 2: Multi-level drivers of child criminal exploitation in county lines.

The graphic above illustrates the individual, family and structural factors that increase a child’s risk of exploitation through county lines. These harms are multi-layered, interactive and cumulative, with experiences compounding vulnerability and heightening the risk of exploitation. The literature broadly agrees that multiple factors of exclusion, marginalisation, and discrimination place children at risk of exploitation within drug markets (Billingham and Irwin-Rogers, 2021; Reid, 2023; Spicer, 2021). Therefore, children most at risk of county lines exploitation include care-experienced young people (Fox et al., 2024; Shaw and Greenhow, 2020;), those excluded from school or in alternative or special needs education (Neaverson and Lake, 2023), and those facing poverty, housing instability and/or living in areas of high deprivation (Thompson, 2019), experiencing abuse and/or neglect (Shaw, 2024), neurodivergence (Langhoff et al., 2024; Lydon and Emanuel, 2025), or unmet mental health needs (Children’s Commissioner, 2019). These vulnerabilities are not simply individual but reflect wider structural inequalities, including the impact of austerity, reduced social support and fragmented safeguarding systems (Alexandrescu and Spicer, 2023; Setter and Baker, 2018). Children exposed to violence and trauma, at home or in their communities, are at heightened risk of being criminally exploited (Caluori et al., 2022: 26), with county lines activity intensifying existing forms of social harm (Barker et al., 2025; Children’s Commissioner, 2021; Maxwell, 2023).

The threat of violence and intimidation is endemic across all modes of county lines (Maxwell and Wallace, 2021). Although not always necessary (Irwin-Rogers, 2019), threat violence and weapons are used to instil fear and control, enforce discipline, manage debts and maintain territorial control (Children’s Commissioner, 2021; Densley et al., 2023; Hall, A. 2020; Holligan et al., 2020; Storrod and Densley, 2017). The violence inherent in county lines operations is experienced in myriad ways, across various contexts, by exploited children and young people:

Within exploitation relationships:

- Sitters, who act as regional managers, groom children through offers of friendship or protection, but can employ extreme violence to increase profits and maintain discipline (Coomber and Moyle, 2018; Stone, 2018).
- Sexual abuse and economic control are strategically used against both boys and girls to instil fear and maintain control, especially among children with care experience and histories of domestic abuse (Havard et al., 2021).
- Children face reprisals from line holders following any police contact if they suspect they gave them any information or intelligence about operations. In these cases, children will be coerced into violence or more serious criminality to protect themselves and their families (Atkinson-Sheppard et al., 2025).

During operational activity (e.g. commuting and dealing)

- Children acting as runners face high risks of violence from within the network and from rival gangs while travelling or distributing drugs.

Within exploitation settings (e.g. properties secured through home invasion):

- Invaded homes function as sites of violence where children are exploited into practices of coercion, violence and sexual exploitation as they move up the hierarchy (Atkinson-Sheppard et al., 2025; Coomber and Moyle, 2018).

Within community and market environments:

- County lines are embedded within wider gang activity, normalising street control and sustaining cultures of serious youth violence (Andell et al., 2023; Holligan, 2020; Reid, 2023).
- Harms are not limited to urban areas; county lines have increased violence in rural and coastal communities (Coomber and Moyle, 2018; McLean et al., 2018).
- Violence associated with county lines spills into communities where groups use it to expand into new territories while maintaining control over their own areas (O'Hagan and Long, 2019).

Children experience broader harms when they travel, are exploited in importer areas, or are placed in invaded properties, including physical and sexual violence, intimidation and emotional abuse (Moyle, 2019). These environments often expose them to drug use, overdoses and pressure to engage in risky behaviours. They are vulnerable to assault from drug users, dealers and rival groups, with violence escalating during market conflict (Bonning and Cleaver, 2021; Windle and Briggs, 2015). Persistent threats from gangs, rivals, and authorities create trauma and hypervigilance, increasing mental health risks. Violence, entrapment and isolation from families also cause significant psychological harm for exploited children, leaving families feeling powerless to intervene (Dando et al., 2023).

Girls are frequently used to transport drugs across geographical areas, often being forced to conceal them internally in a process known as plugging. Those exploited as runners or used to transport drugs are at increased risk of sexual abuse by senior OCG members, and victims of home-takeovers may also be coerced into sex work, particularly where drug use is already present (Havard et al., 2021; Macdonald et al., 2022; Shaw et al., 2024; Spicer et al., 2020). While the sexual abuse of boys and young men is typically underreported (Cockbain et al., 2017), underreporting is also likely to affect girls and young women; however, girls and young women face heightened risks within these markets. The graphic below depicts the range of harms that children are exposed to in county lines exploitation, ranging from violence and sexual exploitation to isolation and psychological distress and trauma.

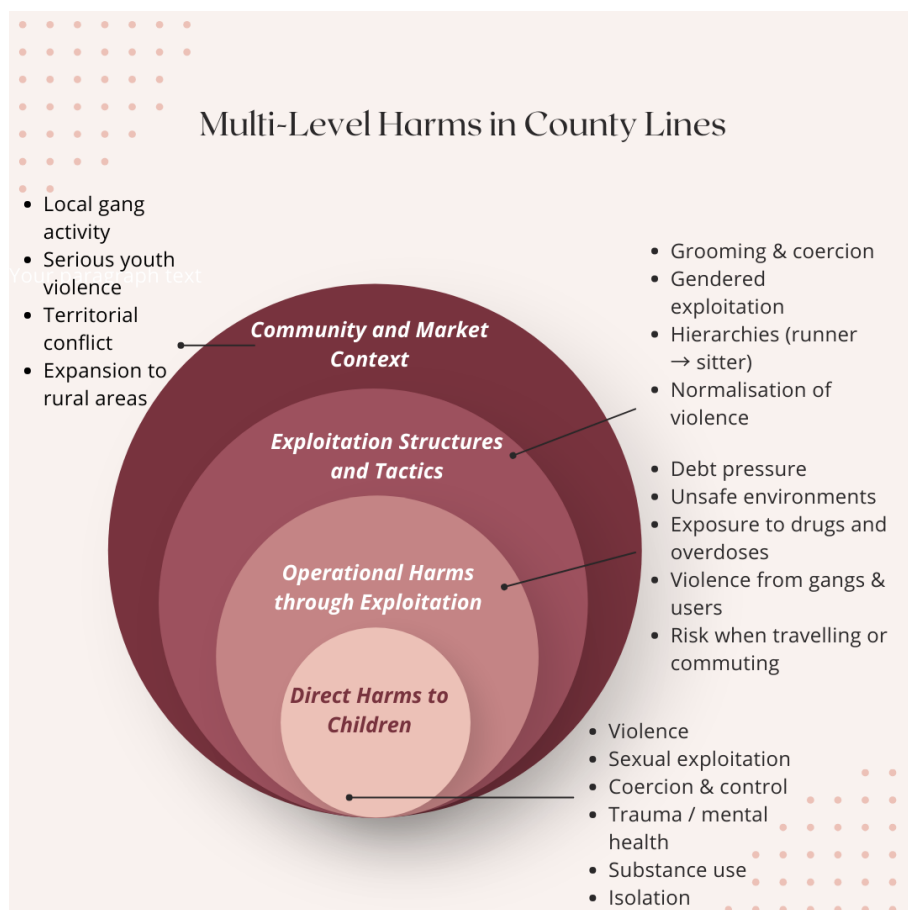


Figure 3: Multi-level harms in county lines.

1.5. Police Responses to Child Criminal Exploitation

The widespread nature and associated harms of county lines have made it a growing priority for many police forces. Its complex business model, along with the constantly evolving tactics, poses significant challenges for the police in disrupting lines and arresting and prosecuting perpetrators. Policing county lines involves three core elements: disrupting drug supply networks, protecting vulnerable children and adults from exploitation and monitoring the movement and control of drugs and people across locations.

The police response to county lines is coordinated through the NPCC policing strategy, which sets out the national 4P strategy for tackling county lines (NPCC, 2024). The plan involves four principal goals: **Prevent, Protect, Prepare** and **Pursue**. The table below outlines the framework, its goals and the targeted responses used to achieve them.

	Goal	Ambition
Prevent	Preventing people from engaging in county lines, and the associated violence and exploitation	- Target resources into affected areas with visible community-led policing - Deliver training to promote a contextual safeguarding approach and improve understanding about how to recognise and respond to vulnerability - Deliver intervention pathways to prevent children from engaging in county lines and associated violence.

Protect	Being proactive in our approach to safeguarding that better protects children and vulnerable adults from harm	• Consistent adoption of a trauma-informed approach to better recognise vulnerability and enable appropriate safeguarding interventions • Strengthen partnership working and information sharing • Provide specialist support to those at risk of harm and exploitation, • Improve police responses to missing episodes linked to county lines.
Prepare	Better prepare communities to strengthen resilience against the harms of county lines	• Raise awareness through county lines public information campaigns • Engage communities through neighbourhood policing • Deliver coherent and consistent training to internal and external partners.
Pursue	Relentlessly pursue the individuals or criminal gangs controlling county lines	Intelligence-led, targeted approaches to: • Identify and close drug lines • Disrupt and dismantle organised crime groups, urban street gangs and individuals by targeting line holders • Utilise data-led precision operations • Pursue criminals through the use of all criminal or civil order powers to prevent and disrupt offenders.

Figure 4: The NPCC Framework. Adapted from NPCC (2024) Disrupting County Lines, Policing Strategy 2024-2027.

Policing county lines in England and Wales, therefore, involves a coordinated effort across multiple organisations. The 43 territorial police forces operate separately, supported regionally by Regional Organised Crime Units (ROCs). At the national level, the NCA and the National County Lines Coordination Centre (NCLCC) provide strategic coordination, specialist capabilities and intelligence sharing. Key exporting forces, including the Metropolitan Police, Merseyside Police, West Midlands Police and the British Transport Police (BTP), have established Home Office-funded dedicated taskforce teams, working with ROCs, to disrupt drug supply networks, safeguard vulnerable people and pursue offenders in line with the NPCC's four objectives.

The infographic below shows the key organisations involved in tackling county lines, their relationships and their responsibilities regarding the 4P strategy.

Policing County Lines:

COORDINATED RESPONSE

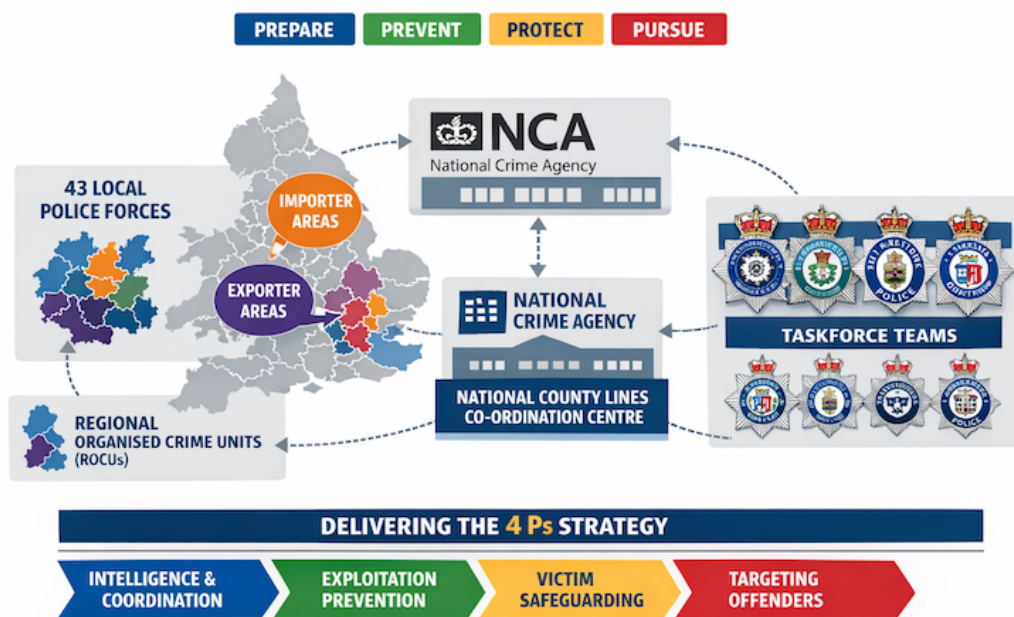


Figure 5: Policing county lines: prepare, prevent, protect and pursue.

A major development in the response to county lines was the establishment of the NCLCC in 2018. This followed the NCA's recognition of the threat in 2014. Supported by the Home Office County Lines Programme, the NCLCC has strengthened intelligence sharing, coordination and data-led targeting across police forces (HMICFRS, 2022). This includes the creation of specialist taskforces, technological investment and collaboration with partners such as the BTP and the collection of regional datasets under ROCUs. Between July 2024 and March 2025, this activity contributed to over 1,200 line closures, 2,000 arrests and more than 2,000 safeguarding referrals (Home Office, 2025b). According to the NPCC (2024), the implementation of the NCLCC has enhanced detection, created a better understanding of the scale of networked lines, and enabled a data-led, precise approach to closing lines. Since the County Lines Programme was implemented, there has been an overall 19% increase in police-recorded violence (equivalent to 3,650 crimes) (Home Office, 2025b). It is unclear whether this relates to improvements in targeting, detection and enforcement, or to rising rates of gang-related harm.

Over the past decade, police responses have prioritised enforcement, focusing on arrests and prosecutions. The 2022 HMICFRS inspection identified progress in police and NCA responses to county lines, including dedicated teams, improved intelligence practices, and greater focus on disrupting offenders (HMICFRS, 2022). However, these approaches have been criticised for targeting low-level actors while more serious offenders remain insulated and concealed (McLean et al., 2018; Spicer, 2019). Disruption tactics, such as shutting down mobile phone numbers (deal lines) linked to county lines drug activity, can temporarily destabilise markets, but the effects are often short-lived. The 2022 inspection also highlighted inconsistencies in identifying exploited children and a lack of coordinated, prioritised responses (HMICFRS, 2022). In response, the NCLCC strengthened national coordination through improved intelligence guidance, dedicated Drug Dealing Telecommunications Restriction Order (DDTRO) teams, and developed closer working between the NCA, ROCUs and local forces (Havard, 2022). However, despite enhanced coordination, performance remains uneven; for example, HMICFRS (2024) found the Metropolitan Police was slow to initiate and progress evidence-led investigations and frequently missed opportunities to disrupt county lines activity. Consequently,

the inspectorate concluded that the force was failing to adequately protect children from further harm (HMICFRS, 2024).

Police performance is constrained by limitations in existing legislation for tackling perpetrators and protecting children. Current frameworks, including the Modern Slavery Act 2015 and Serious Crime Act 2007, do not adequately address CCE (Lydon and Emanuel, 2025). When implemented, the Crime and Policing Act (2026) will introduce specific offences for CCE, cuckooing and coerced drug concealment, alongside new protection orders, to address these gaps. While this may strengthen recognition of children as victims, enforcement alone is insufficient since children, without adequate safeguarding, remain at risk. County lines activity is highly adaptable, and policing responses are shaped by discretion and organisational culture, meaning safeguarding is not always prioritised (Ericson, 2007; Olver and Cockbain, 2021). As acknowledged by the Alliance for Youth Justice (2025: 39), ‘the response to child victims of CCE still has a long way to go to ensure a safeguarding response always takes priority over criminalisation.’

1.6. Police Identification and Safeguarding of Children in County Lines

Protecting children and preventing harm are core responsibilities of the police when tackling county lines, as outlined in the ‘Your Trust’ pillar of the 2024-27 NPCC Children and Young Persons Policing Strategy (NPCC, 2024). The NPCC recognises the victim–offender overlap, acknowledging that children’s offending may result from exploitation or coercion. Officers are encouraged to approach young people with openness and a trauma-informed perspective, yet responding appropriately to exploited children is often complex (Turner et al., 2019). Specialist county lines and child exploitation teams, including those operating within the BTP, combine intelligence-led disruption with multi-agency safeguarding approaches to identify vulnerable children on the rail network, rather than defaulting to criminalisation (Blakeburn and Smith, 2020). This approach seeks to address the grey area between victimisation and offending, embedding protection within everyday operational activity through joint working with local authorities, using safeguarding flags in police systems and immediate child protection referrals (Blakeburn and Smith, 2021). However, enforcement still often dominates policing, risking the criminalisation of children and exposing them to further exploitation (Turner et al., 2019; Koch, 2021; Shaw and Greenhow, 2021).

Assigning victim status in county lines is complicated by children’s dual roles as victims and offenders (Shaw, 2024; Windle et al., 2020). Police discretion often determines whether safeguarding actions and NRM referrals are initiated (Alliance for Youth Justice, 2025). Traditional notions of victimhood, emphasising innocence and disconnection from offenders, fail to capture the realities of county lines exploitation and can perpetuate victim-blaming narratives, undermining safeguarding efforts (Bosma et al., 2018; Robinson et al., 2019).

Studies suggest that whether a child is assigned victim status depends upon referrer perceptions of the circumstances of the child’s exploitation and criminal behaviour, their demeanour and acceptance of their victimisation (Espeute and Lanskey, 2023; Robinson et al., 2019; Spicer, 2021; Windle et al., 2020). The attribution of victim status is also shaped by relationships with peers and family (Marshall, 2024b). If a young person is perceived as causing significant harm to others within their social networks, their victim status may be minimised. When there is limited police recognition of the heightened risks of exploitation associated with neurodiversity and neurodevelopmental need, victimisation is much more likely to be overlooked (Lydon and Emanuel, 2025; Macdonald et al., 2024). Misinterpretation of behaviour, especially for autistic or intellectually disabled children, can mask exploitation and result in inappropriate policing responses (Baldry et al., 2017; Macdonald and Peacock, 2026). This may be heightened by processes of adultification, whereby children, particularly those from some minority ethnic backgrounds, are perceived as more mature, culpable or less vulnerable than they are, increasing the likelihood of punitive rather than safeguarding responses.

A child’s role or position within county lines hierarchies is often difficult to determine when they do not disclose information (Espeute and Lanskey, 2023; Windle et al., 2020). When interviewing children as both suspects and victims,

police can prioritise their offender status, particularly if they pose risks to others, overlooking signs of victimisation (Marshall, 2024a; Olver and Cockbain, 2021). Refusal to disclose or justify exploitation may lead officers to assign responsibility and criminalise the child, often guided by instinct, age, demeanour or perceived attitude (Caluori et al., 2022; Davis and Marsh, 2020; Villacampa and Torres, 2017). However, many children reject the victim label to avoid stigma, protect self-image and maintain social standing, presenting bravado while masking exploitation (Blakeburn and Smith, 2021; Fohring, 2018; Windle et al., 2020). Mistrust in authorities or feeling unsafe can further undermine disclosure and protection efforts (Finkelhor et al., 2001; Langhoff et al., 2024; Neaverson and Lake, 2023). Effective safeguarding depends on police understanding the complex interplay between victimisation and offending and the child's willingness to disclose harm.

Parents who seek help from police and other agencies often find responses ill-equipped to address exploitation and report feeling marginalised, as efforts prioritise prosecuting OCG members over safeguarding their children (Maxwell, 2023). Safeguarding approaches within social services have similarly been criticised for focusing too narrowly on family dynamics, overlooking the extra-familial risks posed by peers and older individuals in county lines networks (Caluori et al., 2022; Ministry of Justice, 2019). As a result, families frequently encounter dismissal or misinterpretation of concerns, including missing episodes, leaving children exposed to ongoing harm (Dando et al., 2023; Fox et al., 2024).

1.7. Safeguarding Children Through the National Referral Mechanism and the Modern Slavery Act 2015

As part of the Serious Violence Strategy, police work alongside the NRM to identify, refer and support suspected victims of modern slavery or trafficking, including those coerced into criminal activity who may be eligible for protection under Section 45 of the Modern Slavery Act 2015. The NRM is the UK's framework for identifying and supporting victims of modern slavery, including children exploited through county lines. Professionals use section 45 defences alongside NRM referrals to evidence victim status with respect to prosecution. Section 45 of the Modern Slavery Act 2015 provides a legal defence for victims of modern slavery who commit offences as a direct result of their exploitation. For children, the threshold is lower than for adults, as coercion does not need to be proven. In recognition of children's heightened vulnerability, it must only be demonstrated that another person with the child's characteristics would have acted similarly when faced with the same situation. In theory, this should prevent criminalisation for offences such as drug possession or supply.

While both the NRM and Section 45 are intended to protect children from prosecution, their effectiveness is limited in practice, and exploited children are still criminalised. The NRM is intended to safeguard children exploited through county lines, but current processes often fail those who do not fit traditional notions of victimhood. Inconsistencies in NRM referrals, delays, and reliance on outdated or incomplete information limit its protective impact (Caluori et al., 2023; Lydon and Emanuel, 2025). NRM procedures frequently struggle to account for the overlap between victimisation and offending, sometimes reinforcing criminalisation rather than diversion (Espeute and Lanskey, 2023; Marshall, 2023). Even when children receive positive NRM decisions, measures such as Youth Justice Service (YJS) supervision, curfews, or electronic tagging may be imposed as safeguarding, reflecting a lack of alternative support and perpetuating inequalities (Lydon and Emanuel, 2022; Wroe, 2021b).

Practitioners may be unclear about, or reluctant to use, the NRM, particularly as the outcome carries no legal weight, meaning it can be disregarded by courts. As a result, exploitation-based defences under Section 45 of the Modern Slavery Act 2015 are applied inconsistently, and many children continue to be criminalised for drug offences despite clear indicators of exploitation (Gadd and Broad, 2024; Spicer, 2021). As police are expected to identify and refer potential victims, while the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) assesses eligibility for protection, outcomes remain inconsistent. Referrals have increased, yet this has not translated into reliable protection. Evidence gaps, limited recognition of victimhood and a prosecutorial focus on offending behaviour continue to undermine the non-punishment principle (Espeute and Lanskey, 2023; Gadd and Broad, 2024).

These challenges are compounded by the hybrid victim–offender status common in county lines, which the NRM and existing legislation fail to address (Lydon and Emanuel, 2022). Lydon and Emanuel (2022) report charge authorisations being rejected, CPS’s reluctance to proceed with cases leading to discontinuations, and evidence not being tested in court. In these cases, children continued to be exploited and arrested for similar offences following referral (Independent Slavery Commission, 2020). Some children recognised as victims are still prosecuted, highlighting a fundamental contradiction in the system. Rather than providing consistent protection, the NRM operates as a partial and unreliable safeguard, with the criminalisation of exploited children, particularly older teenagers, remaining a persistent outcome (Alliance for Youth Justice, 2025).

Warnings have also been issued in an HMICFRS inspection report (HMICFRS, 2022), noting that the statutory defence for victims of slavery and exploitation can unintentionally increase the risk of exploitation. This occurs when an exploiter uses the conclusive grounds decision as a shield against future prosecution and coaches the child to say they are being trafficked if they are caught, to prompt a referral. Upon turning 18, exploited young people may decide to disengage from the NRM and fail to consent, leading to the suspension of their case, the loss of support and increased risk of prosecution. This is typically due to fear of retaliation, rejection of victim-status or distrust of authorities (Alliance for Youth Justice, 2025).

Within the NRM, Independent Child Trafficking Guardians (ICTGs) provide specialist support to children identified as potential victims of trafficking or modern slavery. Introduced under the Modern Slavery Act (2015), they act as independent advocates to help children navigate safeguarding, legal, immigration, and criminal justice systems, and better protect their rights, welfare, and best interests. Although ICTGs are gradually being introduced through the ICTG Service to give one-to-one support to children through the NRM process, the service has been rolled out in phases, and access is patchy and limited. Even where children can access support, this support discontinues once a young person turns 18, regardless of whether their victimisation and exploitation continue (Alliance for Youth Justice, 2025).

1.8. Recognition and Response to Intersecting Vulnerabilities in Child Exploitation and Criminalisation

Police forces in England and Wales increasingly recognise that CCE is shaped by multiple vulnerabilities operating at individual, familial, structural and environmental levels (Cockbain et al., 2017; Macdonald et al., 2022; Moyle, 2019; Shaw and Greenhow, 2020). However, the interaction between these vulnerabilities, such as ethnicity, disability, gender, school exclusion, poverty and care experience, and how they shape risk remains under-researched, as does the extent to which police responses reflect this complexity. Existing evidence suggests that police recognition of intersecting vulnerabilities is improving, but is inconsistent and uneven, resulting in missed opportunities to identify and safeguard exploited children. Fragmented data and inconsistent definitions of CCE across forces further limit the translation of this recognition into effective safeguarding practice. The key vulnerabilities are discussed below.

1.8.1. Ethnicity

Outside London, most exploited children are White (64.8%), while Black children are significantly overrepresented both in London (60.1%) and nationally (25.1% compared to approximately 5-6% of the child population) (NPCC, 2024). Although police acknowledge racial disproportionality in frontline duties, responses often reproduce rather than challenge these biases (HMICFRS, 2021; NPCC, 2025; Wroe, 2021b). As a result, children from minority ethnic backgrounds are more likely to be treated as suspects and subjected to intrusive policing, even where clear indicators of exploitation are present (Action for Children, 2024). This reflects broader gang talk narratives that racialise Black youth as inherently criminal, displacing attention from structural drivers such as poverty, exclusion and racism (Hall et al., 2023; Koch et al., 2024; Lynes et al., 2020). These dynamics are reinforced by processes of adultification, whereby Black children are perceived as older, more culpable and less vulnerable than they are, increasing the likelihood of punitive rather than safeguarding responses (Reed et al., 2026). Such framings may shape police perceptions of agency,

culpability and vulnerability. Within county lines contexts, these assumptions may contribute to the differential recognition of vulnerability, whereby racially minoritised children are more readily viewed as offenders, rather than victims requiring protection and safeguarding (Koch et al., 2024; Warburton, 2024). Given that county lines networks are ethnically diverse, reliance on racialised profiles is both inaccurate and harmful. It contributes to the over-criminalisation of Black children while obscuring the vulnerability of White and mixed-heritage children, ultimately serving to embed systemic bias in policing and widen inequalities in protection (Koch et al., 2024; Warburton, 2024).

1.8.2. Disability

Disability has also been identified as a significant risk factor for county lines exploitation (Macdonald et al., 2022; Williams and Finlay, 2019). A key risk factor concerns disabled children, including those who are neurodivergent, have significant mental health difficulties or experience sensory impairments. Children with a range of impairments, particularly learning difficulties and mental health conditions, are overrepresented among those exploited through county lines (Williams and Finlay, 2019). Families frequently describe being dismissed by educational practitioners, health professionals and statutory services when raising concerns about their child's mental health or possible neurodevelopmental conditions. They also report facing inconsistent thresholds, long waiting lists and significant gaps in provision, often resulting in little or no intervention (Barker et al., 2025; Dando et al., 2023; Maxwell, 2023). Where children remain unsupported, parents often report that behavioural difficulties increase, particularly where children were excluded from education (Williams and Finlay, 2019; Action for Children, 2024). Thus, systemic gaps are closely linked to patterns of school exclusion and disengagement from mainstream education. School exclusion further increases vulnerability to exploitation by reducing protective oversight and placing children in higher-risk environments (Williams and Finlay, 2019). Although police forces formally recognise disability and mental health as risk factors, adjustments to policing practices remain inconsistent. As a result, some neurodivergent children are channelled into criminal justice pathways rather than safeguarded (Action for Children, 2024). This highlights a systemic failure to translate knowledge about disability into effective safeguarding practice.

1.8.3. Care Experience

Young people in contact with children's services, particularly those who are looked after, are consistently identified as highly vulnerable to county lines exploitation. The NPCC (2024) highlights their heightened risk, while research links vulnerability to factors such as missing episodes, substance misuse, domestic abuse and prior offending. County lines groups actively target children in care, recognising their emotional needs, limited familial protection and systemic gaps in care provision (Shaw and Greenhow, 2020; Turner et al., 2019). These conditions both increase susceptibility to grooming and undermine safeguarding responses (Shaw et al., 2024). For many, promises of belonging and validation are particularly compelling, accelerating exploitation processes (Barker et al., 2025; Hudek, 2018).

Although most looked-after children do not offend, those who do are significantly more likely to be criminalised than their peers (Howard League for Penal Reform, 2019; Prison Reform Trust, 2016). This is made worse when care settings rely on the police to respond to behaviour that might otherwise be managed through support and intervention (Shaw and Greenhow, 2020). Vulnerability intensifies during missing episodes, where failures in supervision and safeguarding expose children to further harm, including sexual and criminal exploitation (Turner et al., 2019; Fox et al., 2024; HMICFRS, 2022). Disconnection from stable networks further entrenches vulnerability, with care-experienced children disproportionately drawn into drug markets due to isolation (Andell and Pitts, 2018).

Despite this, responses remain inconsistent. While some police forces recognise care experience as a key vulnerability, practice is uneven and often enforcement-led. Care-experienced children continue to be prosecuted for drug offences even where coercion is evident (Action for Children, 2024), suggesting that vulnerability is acknowledged but frequently overridden by evidential or resource pressures. This reflects a broader pattern of systemic neglect, although these

children are known to multiple agencies, exploitation is often missed, and concerns raised by carers are minimised (Dando et al., 2023; Maxwell, 2023). This is further compounded by the prevalence of trauma among care-experienced children, including abuse, neglect, domestic violence, and the effects of poverty or addiction. The loss of family networks and unmet emotional needs heighten susceptibility to coercion, creating a paradox in which those most visible to the state are often the least effectively protected.

1.8.4. Gender

County lines exploitation and constructions of vulnerability are profoundly shaped by gender. Safeguarding professionals note that gendered norms influence perceptions of agency, with boys more likely to be seen as choosing involvement, while girls' exploitation, particularly sexual exploitation, is often normalised or overlooked within trap house contexts (Harding, 2020; Maxwell and Wallace, 2021). These assumptions obscure harm in different ways: boys' victimisation is minimised through narratives of agency, while girls' experiences are underestimated, especially where they do not fit stereotypical sexual exploitation frameworks (Brewster et al., 2023; Home Office, 2023; Langhoff et al., 2024; Moyle, 2019). As a result, although boys are more visibly involved, girls' participation and exploitation are likely significantly under-recognised. The relationship between gender and exploitation is therefore complex; sexual exploitation is not confined to girls, and sexual harm is experienced by both sexes. Moreover, barriers to disclosure make comprehension of these harms extremely challenging.

Within this context, county lines recruitment targets both boys and girls, though in gendered ways (Havard et al., 2021; Shaw et al., 2024). Boys are more commonly targeted for visible and higher-risk roles, such as street-level dealing, debt enforcement, and transporting drugs across areas, where exposure to violence is frequent and often normalised. Expectations of toughness and resilience mean that boys are more likely to be perceived as willing participants, which can obscure coercion and reduce the likelihood of safeguarding responses. Girls are frequently used to transport drugs across areas, including through internal concealment (plugging), and are increasingly deployed as runners, roles historically associated with boys, partly due to lower police suspicion (Brewster et al., 2023; France, 2020). They may also be targeted for coupling where relationships are used to facilitate cuckooing and take over homes (Macdonald et al., 2022; Spicer et al., 2020). What distinguishes female recruitment, however, is its frequent overlap with sexual exploitation; girls involved in county lines are often subjected to abuse by OCG members or coerced into sex work, particularly where existing vulnerabilities such as drug use are present (Havard et al., 2021; Shaw et al., 2024).

1.8.5. Poverty

The link between poverty and CCE is well established. Children in deprived contexts, marked by school exclusion, family adversity, and limited opportunities, are at heightened risk of recruitment into drug markets (Children's Commissioner, 2021; Holligan et al., 2020; Windle et al., 2020). Understanding their involvement requires balancing structural vulnerability with constrained agency (Densley et al., 2020). Where education, family support, and employment pathways are absent, some young people turn to gangs in pursuit of status, income, and belonging, though these goals are rarely realised (Barker et al., 2025; Cornish and Brennan, 2025).

While police often acknowledge the role of deprivation in sustaining county lines, particularly in areas with limited youth opportunities (Cockbain et al., 2025; Spicer, 2021), this recognition remains largely abstract. In practice, responses continue to prioritise enforcement over safeguarding. Children from disadvantaged backgrounds are disproportionately criminalised for drug offences, even where grooming and coercion are evident (Action for Children, 2024), indicating that awareness of vulnerability does not consistently shape frontline decision-making. This tension is further reflected in the spatial dynamics of county lines. Drug markets expand from saturated urban centres into deprived rural, coastal, and small-town contexts, where exploitation is embedded in local ecologies of disadvantage

(Cockbain et al., 2025). Despite the significant harms generated, responses in these areas are often weakened by limited multi-agency capacity (Macdonald et al., 2022).

Understanding intersecting vulnerabilities in county lines is complex; many young people do not fit traditional conceptions of vulnerability or victimhood (Coliandris, 2015; Moyle, 2019). They may not self-identify as victims or disclose suffering (Marshall, 2024a; McLean et al., 2018; Villacampa and Torres, 2017). Continued engagement in risky behaviours and drug and alcohol use may be read by professionals as agency, contributing to the child's adultification. When children and young people are excluded from education or employment, their involvement is often framed as a constrained choice shaped by intersecting socioeconomic pressures and family expectations (Marshall, 2022). It may function as a survival strategy (Atkinson-Sheppard, 2025; Windle et al., 2020), a way to generate income (Atkinson-Sheppard et al., 2025), or a means of gaining belonging and status (Billingham and Irwin-Rogers, 2021; Neaverson and Lake, 2023). However, it is important to recognise that grooming manipulates children into believing they have agency and control over their lives, when in reality this illusion serves only to entrench them in a cycle of exploitation and alienate them from their victimisation.

1.8.6. Contextual Safeguarding and County Lines Drug Markets

Evaluations of contextual safeguarding in drug markets indicate that trauma-informed, voluntary-sector partnerships can reduce re-recruitment and support sustained exits from county lines, addressing vulnerabilities beyond the reach of policing alone (Firmin et al., 2025; St Giles Trust, 2018). Unlike statutory safeguarding, which centres on parental abuse, neglect and risks within the family home, contextual safeguarding extends protection to the wider contexts where exploitation occurs (Wroe, 2021a). Wroe (2019) identifies four domains of contextual safeguarding that are particularly relevant to county lines. First, interventions should extend beyond individual children to include the wider contexts and peer networks in which exploitation occurs. Second, legislative tools such as the Modern Slavery Act (2015) can be used to strengthen safeguarding responses. Third, effective responses require multi-agency partnerships involving the police, schools, housing providers, and health services. Finally, success should be measured in terms of child safety and wellbeing rather than arrests.

Applied to policing, contextual safeguarding requires forces to map risks within communities and geographical spaces, identify harmful peer groups and associations, and co-produce interventions in partnership with local agencies and communities (Firmin, et al, 2025). However, resource constraints mean that many forces working alongside contextual safeguarding teams often revert to enforcement-led approaches rather than embedding contextual safeguarding into their core practice (Wroe, 2021a; Koch et al. 2024; Firmin, et al, 2025). The literature also highlights a 'cliff edge' at 18 (Holmes and Smale, 2018), where statutory protections fall away, even as vulnerabilities persist. Once legally classified as adults, 18–24-year-olds are more likely to be prosecuted rather than safeguarded (Alliance for Youth Justice, 2025). This is compounded by stricter evidential requirements under the Modern Slavery Act (2015), which, unlike for children, require proof of the 'means' of exploitation, creating significant barriers to recognising and protecting exploited young adults.

While significant advances have been made in mapping and documenting harms, analysing policing responses, and embedding contextual safeguarding, important gaps remain. In particular, there is limited empirical work that integrates the perspectives of those directly affected with an analysis of how intersecting vulnerabilities are recognised, interpreted and operationalised within policing practice. In practice, recognition of intersecting vulnerabilities is heavily constrained by resource pressures, evidential hurdles, and entrenched enforcement-oriented policing cultures, within which safeguarding responses are often marginalised (Alliance for Youth Justice, 2025). Police officers often default to familiar drug enforcement tools, even where indicators of exploitation are present (Spicer, 2021). While police forces formally recognise these risk factors and intersecting vulnerabilities, research shows that such recognition rarely translates into meaningful protection for children (Children's Commissioner, 2021; Hall et al., 2023; Spicer, 2021).

1.9. Aims and Research Questions

This study will address critical evidence gaps and support the development and spread of good policing practice. The central aim is to understand how police identify and disrupt adult exploiters, how they respond to drug-market harm involving children, and how they actively protect those being exploited. The project will assess variations in police approaches across three different policing regions, highlighting examples of effective and inclusive practice. While we acknowledge that safeguarding outcomes are shaped by wider multi-agency contexts, this study's primary focus is on the role, actions and decision-making processes of police forces. We will examine how children are treated during enforcement, how discretionary decisions (e.g. arrest, referral, inaction) are made, and how these decisions affect safety and long-term outcomes for exploited young people. Our research explores how different drug market environments influence police responses, and how children involved in these markets are criminalised, safeguarded, supported or overlooked. We address the following research questions aligned with the Youth Endowment Fund (YEF):

1. How are local, national and transnational drug markets structured, and how do they exploit children, especially those with unmet needs?
2. What policing responses are currently used, and how are they perceived in terms of effectiveness and child protection?
3. To what extent do police forces recognise and respond to intersecting vulnerabilities (race, disability, poverty, care experience) that shape children's risk of exploitation and criminalisation in drug markets?
4. What changes are needed within policing structures and practices to better safeguard children and reduce harm from exploitation in drug markets?

Chapter 2: Methodology

2.0. Introduction

This study examines how the police respond to drug markets and how these responses affect exploited children and young people. It highlights the influence of organisational structures, decision-making processes and wider social inequalities. It focuses on the contradictory positioning of young people as both victims and offenders. This tension is evident in police discretion, safeguarding decisions, and organisational interpretations of vulnerability and risk, which contribute to uneven patterns of protection and criminalisation. To understand these dynamics, the study adopted a methodology capable of examining how police services operate, how young people experience exploitation, and how drug markets are organised. It was also underpinned by consideration of the ethical challenges of working with sensitive police data and exploited young people.

To achieve this, the study adopts a mixed-methods design combining qualitative and quantitative approaches.

- Interviews with police, safeguarding professionals and national coordination staff illustrate decision-making processes.
- Biographical narrative interviews with young people reveal how these processes are experienced by those subjected to them.
- Quantitative analysis of large datasets identifies population-level patterns and disproportionalities in risk, arrest and referral, including comparisons between self-reported involvement and police-recorded outcomes.
- An experimental qualitative approach, integrating NVivo with a secure offline AI-assisted thematic analysis tool (gpt-oss:120b), enabled systematic, ethically secure engagement with a large qualitative dataset while ensuring interpretation remained researcher-led.

This integrated approach recognises that children's experiences of exploitation and criminal justice are shaped by organised crime, institutional practices and wider biographical experiences. By linking professional accounts, young people's narratives and population-level data, the methodology takes account of this nuanced and complex reality.

2.1. Research Design

The research design recognises the limitations of relying on a single data source. Police records capture institutional processes but often miss undetected criminality and exploitation. Surveys capture experiences but provide limited insight into decision-making. Professional accounts help explain organisational practices, but not always their outcomes. Lived narratives reveal the consequences of exploitation, but not necessarily the wider structural factors that shape them. By combining these approaches, the study provides a more comprehensive understanding of how exploitation is organised, identified and experienced. Rather than simply comparing findings across different datasets, the analysis brings together multiple forms of evidence to develop a richer interpretation of the issue (Plano Clark and Ivankova, 2016; Schwartz-Shea and Yanow, 2012; Wilkes et al., 2022).

2.2. Quantitative Data

Quantitative analysis was conducted on two separate datasets. The first was used to consider patterns of children's involvement in drug markets. The second explored police responses to children committing drug-supply offences across two force areas. This data allowed individual and organisational experiences recorded in interviews to be situated within broader population trends. Quantitative analysis addressed questions of prevalence, association and divergence between self-reported experiences and formal criminal justice outcomes. It also enabled examination of whether

particular groups of young people experience different police responses once involvement in drug market activity is accounted for.

The quantitative strategy was comparative and drew upon two analytically distinct but complementary datasets.

- *Dataset 1: National Survey of Children involved in drug markets*

Dataset 1 comprised data from the YEF's *Children, Violence and Vulnerability Survey*, an annual survey of children aged 13-17 in England and Wales. The 2025 survey included responses from 10,835 young people and represents one of the largest surveys of children's experiences of violence, vulnerability, victimisation, offending and exploitation conducted in England and Wales (YEF, 2025). To align the analysis with the study's focus on drug market exploitation, an analytic subsample was created to contain only those who reported indicators consistent with involvement in drug market activity. These indicators included gang involvement, selling drugs, storing drugs, or moving drugs, money or weapons between locations. Young people reporting drug use alone were excluded to avoid conflating substance consumption with participation in organised drug distribution or supply networks. This process resulted in a survey response from 1,476 young people.

- *Dataset 2: Police arrest and referral dataset*

Dataset 2 consisted of police arrest and outcome data constructed from administrative records obtained from two police forces in the North East of England and London. The dataset covered the period 2020-2025 and included 2,268 cases involving children and young people aged 12-17 who had been arrested for drug market-related offences. These offences included the supply, production, importation, exportation and distribution of Class A, B and C drugs, including heroin, crack cocaine and cocaine. Simple possession offences were excluded, as the study was specifically concerned with children involved in drug market activity rather than personal drug use. The dataset, therefore, captures children who came to police attention through arrest and does not include children who were referred for safeguarding, reported missing, identified as victims or otherwise known to the police without being arrested. Police administrative records included age, gender, ethnicity, offence type and recorded outcomes of police action. These outcomes were determined by Home Office closing codes and included disposals such as charge, caution, no further action (NFA) (Police/CPS/Insufficient Evidence), Released Under Investigation, Youth Offending Team (YOT) triage and NFA for safeguarding. While the vast majority of children were recorded with a single closing code per offence, there were a small number of crimes which had been double-coded to show that the child had been NFA'd for safeguarding and referred for YOT triage. The lack of consistency in police implementation of closing codes may, therefore, limit the accuracy and comparability of the data. It is possible, for example, that some 110 NFA Police closing codes may fail to capture any safeguarding activity that has taken place. This dataset provided an institutional perspective on how young people are processed within policing systems, and which formal outcomes follow police contact. The findings should therefore be interpreted as reflecting post-arrest decision-making rather than the full range of police safeguarding activity.

Combining self-report survey data with police administrative data was methodologically valuable because the two datasets provide insight into different aspects of children's involvement in drug markets. Self-report data capture experiences, behaviours and vulnerabilities that may never come to police attention and can illustrate the extent of involvement beyond recorded crime (Krohn et al., 2012). In contrast, the police dataset captures children who were arrested for drug market-related offences and provides insight into post-arrest decision-making and recorded vulnerabilities. Comparing these datasets enabled exploration of differences between self-reported involvement and police-recorded enforcement patterns. However, because the datasets capture different populations and measure different processes, comparisons should be interpreted cautiously. Differences observed between the datasets may reflect a range of factors, including variations in offending behaviour, enforcement exposure, offence type, recording

practices and police decision-making, and should not be interpreted as evidence of causal relationships. The comparison allows us to explore gaps between children's reported experiences and criminal justice responses. It does not assume that the two datasets provide equivalent measures of exploitation.

2.3. Statistical Analysis

Quantitative analysis followed established approaches to survey and categorical data (De Vaus, 2002). Given the predominance of nominal and ordinal variables, the analysis focused on descriptive statistics rather than predictive or causal modelling (Rindskopf, 2004). Analysis began with univariate techniques to examine frequency distributions and prevalence across key variables (Hall, 2008), including drug market involvement, ethnicity, gender, neurodivergence, special educational needs (SEN), mental health, exploitation and police contact. This provided an overview of sample characteristics and identified patterns for further exploration. Bivariate analysis using cross-tabulations then examined associations between drug market involvement, vulnerability indicators, and institutional responses such as arrest, referral and diversion (Punch, 2015).

The two datasets were analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences. Statistical significance was assessed using chi-square tests. Where expected cell counts fell below five, Fisher's Exact Test was applied to confirm statistical reliability. Statistical significance was set at $p \leq 0.05$. Where statistically significant associations were identified, further bivariate analysis was undertaken to explore these relationships in greater depth and to identify recurring patterns across datasets (Hall, R.D., 2020). Across the analysis, several statistically significant thematic patterns emerged. The aim of the quantitative component was not to predict individual behaviour or produce risk forecasting models. Instead, it sought to identify patterned disproportionalities and structural inequalities (Blaikie, 2003).

Integrating quantitative and qualitative findings was central to the study. Patterns within the statistical analysis were interpreted alongside qualitative data to develop explanatory insights into how institutional processes shape outcomes for children in drug markets. For example, patterns in arrest outcomes were analysed alongside professional accounts of discretion and safeguarding thresholds, enabling a multi-layered explanation of exploitation and police response.

2.3.1. Limitations

The quantitative analysis presented in this study is subject to a number of important limitations relating to data quality, measurement and analytical design. Self-report measures may reflect recall bias or selective disclosure, while police-recorded data is shaped by institutional recording practices and may not capture the full extent of exploitation. In particular, police data was found to be limited in documenting key indicators of vulnerability, constraining the ability to fully assess the relationship between exploitation and safeguarding responses. A further limitation concerns the relationship between the two quantitative datasets. The self-report and police datasets capture different populations and measure different aspects of involvement in drug markets. The self-report dataset identifies children who reported experiences or behaviours consistent with involvement in drug market activity, regardless of whether this came to police attention. By contrast, the police dataset includes only children who were arrested for drug supply-related offences. As a result, the police sample is likely to represent a more selective group of children who have been identified through enforcement processes. Differences observed between the datasets may therefore reflect variation in detection, arrest, offence type, frequency of involvement, policing practices or enforcement exposure, rather than differences in vulnerability, exploitation or need alone. Comparisons between the datasets should therefore be interpreted as identifying potential divergences between self-reported experiences and police-recorded enforcement patterns rather than providing directly equivalent measures of involvement.

An additional limitation is that the police dataset includes only children who were arrested for drug market-related offences. It does not capture children who came to police attention through safeguarding, victimisation, missing person

reports, intelligence gathering or other non-arrest pathways. As a result, the police data reflect post-arrest decision-making rather than the full range of policing and safeguarding responses to exploitation. Arrest data should therefore not be interpreted as a complete measure of vulnerability, exploitation or unmet safeguarding need. In addition, the analysis is descriptive and does not control for potentially confounding variables that may influence policing outcomes. It does not adjust for differences in offence type, evidential thresholds, prior contact with the criminal justice system, or patterns of enforcement exposure, all of which are likely to vary by age, gender and ethnicity and may shape decision-making processes. For example, older adolescents may be more likely to have previous arrests or more serious offending histories, which could increase the likelihood of charge or prosecution independent of any differential recognition of vulnerability. As a result, the observed patterns in policing outcomes should not be interpreted as causal.

While the analysis identifies statistically significant differences across age, gender and ethnic groups, these patterns may reflect a combination of structural factors, differential exposure to policing, and variation in recorded offending rather than differences in harm or need alone. The findings, therefore, indicate systematic associations that are consistent with, but do not definitively establish, differential recognition and response to vulnerability. These limitations are particularly relevant when interpreting age-, gender- and race-based disparities identified in the analysis. Rather than treating these constraints solely as limitations, the study addresses them by situating quantitative findings within richer qualitative data. This mixed-methods approach enables a more interpretive and holistic analysis, allowing patterns identified in the quantitative data to be explored, contextualised and critically examined.

2.4. Qualitative Interviews With Police and Safeguarding Partners

Qualitative interviews with police officers, safeguarding partners and staff from the NCLCC formed a central component of the study. Approximately 62 semi-structured interviews were conducted across police services in the North East of England, the North West of England, North Wales, and the London area. These sites were selected to capture diversity in drug market structures and policing environments, enabling analysis of how such variations shape both the range and prioritisation of responses. This included urban settings characterised by high levels of organised criminal activity, rural areas with dispersed service provision, and coastal contexts where patterns of mobility and exploitation may differ.

Interviews examined how exploitation in drug markets is identified, interpreted and responded to within policing and safeguarding systems, and how decisions are shaped by organisational cultures, operational pressures, local conditions and wider institutional contexts. The adoption of a semi-structured approach enabled flexibility while ensuring coverage of key themes, including the identification of exploitation, assessments of vulnerability and risk, and the application of safeguarding frameworks (Noaks and Wincup, 2004). Rather than simply documenting practice, the interviews explored how professional knowledge is produced, how categories such as vulnerability, victimhood and culpability are constructed, and how tensions between enforcement and safeguarding are navigated in decisions around arrest, referral, diversion and inaction. Accounts were understood as shaped by professional identity and organisational context.

Sampling was purposive and theoretically informed (Ahmad and Wilkins, 2024; Nyimbili and Nyimbili, 2024).

- Police participants were recruited across a wide range of ranks and roles. This included police constables, sergeants and detectives with frontline responsibility for identifying exploitation and making arrest or referral decisions. Inspectors, detective chief inspectors and detective superintendents with responsibilities for strategic oversight, performance management, resource allocation and multi-agency coordination were also interviewed. Including participants from across organisational levels enabled examination of how strategic priorities and national narratives translate into frontline practice. It also allowed analysis of how discretion operates differently according to role, professional identity and organisational positioning. All police participants had specialist experience in drug markets, county lines and the exploitation of children.

- Semi-structured interviews with staff from the NCLCC enabled national-level insight into how county lines activity and child exploitation are conceptualised, prioritised and coordinated across police services.
- Key safeguarding partners were consulted to examine how policing responses intersect with safeguarding systems, referral pathways and threshold decisions.

Semi-structured interviews were designed to elicit reflective accounts of professional practice rather than organisational narratives (Aadland, 2010). They explored organisational pressures, including resource constraints, workload, intelligence priorities and risk management, as well as variations in drug markets across urban, rural and coastal contexts. It is important to acknowledge that police interpretations and responses to exploitation are not always consistent, and that police knowledge of county lines is constructed and shaped by stereotypes, intelligence gaps and organisational framing (Coomber et al., 2025; Spicer, 2021). All interviews were audio-recorded with informed consent, professionally transcribed by a police-approved provider, and anonymised to remove identifying details relating to individuals, locations and operations.

2.5. Biographical Interviews With Children and Young People

A total of 21 biographical interviews were conducted with children and young people aged 14-24; fewer than half of those originally planned. Interviews were conducted across the North East of England, the North West of England and London. These areas reflect differing drug market dynamics and policing contexts. The sample was predominantly male, with 19 male and two female participants. Ethnicity data was unavailable for eight young people interviewed by practitioners who chose to remain anonymous. Of the 13 participants whose ethnicity was known, eight identified as White, one as Asian, two as Black (African) and two as White and Black (Caribbean). Six young people were either neurodivergent or had intellectual impairments. These demographic characteristics were used analytically alongside participants' accounts to explore how experience, criminalisation and access to support pathways varied across social groups.

The research team made extensive efforts to recruit children across all four sites, including contacting all YJSs, social services, including transitions teams for looked-after children with experience of CCE, key national charities supporting children and parents affected by CCE, and educational providers. However, despite these efforts, no young people from Wales participated. This limitation is acknowledged and reflects well-documented challenges relating to access, gatekeeping and ethical recruitment when working with highly marginalised and vulnerable populations (Addison and Stockdale, 2024; Macdonald, 2022). Many of the organisations approached were unable to accommodate the research. Some faced high service demands or had already committed to other studies involving exploited young people. In other cases, the children in their care were not emotionally or psychologically ready to participate following their experiences. Recruitment was further hindered by young people's ongoing trauma, as well as fears of identification by exploiters or potential repercussions from disclosure, including involvement with the youth justice system.

Of the 21 interviews, 10 were conducted by the research team. Eight were carried out by youth workers or youth justice professionals who supported the young person as a trusted adult. To address recruitment challenges, the team also facilitated access to three interview recordings conducted by safeguarding professionals from the NCLCC. While all interviews explored involvement in drug markets and police contact, those conducted by youth workers or youth justice professionals were shorter, more superficial and more structured. NCLCC interviews, though biographical in focus, preceded the interviews for this study and were conducted for intelligence-gathering and operational purposes, rather than for research. Biographical interviews with children and young people were central to understanding exploitation in drug markets (Macdonald, 2022; Wengraf, 2001). This method recognises that exploitation develops over time through structural disadvantage, social relationships, and repeated institutional encounters. It enables participants to reflect on experiences such as poverty, family disruption, housing instability, educational exclusion, care involvement and exposure to violence, and how this shaped vulnerability to exploitation by drug markets. Interviews also captured

how interventions, or their absence, affected young people's sense of safety, trust and willingness to engage with services.

Following Wengraf's (2001) narrative approach, interviews were participant-led, chronological where possible, and co-constructed, allowing young people to tell their stories on their own terms. Participants were invited to describe their experiences without assuming exploitation in advance. Interviews explored early life, schooling, peer networks, family and social service contact, and then moved to involvement in drug markets, including recruitment, roles, coercion and perceptions of agency. Particular attention was paid to encounters with policing and safeguarding. Within this, experiences of stop and search, arrest, referral, diversion, informal police contact and being labelled as offender or victim were explored. The way in which these interactions influenced access to support and long-term trajectories of criminalisation was also discussed. To minimise the risk of harm, interviews avoided direct questioning about traumatic experiences. At the same time, researchers ensured that participants' accounts were understood within the context of exploitation, recognising that agency was often constrained through grooming and manipulation. However, this approach was not appropriate for all participants, as a significant proportion did not identify or disclose their involvement in drug markets.

Trauma-informed practices guided all interviews (Karmarkar and Duggal, 2024), with attention to pacing, language, emotional safety and potential distress. Participants could pause, skip questions or withdraw without consequence. Safeguarding protocols addressed disclosures of harm and included referral pathways developed with partner organisations, balancing ethical responsibility with participant control (Alessi and Kahn, 2022). Interviews were audio-recorded with consent, professionally transcribed, anonymised and securely stored. Analysis avoided deficit-based framings, instead capturing the complexity of participants' experiences, including resilience, resistance and decision-making within constrained social environments.

2.6. Thematic Analysis: NVivo and Offline AI-Assisted Approach

Qualitative data from all interviews were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's approach (Braun and Clarke, 2021). Reflexive thematic analysis enabled systematic engagement with a large and diverse qualitative dataset. At the same time, it allowed analytic flexibility to attend to variation across participant groups, organisational contexts, and geographical settings (Adu, 2026). NVivo 20 was used as the primary data management and coding platform. All interview transcripts were checked for accuracy, anonymised and imported into NVivo. They were organised by participant groups (police and safeguarding staff and young people), geographical sites and interview types. This organisation supported structured comparison across groups and contexts. It also enabled transparent tracking of coding decisions over time (Braun and Clarke, 2021). Analysis began with repeated familiarisation through close reading of transcripts. It combined inductive codes grounded in participants' accounts with theoretically informed codes linked to the study's analytic focus (Richards, 2021), including exploitation, vulnerability, discretion, safeguarding, criminalisation and police responses. Codes were refined and reorganised as analysis progressed, with constant movement between coded extracts, memos and developing themes (Braun and Clarke, 2021).

To check the analysis produced by NVivo, AI-assisted thematic analysis was conducted in parallel. This took place within a fully offline, high-security analytic environment. The offline workstation ran an Ubuntu operating system. Ollama provided the local model runtime, and OpenWebUI enabled controlled local user access. The AI model used (gpt-oss:120b) was deployed entirely locally. This ensured that no qualitative data was transmitted externally and that all processing occurred within the secure machine. This configuration maintained full data security. This strict configuration was essential to protect the highly sensitive interview data, which included personal accounts of exploitation and detailed interactions with policing and safeguarding services. AI was used conservatively as an analytic assistant rather than as an autonomous analytic agent. Its role was to support tasks such as identifying recurring patterns across text, highlighting candidate thematic clusters, supporting cross-case comparison, and retrieving

relevant segments linked to analytic concepts. AI outputs were treated as provisional rather than findings in their own right. They were always reviewed against the original transcripts and NVivo coding. AI did not generate final themes independently. Instead, it was used to strengthen systematic engagement with the data, while keeping interpretation firmly grounded in researcher judgement and theoretical framing.

Separate coding and themes were developed for professional interviews and biographical interviews. For police officers, safeguarding partners and national coordination staff, analysis focused on how exploitation was conceptualised, how vulnerability and risk were assessed and how discretionary decisions were justified. This included attention to variation by role, rank, organisational position and geographical context. For biographical interviews with children and young people, analysis supported identification of pathway patterns, turning points and recurring experiences across narratives. These included accounts of coercion, control, mobility and police contact. Attention was paid to how young people narrated agency and constraint. Analysis also examined how experiences were reinterpreted over time, especially in relation to policing and safeguarding encounters. Throughout the analytic process, AI-generated outputs were cross-checked against NVivo coding and close reading of transcripts. Where AI-identified patterns aligned with manual coding, this increased confidence in the coherence of emerging themes.

Researchers remained aware of the risk that AI-assisted approaches may privilege frequently occurring language. This could obscure analytically significant but less common experiences. The risk was reduced by ensuring that thematic decisions were anchored in the research team's sustained engagement with the data and guided by the study's theoretical framework. The use of N-Vivo supported transparency by documenting coding structures, analytic memos and the evolution of themes over time. The offline AI environment supported ethics and security by ensuring that sensitive qualitative data was not exposed to cloud-based platforms or external servers. Access to the analytic environment was restricted to named researchers. All AI-assisted outputs were reviewed to prevent inadvertent reproduction of identifying information or operationally sensitive details. Compared with the NVivo analysis, the AI-assisted thematic analysis revealed broadly similar themes, gaps and key concerns. The AI-supported approach enabled more rapid initial coding and pattern identification; however, it did not replace the need for detailed researcher-led interpretation. Rather than being preferable, it functioned as a complementary tool, supporting efficiency while maintaining the importance of reflexive analysis.

2.7. Ethical Approval

Ethical approval was central to the design and delivery of this research. Approval was granted by Durham University following review of the research aims, recruitment strategy, safeguarding arrangements, and data handling procedures. This covered qualitative interviews with professionals and young people, as well as the analysis of survey and administrative datasets. Particular attention was given to the involvement of young people, the potential for distress when discussing exploitation and criminalisation, and the handling of sensitive criminal justice data. In addition, governance approvals were secured from four police services in the North East and North West of England, London and Wales. These governed access to arrest and referral records and set conditions for data sharing, anonymisation, storage and use. Each service operated distinct governance and data protection processes, requiring detailed negotiation and documentation. Differences in data structure, availability and recording practices also shaped the analytic approach, necessitating flexibility while maintaining comparability across datasets.

Safeguarding was integral to the research design, particularly for biographical interviews. Consent procedures ensured participants understood the purpose of the research, what participation involved, how data would be used, and their right to withdraw. Information was provided in accessible language, and understanding was actively checked. Trauma-informed practice guided all interviews, with attention to pacing, language and emotional safety. Participants could pause, skip questions or withdraw at any stage. Protocols were in place to respond to disclosures of harm, including referral pathways developed with safeguarding partners. Data governance procedures ensured confidentiality and

security throughout. Qualitative transcripts were anonymised, and quantitative datasets were de-identified before leaving police systems, with access restricted to trained, named researchers. AI-assisted qualitative analysis was conducted within a fully offline environment, preventing any data transfer to external servers. All outputs were reviewed to ensure anonymity and that interpretations remained grounded in the data.

Ethical considerations were revisited throughout the project. This included reflecting on the reporting of sensitive material, the risks associated with network representations, and the need to balance transparency with participant protection. Ongoing ethical reflexivity supported responsible reporting and minimised the risk of harm, misrepresentation or stigmatisation (Guillemin and Gillam, 2004).

Chapter 3: Child-Exploitation and Drug Markets

3.0. Introduction

This chapter examines how multiple vulnerabilities shape children's involvement in illicit drug markets. It also explores how these vulnerabilities are recognised and acted upon within policing practice. It treats factors such as gender, age, race, neurodivergence, mental health issues, care experience, poverty and exposure to violence as conditions that shape experiences of exploitation. The chapter examines not only patterns of involvement and enforcement, but also the extent to which vulnerability becomes institutionally visible through recorded arrest data. The analysis draws on two quantitative datasets alongside qualitative biographical interviews with young people. The first dataset comprises 1,476 children who self-reported involvement in drug market activity in a national survey (YEF, 2025). The second includes 2,268 police-recorded arrests across two police services in the North East of England and London over a five-year period. This analysis is examined in combination with 21 biographical interviews with young people who described experiences of recruitment, coercion, repeated police contact and uneven access to safeguarding support. Across the chapter, thematic analysis explores disparities in visibility, recognition and policing practices.

By drawing on multiple data sources that capture young people's experiences of drug markets, this approach enables a systematic assessment of how vulnerability is translated into police decision-making. It also shows how these processes shape children's exposure to criminalisation or safeguarding. The findings demonstrate that multiple vulnerabilities are widespread among children involved in drug markets, but safeguarding responses often fail to reflect this. While the wider study examines the organisation of drug markets and the full range of policing responses across local, national and transnational contexts, this chapter focuses specifically on how vulnerabilities shape children's visibility within policing and safeguarding outcomes. In so doing, it contributes to understanding the extent to which police forces recognise and respond to structural disadvantage, and how exploitative drug markets operate through children with unmet needs. The analysis, therefore, provides an empirical foundation for subsequent chapters that examine organisational decision-making, policing practice and the structural changes required to strengthen child protection responses.

3.1. Gender Profile of Children Encountering Drug Markets

Recent literature has increasingly recognised the role that gender plays in shaping the positions young people occupy within drug markets (Havard et al., 2021; Moyle, 2019). The self-reported quantitative analysis examined whether any gender was disproportionately represented among children exploited in drug markets. National youth offending statistics provide some context, although they do not directly measure drug market exploitation. Girls account for approximately 15% of the youth justice caseload in England and Wales (HM Inspectorate of Probation, 2024). Within the self-reported sample, 61% of exploited children were male ($n = 857$), while 39% were female ($n = 560$; see Figure 6). Although the youth offending population does not provide a direct benchmark for drug market exploitation, the findings suggest that girls are more prominently represented within this exploited sample than might be expected from youth offending statistics alone.

Table 2: Gender

Characteristics	Per cent	N
Gender (Self-Reported Data)	100%	162
Male	60.5	857
Female	39.5	560
Gender (Arrest Data)	100%	2,211
Male	94.3	2,086
Female	5.7	125

Notes: n = participant numbers

Figure 6: Gender self-reported and arrest data.

These findings highlight the need to examine how gender shapes both recruitment into drug-market roles and responses from policing and safeguarding systems. They suggest that girls' exploitation may be under-recognised or differently interpreted due to assumptions about gender, risk and offending. The finding that nearly two in five children involved in drug markets are female contrasts with their representation in official criminal justice data. This suggests that girls may be less likely to come to the attention of the police. It also raises questions about how vulnerability is recognised and responded to. Girls may occupy less visible roles within drug markets, such as storing drugs or money, recruiting others or being exploited through coercive relationships. As a result, their exploitation may be less likely to trigger enforcement or safeguarding responses. This suggests that girls may be less visible within formal enforcement and safeguarding processes, meaning their exploitation is less likely to be identified. Overall, the proportion of female participants challenges the assumption that drug market exploitation is predominantly male, even when official systems often record it as such.

3.1.1. Gender Profile of Young People Recorded as Suspects in Police Arrest Data

To assess whether policing responses reflect the increasing recruitment of girls into drug markets, arrest data was analysed by gender (see Figure 6). Of 2,211 arrests, 94% involved males ($n = 2,086$) and 6% females ($n = 125$), contrasting sharply with the self-reported data. No significant differences were found between the North East and London ($p = 0.079$), suggesting consistency across both forces. This disparity highlights important differences between self-reported involvement in drug markets and police-recorded arrest patterns. Although girls represent a substantial proportion of those reporting exploitation and involvement in drug markets, they are markedly underrepresented in arrest data. The reasons for this cannot be determined from the available data and may reflect differences in drug-market roles, offending patterns, exposure to enforcement or how involvement comes to police attention. If arrest is a key route into safeguarding, groups that are less likely to be arrested may also be less likely to access support. However, because this analysis is limited to children identified through arrest, it cannot account for girls recognised through alternative pathways. This is an important limitation and cautions against using arrest data as a complete indicator of safeguarding need.

3.1.2. Qualitative Biographical Analysis of Male and Female Children Involved in Drug Markets

In the interviews with children and young people, 19 out of 21 participants identified as male. Boys in the sample were exploited in illicit drug markets in a range of roles, including runners, collectors, protectors and distributors. One young woman, aged 23, described being coerced into drug sales through a relationship with a senior figure in the network. After he received a prison sentence, he continued to control her, forcing her to run the line and return all profits to him. She was later arrested and, at interview, was serving a 12-year custodial sentence resulting from her exploitation. She described being respected within the network and recruiting young men to operate the line. Although police asked whether she had been coerced, she denied this due to fear of repercussions. Despite distrusting the police, she felt they did not ask enough questions about her situation and said she would have disclosed her exploitation if they had done

so. She described herself as ‘terrified’ and ‘just surviving’. Although she appeared to hold a position of authority, she was being manipulated, exposed to risk and threatened with violence. Her vulnerability remained largely hidden.

Some of the young males in the sample also discussed girls’ exploitation in illicit drug markets. Two participants reported asking their girlfriends to store cash and drugs to reduce the risk of police detection or when they were unable to spend the money themselves. Others suggested that the status and enrichment they generated in drug markets made them more attractive to girls and this motivated their involvement. However, there were also indications that girls were being exploited across regions in a range of additional roles.

‘It sounds horrible, but we used to get girls from different cities. The cities used to trade them... What happened was kids who were missing from Bradford would go up to Newcastle for a week. Yeah, they’d work, run the stuff quickly, make sure the boys got their money. Police wouldn’t know’ (Young Person (YP) 2).

In contrast, one participant described working on a line run by a woman whose partner had previously controlled it. Her position appeared to shield her from scrutiny, and the police were reportedly unaware of her involvement, reinforcing the perception that women are less likely to be identified as exploiters. However, the young person suggested that women, when acting as exploiters, can be particularly adept at recruiting and exploiting young boys.

‘Girlfriends. They know everything. They can be the ones who run everything... It’s more men who’ll try and exploit young girls. It’s more women who exploit the young boys’ (YP1).

While these comments are anecdotal and based on a single account, they suggest that girls and young women may occupy complex and fluid positions within illicit drug markets, not solely as victims in subordinate roles, but also in positions of apparent operational control. This account disrupts binary assumptions that position exploitation as predominantly male-perpetrated and female-experienced. The suggestion that women attract less police scrutiny highlights how gendered stereotypes can obscure their involvement in exploitation, potentially enabling them to exercise control while remaining under the radar. At the same time, the perception that women may exploit boys complicates dominant safeguarding narratives that position girls as primary victims. While this insight should be interpreted with caution, it indicates that gender may operate not merely as a vulnerability marker but as a structuring feature of market organisation, recruitment practices and risk distribution. Safeguarding approaches grounded in simplified gender assumptions may reduce girls to victim status, while overlooking the coercion of girls into positions of authority and boys’ experiences of exploitation by female actors. This illustrates the need for more nuanced, gender-attuned interventions that recognise the differentiated ways in which exploitation is organised, concealed and experienced within illicit drug markets.

3.1.3. Gender Differences in Police Outcomes for Young People Recorded as Suspects

As discussed, girls constitute a substantial minority of children self-reporting involvement in drug markets, comprising 39% of the sample (see Figure 6). This finding challenges assumptions that drug market exploitation is predominantly experienced by boys. This may indicate that OCGs and USGs are increasingly recruiting girls into roles that have traditionally been male-dominated. These roles include running drugs or storing drugs and money. The literature suggests that this may be driven, in part, by gendered assumptions within policing, where girls are perceived as less likely to be exploited in drug markets or gang activity (Havard et al., 2021; Moyle, 2019). In this context, Figure 7 examines whether girls are more or less likely than boys to receive safeguarding-oriented outcomes following arrest. Specifically, it explores the relationship between the gender of the suspect and police outcomes after arrest, allowing an assessment of whether gender shapes access to safeguarding or diversion. The quantitative analysis of arrest data demonstrates that male and female children experience systematically different policing responses. Among female

suspects (n = 120), the most common outcome is NFA on evidential or procedural grounds, which accounts for 56% of cases. A further 17% of female cases result in safeguarding, welfare, diversion or YOT decisions, while 27% lead to a charge or prosecution. In contrast, male suspects are far more likely to experience enforcement-led outcomes. Among male suspects, 62% are charged or prosecuted, while 28% receive NFA and only 10% are diverted into safeguarding or welfare pathways (p < .001; see Figure 1).

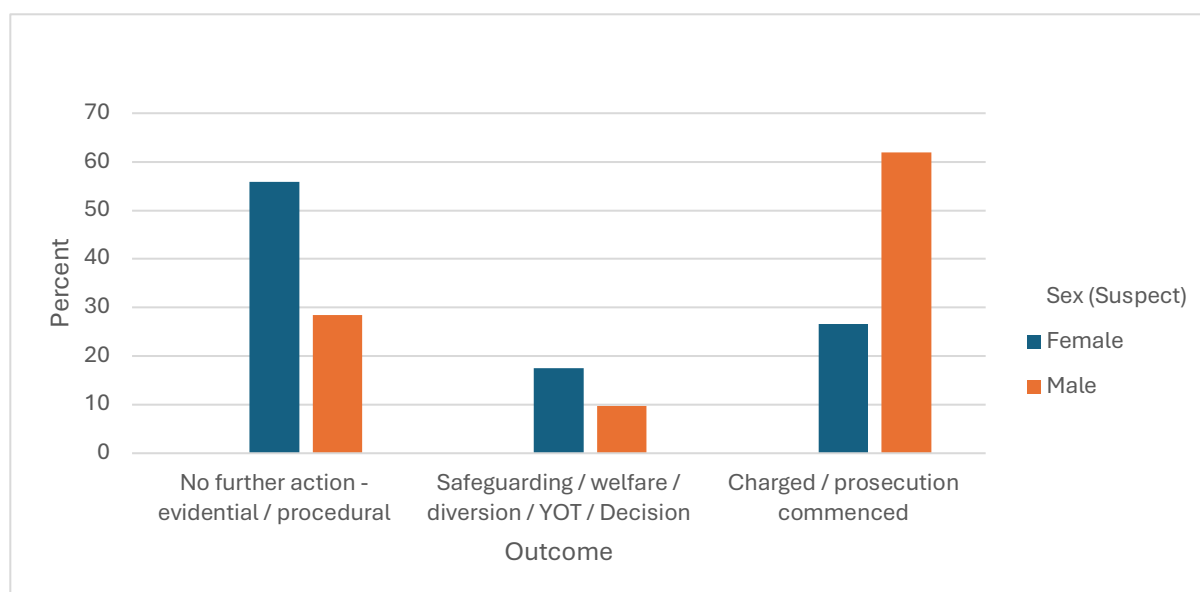


Figure 7: Police outcomes by gender of suspect in drug market-related arrests.

These findings point to structural patterns within policing systems where gendered assumptions shape how children are perceived and responded to by the police. Girls are more likely than boys to receive safeguarding outcomes, reflecting a greater tendency for their involvement to be framed in terms of vulnerability or coercion. However, among children who had been arrested for drug market-related offences, safeguarding remained the least common outcome for both groups, with NFA and charge or prosecution dominating post-arrest responses overall. This indicates that, while gender influences recognition, safeguarding itself is marginal within current policing practice. By contrast, boys are more readily framed as criminals, leading to higher rates of charging and prosecution. While these patterns may in part reflect differences in offence type, evidential thresholds or prior contact with the criminal justice system, the persistent differences in post-arrest outcomes between boys and girls, particularly alongside earlier evidence of comparable exposure to coercion and exploitation, warrant further examination of how gender influences policing responses.

3.1.4. A Qualitative Biographical Analysis of Gender and Safeguarding Experiences

When examining the relationship between safeguarding, charge and prosecution by gender, all but one of the boys in the qualitative sample had been charged and prosecuted. Although these charges were not exclusively drug-related, they support the quantitative finding that young males are more likely to be attributed agency, categorised as offenders and criminalised. Among the two female participants in the qualitative biographical stage of the study, only one had been formally charged and prosecuted. Despite her vulnerability and experiences of coercive control, her senior role as a line holder appeared to frame her primarily as a perpetrator, with limited consideration given to safeguarding.

‘So my partner he was a dealer. And I now recognise that he just had complete control over me. Yeah, he had total power over me, and, well, leaving him was never really an option, though, because of a situation I was in. So I ran the line’ (YP3).

She felt that the police focused solely on prosecution, provided limited information about what would happen and only engaged with her during investigative interviews. Living in fear and actively seeking help, she believed she would have disclosed her exploitation if officers had taken more time and adopted a more supportive, safeguarding-oriented approach. Furthermore, Improved engagement might have secured important intelligence gains.

‘I was actually asked by police if I'd been forced to run drugs, but I said no. I just didn't trust the police to open up. I don't think they could protect me. ... Like looking back, if the police had actually given me a bit more time and space to open up, I think I would have, because I actually did want [to]’ (YP3)

This example highlights the need for investigative and safeguarding officers to develop a more nuanced understanding of the layered disadvantages and intersectional vulnerabilities experienced by girls involved in illicit drug markets. These findings indicate that meaningful change within policing structures requires safeguarding to be embedded as a routine and universal component of arrest and outcome decision-making. Rather than operating as an exceptional response applied selectively, safeguarding should be integrated into all encounters involving potentially exploited children and young people. This also requires moving beyond gendered assumptions about vulnerability and recognising that exploitation may present differently across groups. It also requires consistent assessment of exploitation risk for all children and young people and the activation of safeguarding pathways independently of offence type or perceived culpability. Without such reform, policing responses will continue to operate unevenly. They will protect a small minority while subjecting many children and young people, particularly boys, to punitive or non-protective outcomes, thereby reproducing rather than reducing harm in drug markets.

3.2. Age Profile of Children Involved in Drug Markets

Children and young people between 12 and 24 years are widely understood to be particularly susceptible to grooming, coercion and exploitation. Recent research has shown that USGs and OCGs are targeting children at increasingly younger ages (Children’s Commissioner, 2021; Home Office, 2023; Stone, 2018). Within the self-reported survey data, the youngest child identified as encountering drug markets was aged 13. The data analysis shows that involvement in drug markets is concentrated in early to mid-adolescence. The largest single age group is 15-year-olds (23%, n = 334), followed by 13-year-olds (21%, n = 297). Children aged 14 and 16 each account for 19% of the sample (n = 271), while 17-year-olds represent 18% (n = 252). Notably, 63% of children exploited in drug markets are aged 15 or under and more than one-fifth are aged just 13 (see Figure 8).

Table 3: Age

Characteristics	Per cent	N
Age (Self-Reported Data)	100%	1,425
13 years	20.8	297
14 years	19.0	271
15 years	23.4	334
16 years	19.0	271
17 years	17.7	252
Age (Arrest Data)	100%	2,268
12 to 13 years	2.8	63
14 to 15 years	20.6	468
16 years	29.7	674
17 to 18 years	46.9	1,063

Notes: n = participant numbers

Figure 8: Age self-reported and arrest data.

The presence of substantial numbers of 13- and 14-year-olds is significant given that the age of criminal responsibility in England and Wales is 10 years. It indicates that exploitation occurs when children are legally liable to prosecution yet

remain developmentally immature and highly vulnerable to grooming. The relatively even age distribution challenges assumptions that drug-market exploitation is confined to older adolescents and is consistent with wider research suggesting that younger children are consistently targeted for recruitment into drug markets (Children's Commissioner, 2021; Home Office, 2023; Stone, 2018). From this perspective, early involvement (ages 10-15) reflects strategic recruitment by perpetrators, rather than informed decision-making among children. Overall, these findings highlight the importance of developmentally informed policing and safeguarding responses. Given the high levels of involvement reported among younger adolescents, recognising age vulnerability and providing early support may help prevent both criminalisation and longer-term harm.

3.2.1. Age Profile of Young People Recorded as Suspects in Police Arrest Data

This analysis is further explored through police-recorded arrest data by age. As shown in Figure 8, while over 60% of children exploited in drug markets were aged 15 or under in the self-report dataset, only 23% of police-recorded arrests involved children aged 15 or under (20% aged 14-15 and 3% aged 12-13). This indicates a clear underrepresentation of younger adolescents in arrest data. As the dataset captures only children identified through arrest, it cannot reflect the full range of policing or safeguarding responses to younger children experiencing exploitation. The findings suggest a divergence between the ages of children reporting exploitation and those appearing in arrest data. Older adolescents are more likely to be arrested, while younger children are less visible within arrest-based systems. This has important implications for child protection. Opportunities for early identification may be missed when relying on arrest data alone, particularly for younger children who may be identified through alternative safeguarding pathways.

3.2.2. Qualitative Biographical Analysis of Age and Drug Market Involvement

In the interviews with children and young people, participants were aged 14-24 years. Their accounts indicate that both their drug use and criminal exploitation began at around 12 years of age, often alongside other young people in their neighbourhoods. Hence, several participants described childhoods in which violence was ever-present, either through domestic violence at home or youth violence within their communities. As illustrated in the narratives below, such victimisation, particularly violence from other young people in their communities, had a profound impact, motivating them to carry weapons and become involved in gangs.

'This kid just robbed me. Like I'm a little kid at 10 years old. I didn't really understand, but that was really traumatic... He punched me in the face, took my bike and then continued to run for me for no reason... There were three of them, and they were all bigger, like 15 or 16. After that, I told myself, I can't be weak. I can't let this happen again... Then I go to high school, and there's drug dealers [and] gang members, so I'd carry a knife' (YP9).

Previous research has documented the traumatic impact of robberies and assaults against young children (Coomber, 2015). Such experiences can be particularly traumatic during early adolescence and may result in lasting harm, as younger children are often less equipped to understand and cope with violence. For another young person, exposure to violence, threats and organised crime while being exploited in drug markets at the age of 14 had a desensitising and adultifying effect.

'When I moved back home, I had no fear, felt I was tough. These lot [peers] ain't seen what I've seen. So like I'm going to do what I want. I mean, people could have punched my face all over' (YP8).

While the exposure of young children to violence and trauma is known to have long-lasting and serious implications, exploiters continue to strategically target younger boys for involvement in illicit drug markets. They are often used in street-level distribution and the transportation of drugs specifically because they are less likely to attract the attention

of authorities (Andell and Pitts, 2018; Densley et al., 2020). This pattern was acknowledged by the female participant who acted as a line holder and was responsible for recruiting a young workforce. She admitted that she knew the boys she recruited were younger than they claimed to be and selected them because of their age. However, developmental immaturity may limit young people's perception of risk and their understanding of the potential consequences of involvement, including exposure to harm and the risk of prosecution, as the following narrative illustrates.

'I didn't get scared or anything. It depends on what it was. But then you do it anyway, and then once it's done, you're alright for the next time, and you just don't think about it' (YP21).

Although participants did not describe themselves as traumatised, their accounts reflected the normalisation of violence, emotional numbing and the minimisation of risk. These responses may themselves indicate harm. Younger adolescents may also be less able to recognise and articulate the impact of traumatic experiences while they are occurring. Their exposure to violence, coercion and manipulation represents forms of hidden harm commonly experienced by children and young people involved in and exiting county lines networks (Maxwell and Wallace, 2021). These experiences must be understood within a developmental context. The absence of expressed fear does not mean that harm is absent. Instead, it may reflect coping strategies developed in environments characterised by threat and instability. When combined with existing vulnerabilities, such as substance use and social marginalisation, these experiences may have cumulative psychological and emotional consequences. In many cases, the impact may only become visible over time, particularly at key transition points such as arrest, exit from exploitation or the transition into adulthood.

3.2.3. Age Differences in Police Outcomes and Criminalisation Trajectories

Comparing age with police arrest outcomes reveals a clear, statistically significant pattern ($p < .001$; Figure 2). Policing responses vary systematically by age. Among 12-13-year-olds, 51% receive NFA, 20% are diverted to safeguarding, welfare or YJSs and 29% are charged or prosecuted. By ages 14-15, charges rise to 51%, safeguarding falls to 16% and NFA drops to 33%. At age 16, 58% are charged and only 10% receive safeguarding or diversion; by age 17-18, 66% face charges and just 7% receive protective responses. These findings indicate that charge and prosecution outcomes become increasingly common among older age groups, while safeguarding and diversionary outcomes become less common.

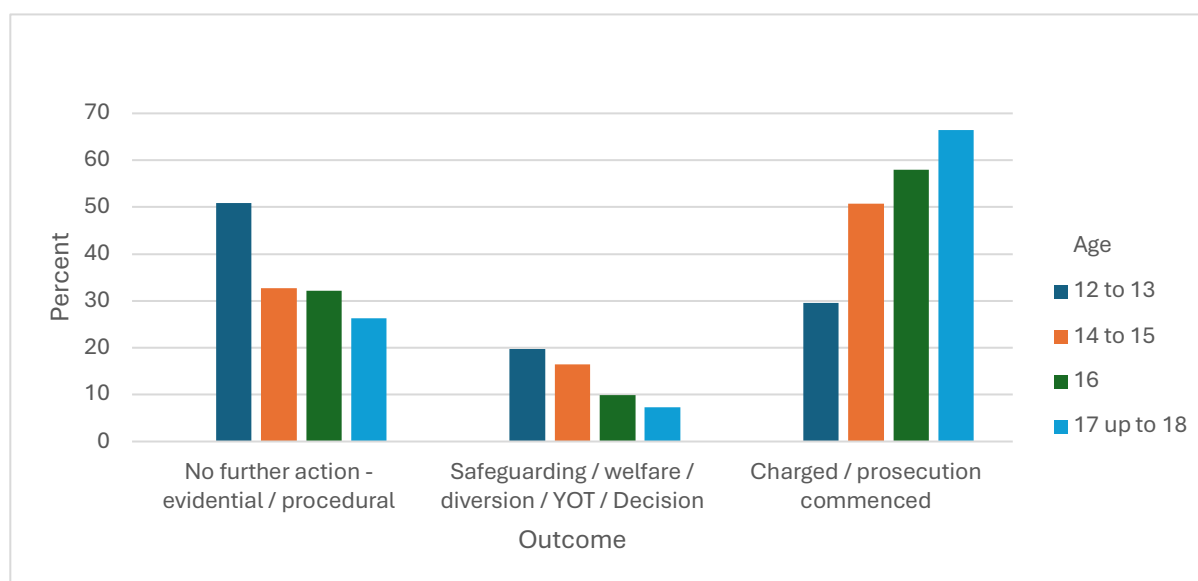


Figure 9: Police outcomes by age in drug market-related arrests.

3.2.4. Age and the Biographical Impact of Criminalisation

In this study, participants aged 16 and over described how criminalisation undermined their ability to exit illicit drug markets and establish a life free from exploitation. This aligns with the quantitative analysis, which shows that younger adolescents are more likely to receive NFA or diversionary outcomes, while older age groups are increasingly subject to enforcement-led responses. Yet after the age of 15, they were more likely to be formally charged. Reflecting the quantitative findings, several reported being diverted for minor offences at the onset of their offending, typically receiving NFA or limited YJS involvement. Having missed significant periods of mainstream education, many also described the difficulties of returning to education post-16.

‘I want to become a youth worker, then possibly a social worker. I’ve already got my level four, so the level before a degree in health and social care that I want to do, but I don’t think I’ll be allowed. Since I got out of prison, they knocked me back for good because I’m on licence. With my criminal record as it is, it doesn’t look good. It’s frustrating, but something will work out’ (YP1).

‘Because of my history, I wasn’t allowed to get into college. They did their risk assessment and rejected me. There’s a lot of hurdles... but eventually you can get there’ (YP11).

One 16-year-old, exploited to commit a serious offence while under the influence of drugs and alcohol supplied by his exploiter, was prosecuted as an adult due to court delays. His support worker described the mitigating circumstances surrounding the offence and expressed frustration that these were overlooked, resulting in a lengthy prison sentence.

‘[Name of young person] was under the influence. He’d been getting plied with alcoholic substances and drugs. He didn’t recollect anything that had happened. He was still vulnerable... Since that day at court, [name of young person] has always made the right decisions, liaising with his probation workers, trying to move forward’ (Support Worker of YP21).

This account illustrates the temporal disjuncture between vulnerability at the point of offence and legal categorisation at the point of prosecution. While exploitation and intoxication shaped the context in which the offence occurred, procedural delay effectively reclassified him from child to adult, narrowing the scope for mitigation and welfare-oriented responses. The case highlights how developmental vulnerability does not abruptly cease at the age of 18, yet criminal justice processes often treat adulthood as a fixed threshold beyond which contextual factors carry reduced weight. In doing so, the system risks obscuring the coercive and exploitative dynamics that preceded the offence. Effective safeguarding requires policing and justice systems to recognise that vulnerability does not disappear as a child ages. Instead, vulnerability can accumulate over time and be shaped by a young person’s wider circumstances. Protective responses must remain available to older adolescents and young adults whose offending is entwined with exploitation, substance use and prior trauma. Without such continuity, delays in process may inadvertently intensify harm, transforming children who were exploited into adults who are punished, with limited recognition of the structural and relational conditions that shaped their exploitation.

3.3. Racial Distribution of Children Encountering Drug Markets

Race is often cited as a factor shaping young people’s involvement in drug markets. Research indicates that Black children are more likely to be criminalised and subjected to enforcement, rather than recognised as victims, particularly in relation to county lines and serious violence (Ford, 2018; Koch et al., 2024). Self-report survey data show (see Table 4) that most children involved in drug markets were White (75%, n = 1,038), followed by Asian or Asian British (12%, n = 167), mixed or multiple ethnic groups (7%, n = 101) and Black, Black British, Caribbean or African (6%, n = 86), closely reflecting national demographics (Office for National Statistics (ONS), 2022). This contrasts with assumptions in policy and policing literature suggesting racialised patterns of exploitation (Koch et al., 2024; Lammy, 2017; Shiner et al., 2018).

The dataset does not indicate disproportionate involvement in drug markets across ethnic groups when compared with population demographics (Table 5). This suggests that racial disproportionality may emerge later in the criminal justice process, for example, through stop and search, arrest or prosecution, rather than at the point of initial exploitation.

Table 4: Race

Characteristics	Per cent	N
Race (Self-Reported Data)	100%	1,392
Asian or Asian British	12.0	167
Black, Black British, Caribbean or African	6.2	86
Mixed or Multiple Ethnic Groups	7.3	101
English, Welsh, Scottish, Northern Irish or British	74.6	1,038
Race (Arrest Data)	100%	2,139
English, Welsh, Scottish, Northern Irish or British	50.1	23.4
Asian or Asian British	39.1	18.3
Black, Black British, Caribbean or African	94.5	44.2
Mixed or Multiple Ethnic Groups	11.6	5.4
White Other	18.6	8.7

Notes: n = participant numbers

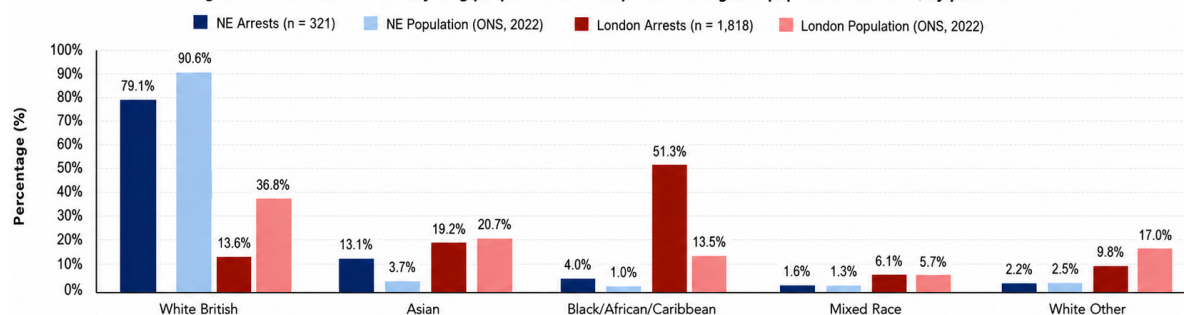
Figure 10: Race and ethnicity self-reported and arrest data.

3.3.1. Racial Differences in Police Outcomes for Young People Recorded as Suspects

To explore whether ethnic patterns in police-recorded arrests differ from self-reported involvement in drug markets, arrests among young people were analysed geographically. As Figure 11 shows, there is a statistically significant association ($p < .001$), confirming that arrest profiles vary by location. In the North East police service ($n = 321$), arrests are overwhelmingly concentrated among White British young people (79%). Although the North East has the highest proportion of White British residents of any English region (approximately 90.6%; ONS, 2022), the arrest profile is nonetheless more ethnically diverse than the wider population. Asian young people account for 13% of arrests compared with approximately 3.7% of the regional population, while Black/African/Caribbean young people account for 4% of arrests compared with around 1% of the population (ONS, 2022), indicating disproportionate representation relative to population share. By contrast, London arrests ($n = 1,818$) show a markedly different profile: Black/African/Caribbean young people account for over half of all arrests (51%), substantially exceeding their share of the London population (13.5%; ONS, 2022). White British young people account for 14% of arrests and Asian young people 19%, with Mixed Race and White Other groups also more prominent in arrest data than in the North East.

Ethnicity	North East Police Service		London Police Service		England population % (ONS, 2022)
	Arrests % (n = 321)	Population % (ONS, 2022)	Arrests % (n = 1,818)	Population % (ONS, 2022)	
White British	79.1	90.6	13.6	36.8	81.1
Asian	13.1	3.7	19.2	20.7	9.3
Black/African/Caribbean	4.0	1.0	51.3	13.5	4.0
Mixed Race	1.6	1.3	6.1	5.7	2.9
White Other	2.2	2.5	9.8	17.0	2.7

Figure 3. Ethnic distribution of young people arrested compared with regional population estimates, by police service



Note: Population estimates based on ONS Census 2021 regional ethnicity data (ONS, 2022). Percentages may not sum to 100 due to rounding.

Figure 11: Ethnic background of young people arrested by police services (North East and London).

By contrast, the self-report data show that children exploited in drug markets broadly reflect national population profiles, with no evidence that Black children are disproportionately involved. This contrast suggests that racial disparities may emerge through criminal justice processes, shaping who is seen, stopped, arrested and processed, rather than who is most likely to experience exploitation (Lammy, 2017; Shiner et al., 2018). Overall, the analysis indicates that while drug market exploitation cuts across racial groups, policing responses are not race-neutral. The divergence between police-recorded arrests and population statistics is an important finding. However, as noted earlier, it should be interpreted with caution because arrest data do not capture all children involved in or affected by drug market exploitation.

3.3.2. Qualitative Biographical Analysis of Race and Drug Market Involvement

In interviews with children and young people, five respondents identified as belonging to minority ethnic backgrounds. Of these, one identified as Asian, two as Black (African) and two as White and Black (Caribbean). The participant who identified as Asian reported generally positive and professional treatment by the police. In contrast, those identifying as Black (African) or White and Black (Caribbean) were more critical, describing routine stop and search, police use of force and feelings of injustice following police encounters. Two of these participants were boys who reported being criminally exploited in illicit markets from the age of 12. They stated that their exploitation was not detected until they were older. Notably, when invited to reflect on their experiences, the two Black British participants struggled to recall a positive encounter with the police. One participant described being stopped and searched in relation to a reported robbery while he was in a shop with his girlfriend. Although the police had provided grounds for the search, the young person interpreted the encounter through the lens of his previous experiences of being stopped, which he associated with his racial identity.

‘I remember there had been a robbery and I was a black guy so obviously I got stopped and searched. But me, I had my knife on me because there’s people who, like, also do, so I have to. I don’t know who I’m going to meet... Then, I get arrested for an offensive weapon’ (YP9).

These findings must also be understood within the longer history of policing in London, particularly the disproportionate and often contested policing of Black communities since the mid-twentieth century. This history continues to influence trust in the police and perceptions of legitimacy. As a result, Black individuals may be less likely to view police

interventions positively, even when practitioners consider them appropriate or effective. The three participants who identified as Black (African) or White and Black (Caribbean) all reported experiences of stop and search. Although stop and search was identified as a significant issue in London, differences in ethnic population patterns across the UK meant that one Black male participant suggested it was preferable to operate in London rather than expand a drug line to other parts of the country. Operating within a predominantly Black gang in London, he reported finding it easier to avoid police detection than individuals operating outside the capital.

‘It’s better to just do your line in London and not go country. There’s a bunch of black kids, there’s a bunch of Audis, everyone wants to make money... there’s a bunch of lines going on, so, like, you’re not the only one there’ (YP7).

Another participant from London expressed little confidence that the police could effectively tackle county lines. He pointed to the poverty, inequality and limited opportunities experienced in many deprived urban communities, which he believed created conditions in which drug markets could flourish. As he stated,

‘People will only stop after they, like me, get caught. It will just be like a cycle, someone else replaces you, and it goes on’ (YP7).

Although these findings suggest that Black young people are not disproportionately represented in drug markets or exploitation, they do highlight broader social and economic factors that can increase vulnerability. Young people living in deprived communities may face limited educational, employment and income opportunities, creating conditions in which grooming and exploitation can occur. These challenges are not unique to Black communities and were evident across other ethnic groups in the study.

3.3.3. Race, Police Outcomes and Racialised Decision-Making

The study found a statistically significant relationship between ethnicity and police arrest outcomes ($p < .001$), similar to the patterns observed for age and gender. As shown in Figure 12, outcomes varied across ethnic groups. Black/African/Caribbean children were less likely to receive safeguarding or diversionary responses and more likely to be charged or prosecuted than White British children. Similar patterns were also evident across other minoritised ethnic groups. Among White British children, 35% of cases result in NFA, while 22% receive safeguarding, welfare or diversion, and 43% are charged or prosecuted. Asian children are more likely to experience charge or prosecution outcomes: 62% charged or prosecuted, 27% receiving NFA and 11% diverted into safeguarding pathways. Disparities are more pronounced for Black children. Within this group, 71% are charged, the highest rate across all ethnic categories, while only 26% receive NFA and just 3% are diverted into safeguarding pathways, a stark contrast to the earlier self-report data showing exploitation broadly mirrors population patterns. Mixed and White Other children also experience elevated levels of criminalisation, with 61% and 56% respectively charged or prosecuted, alongside comparatively limited access to safeguarding outcomes. Across all minoritised ethnic groups, safeguarding and diversion responses are consistently less likely than for White British children. These findings indicate substantial ethnic differences in post-arrest outcomes. While the analysis does not identify the causes of these differences, Black/African/Caribbean and other minoritised ethnic groups were consistently less likely to receive safeguarding or diversionary outcomes and more likely to experience charge or prosecution than White British children.

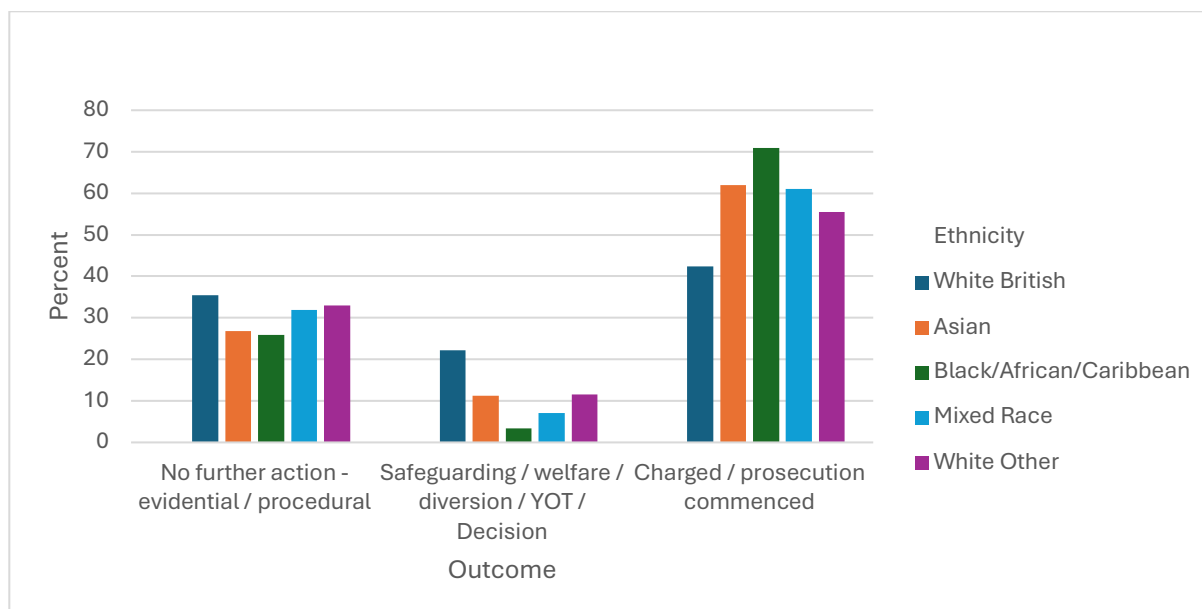


Figure 12: Police outcomes by race and ethnicity in drug market-related arrests.

These findings align with racialised disparities in policing, although causality cannot be assumed as differences in offence severity, enforcement exposure or other contextual factors may play a role. The disparities observed cannot be explained by involvement alone; race shapes perceptions of risk, adultification and deservingness of protection. The literature consistently demonstrates that Black children are more likely to be perceived as threatening, criminally responsible or gang-involved (Ford, 2018; Koch et al., 2024; Shiner et al., 2018), leading to heightened surveillance and harsher outcomes throughout the criminal justice process.

3.3.4. The Biographical Impact of Race and Criminalisation

Young people's narratives indicate that racism is most visible in experiences of stop and search and arrest. Participants, particularly in London, described racial profiling and disproportionate police attention as routine. However, few explicitly recognised that being a young Black person increases the likelihood of being treated as a suspect rather than as a child at risk of exploitation. Although racism was acknowledged at the level of encounter, particularly in policing practices, it was not conceptualised as shaping referral pathways, diversion decisions or safeguarding responses.

'[As a] Black kid... there've been so many times here where, like, I've got arrested just being stereotyped' (YP21).

This distinction is important. It suggests that while overt racialised policing is recognised, the subtle institutional ways race shapes criminalisation, through referral pathways, diversion and safeguarding, remain largely invisible to young people. The routine use of stop and search can make it harder to recognise how racial stereotypes and exploitation interact, reducing opportunities to identify and safeguard vulnerable children. Race operates not only through direct discrimination but through embedded expectations about risk and responsibility. The absence of explicit reflection on arrest outcomes may suggest that repeated contact with the criminal justice system has come to be viewed by children as a normal part of everyday life rather than something unusual. Moreover, from a policing perspective, repeated contact can have a compounding effect as it comes to underpin the rationale for subsequent punitive response. This highlights the need for safeguarding frameworks that are explicitly attentive to how race shapes the boundary between being treated as a perpetrator and being recognised as an exploited child or young person. These perceptions often operate unconsciously, embedded within discretionary judgments about evidence, credibility and response.

3.4. Neurodivergence, Mental Health and Special Educational Needs in Drug Market Contexts

This study examined the prevalence of neurodivergence, mental health needs and SEN among children and young people involved in drug markets and the extent to which these needs are recognised within policing systems. Together, these indicators highlight multiple vulnerabilities associated with children’s involvement in drug markets and experiences of exploitation. They also allow comparisons between children’s self-reported needs and the extent to which those needs are recognised in police records. Self-report data on children and young people exploited within drug markets reveal significantly high levels of disability, with 42% of children and young people reporting having a diagnosed neurodivergent condition (n = 558), 36% reporting a diagnosed mental health condition (n = 486) and 44% reporting having identified SEN (n = 599) (see Figure 13). These figures far exceed population-level estimates, where approximately 21% of children are identified as having SEN (Department for Education [DfE], 2023) and around 20-23% are estimated to have a probable mental health condition (National Health Service [NHS] Digital, 2023). Prevalence of specific neurodevelopmental conditions, such as autism (around 1-2%) and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) (around 3-5%), is substantially lower, although estimates vary depending on diagnostic criteria and measurement (NHS England, 2025). Thus, the data indicate that children involved in drug markets report substantially higher levels of neurodivergence, mental health needs and SEN than would be expected based on population-level estimates. As noted earlier, comparisons between self-reported data and population statistics are important, but they should be interpreted with caution because the datasets measure different populations and experiences.

Table 6: Disability

Characteristics	Per cent	N
Diagnosed Neurodivergence (Self-Reported Data)	100%	1,343
Yes	41.5	558
No	58.5	785
Diagnosed Mental Health Issues (Self-Reported Data)	100%	1,346
Yes	36.1	486
No	63.9	860
Special Educational Needs (Self-Reported Data)	100%	1,367
Yes	43.8	599
No	56.2	768
Neurodivergence (Arrest Data)	100%	331
Yes	19.9	66
No	80.1	265
Mental Health, Suicide and Self-Harm (Arrest Data)	100%	326
Yes	27.6	90
No	72.4	236

Notes: n = participant numbers

Figure 13: Disability self-reported and arrest data.

Nevertheless, this is important because neurodivergent children and those with mental health needs are known to be at greater risk of exploitation. Research consistently shows that these children are more vulnerable to grooming, coercion and manipulation within drug markets (Robinson et al., 2019; Windle et al., 2020). Difficulties with communication, executive functioning, emotional regulation and experiences of exclusion can increase susceptibility to exploitation. School exclusion and disengagement, more common among children with SEN, are also well-established pathways into drug market involvement (Moyle, 2019; Robinson et al., 2019). These characteristics also shape how children are conceptualised during police encounters. Evidence suggests that neurodivergent behaviours are frequently misread as defiance, evasiveness or culpability, increasing the risk of criminalisation rather than protection (Robinson et al., 2019).

3.4.1. Neurodivergence, Additional Needs and Escalating Patterns of Criminalisation

Analysis of neurodiversity, mental health and SEN in police arrest data reveals a marked difference between children's self-reported needs and the extent to which those needs are recorded within police data. Across 2,268 arrests, information on neurodiversity is recorded in only 15% of cases ($n = 331$), and information on mental health, self-harm or suicidality in 14% ($n = 326$). Among those cases where neurodiversity is recorded, 20% are identified as neurodivergent ($n = 66$), while 28% of those with mental health-related information are identified as having mental health needs or experiences of self-harm or suicidality ($n = 90$) (see Figure 13). While these proportions are substantial, the most striking finding is that over 85% of arrests lack recorded data. When contrasted with the self-report data, this suggests that neurodivergence, mental health needs and related SEN are infrequently recorded within arrest data, particularly during enforcement-led encounters. Most recorded data originates from the North East police service, suggesting that recording practices may play an important role in shaping the extent to which vulnerability-related information appears within police datasets. In areas where such information is not routinely recorded, children with significant disabilities may pass through policing systems without their needs being formally documented, potentially limiting opportunities for vulnerability to be recognised and reflected in subsequent responses. These findings highlight a substantial gap between the levels of vulnerability reported by children and the information recorded within police arrest data.

3.4.2. Biographical Perspectives on Neurodivergence, Additional Needs and Criminalisation

Within the interviews with children and young people, six participants identified as neurodivergent, although not all disclosed a specific diagnosis. Two reported having ADHD, one reported dyslexia and one reported an intellectual impairment. Youth justice practitioners, who were involved in recruiting some of the young people to participate in the study, also identified that a number of those interviewed had significant emotional and/or mental health needs. However, only two young people had disclosed this information to the police during post-arrest interviews, even though the YJS to which they were referred was already aware of these needs. Some evidence of safeguarding and diversion was present. In one case, a child with pronounced neurodevelopmental needs, whose intellectual functioning was assessed as significantly below his chronological age, was referred through the NRM and granted protection from prosecution. He was the only participant to receive this level of protection. Although the majority of participants reported negative experiences associated with being neurodivergent, one participant described his ADHD as a benefit, stating that he believed it made him hypersensitive to his surroundings.

'That's all ADHD as well. It helps... the way everything works in your brain. It's all different. ... I'm telling you, you're walking along the street. Next thing you know, you just notice things that you shouldn't, like people [police] that are in plain clothes... And you kind of work it out. And you remember faces. Remember eye colour... You remember everything' (YP2).

Although this participant viewed his ADHD as a positive aspect of his identity, most other participants described their neurodivergencies in negative terms. For many participants, these conditions resulted in placement in specialist education settings or exclusion from school. One participant was moved to a pupil referral unit (PRU) because his school was unable to support his ADHD. While attending the PRU, he was befriended and later coerced into becoming a runner for an OCG. Yet for this young person, the relationship between neurodiversity and exploitation was often not recognised by police and safeguarding practitioners, despite repeated contact with services. Identifying neurodivergence, including intellectual impairments, among children exploited in drug markets is important. It helps shift understanding away from individual choice and towards the structural vulnerabilities and developmental factors that increase the risk of exploitation. However, identification remains challenging because the police do not routinely collect information on neurodiversity. As a result, screening and risk assessment often depend on the knowledge and experience of individual practitioners.

3.5. Care Experience in Police-Recorded Arrest Data Among Children Involved in Drug Markets

Continuing the analysis of vulnerability and disadvantage, the arrest dataset examines whether young people detained by the police are recorded as care leavers. As with neurodiversity and mental health, recording is extremely uneven: across 2,268 arrests, care-leaver status is noted in only 323 cases (14%). All recorded data originates from the North East police service, with no data recorded by the London police service. As a result, the figures reported here reflect recording practices within the North East only, rather than prevalence across both forces. Among these 323 cases where care status is recorded, 38% of children are identified as care-experienced (n = 121; see Figure 14). This represents a substantial increase, given that fewer than 1% of children in England are looked after by local authorities. The divergence between police-recorded arrests and population statistics is an important finding. However, caution is needed when interpreting these results, as discussed earlier. Nevertheless, this finding aligns with wider evidence linking care experience to elevated exposure to exploitation and criminal justice involvement (CSJ, 2024; Fox et al., 2024).

Table 7: Care

Characteristics	Per cent	N
Care (Arrest Data)	100%	323
Yes	37.5	121
No	62.5	202

Notes: n = participant numbers

Figure 14: Care arrest data.

The absence of any care-leaver data from the London police service is important. Care experience is a strong predictor of exploitation and criminal justice contact (CSJ, 2024; Fox et al., 2024), yet no information relating to care status was recorded within the London arrest dataset. This suggests that the recording of vulnerability-related information varies across police forces and may be influenced by local recording practices and data systems. Like neurodiversity and mental health, this pattern highlights substantial variation in the recording of vulnerability-related information across police datasets. Police forces do not consistently record key safeguarding indicators, even where such information is directly relevant to child protection decision-making. In contexts where care status is not recorded, the extent to which this information informs referral, diversion or safeguarding decisions is unclear. As a result, the extent to which care experience is considered within post-arrest decision-making cannot be determined from the available data. This absence of care-related information within the London dataset represents an important limitation, making it difficult to assess the extent to which care experience is recognised and reflected in post-arrest decision-making.

3.5.1. The Biographical Impact of Criminalisation Among Care-Experienced Young People

Children with care experience featured prominently within the interviews with children and young people. Several young males presented with overlapping vulnerabilities, including repeated missing episodes preceding and during their exploitation in drug markets. The majority came from socioeconomically deprived backgrounds and experienced parental disconnection. Their looked-after status often fostered early independence while simultaneously increasing their exposure to criminal gangs and intensifying their search for belonging, heightening their susceptibility to grooming and exploitation, as illustrated below:

‘I don’t care where you come from. Everyone in the care system is looking for their place, so you look for your belonging. You look for your purpose. Drugs. If someone’s in it. People in care are people pleasers, and it’s the easiest way to get into it [illicit drug market]. The police know it, but they don’t care’ (YP1).

Conversely, being in care and subject to daily monitoring within a residential care home may increase the likelihood that behaviours come to the attention of authorities, bringing young people into contact with the police and increasing the risk of criminalisation.

‘I used to be in trouble every single day, like, police where I was getting locked up. It’s not good, like, but what did I have to lose? Nowt ever happened’ (YP4).

These young people were all known to the police before their exploitation due to repeated missing from home episodes. On these occasions, officers typically located them and returned them home or to their residential placements, but follow-up was inconsistent, and little attention was given to exploring underlying reasons or safeguarding against further absences. At times, they were found in safe or trap houses where drug use was evident.

‘I used to go missing all of the time, just running around causing trouble. And then, my mum got into trouble [with drugs], and I couldn’t really take care of her. So I got put into care, and it just got worse. That’s when I got involved with some people in Scotland, and then I went on the run... The safeguarding people came to see me, for, like, missing kids, and they were asking me about it. I didn’t tell them everything though; I want to keep my hands’ (YP8).

In other cases, particularly among those with histories of trauma and substance misuse, children described committing offences unrelated to their exploitation and being arrested multiple times. Many had never been arrested for drug offences, despite suspecting police awareness. This pattern reflects missed opportunities for earlier intervention and a lack of coordination between enforcement and safeguarding, with the two often operating separately rather than as part of a joined-up response. Police contact was frequent but focused on discrete incidents rather than the broader context of vulnerability. Care-experienced children and those on the cusp of care were highly visible to statutory services, yet insufficiently safeguarded: being located when missing, arrested for minor offences or visited by safeguarding practitioners rarely led to sustained protective intervention. Responses often occurred only after problems had arisen and were limited to individual incidents, leaving underlying trauma, instability, substance misuse and exploitative relationships largely unaddressed. Young people often withheld information, ‘I didn’t tell them everything’, highlighting the limits of conventional safeguarding where trust is fragile. Repeated police contact therefore did little to prevent further exploitation, often focusing on immediate problems while leaving underlying trauma, instability and unmet needs unaddressed.

3.5.2. Care Experience and Police Decision-Making in Safeguarding Responses

Analysis of police arrest data shows that recorded care experience is associated with differences in post-arrest outcomes. Among care-experienced children, 51% result in NFA, 29% lead to safeguarding, welfare, diversion or YJS outcomes and 20% result in charge or prosecution. By contrast, among children without recorded care experience, 33% receive NFA, 45% are diverted into safeguarding or welfare pathways and 22% are charged or prosecuted (see Figure 15). Despite extensive evidence that care-experienced children face elevated risks of exploitation, instability and criminal justice contact, children recorded as care-experienced were less likely than those without recorded care experience to receive safeguarding or diversionary outcomes and more likely to have cases resolved through NFA.

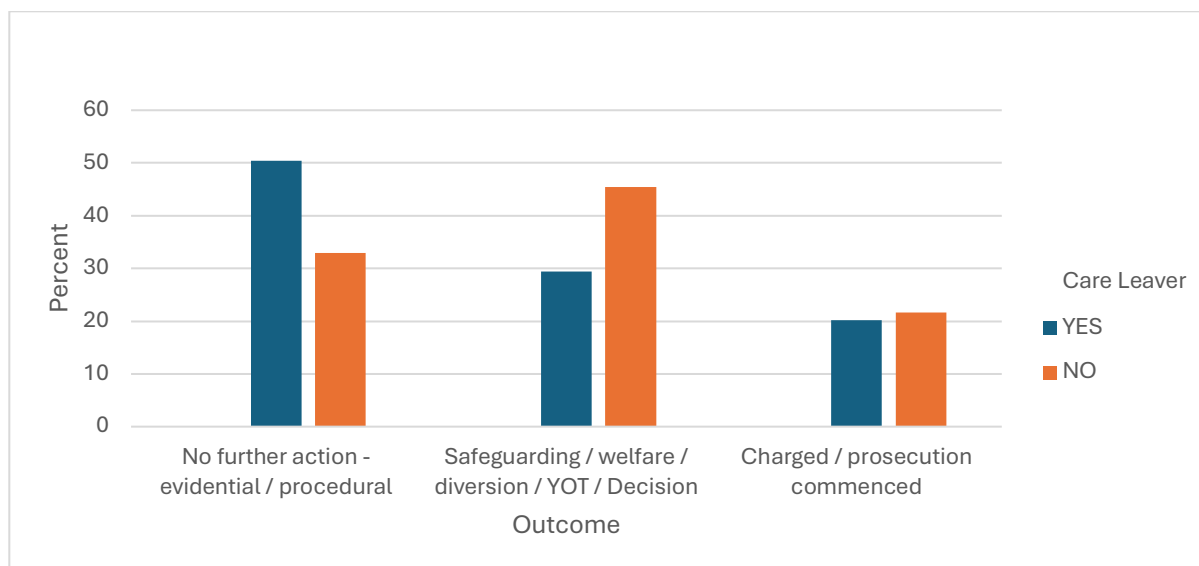


Figure 15: Police outcomes by care-leaver status in drug market-related arrests.

While this avoids immediate criminalisation, it risks leaving underlying harms unaddressed, particularly where exploitation in drug markets is shaped by unmet welfare needs, unstable accommodation or coercive relationships. Biographical accounts illustrated this:

‘They knew I was being exploited, but it was just [that] my ego was bigger than me, right? I just went straight back into it... It’s a bit of a tricky area, because like, I probably wouldn’t have worked with anyone. But if the support was provided, I know a lot of people who were in the same position as me, who were just waiting for someone to step in and help them’ (YP1).

This highlights an important limitation in policing. When care experience is not routinely identified and acted upon, cases may be closed without meaningful support or intervention. As a result, some of the most vulnerable children may leave the criminal justice process without protection, increasing the risk that exploitation continues.

‘All of my drug offences were NFA’d because they never found it on me, so they nicked me, but then it was business as usual. They were just waiting to nick me for a weapon’ (YP9).

In this context, NFA functions less as protection and more as a missed opportunity for intervention. Lower rates of safeguarding for care-experienced children suggest an institutional bias in which care status is normalised rather than treated as a heightened vulnerability. These children may be implicitly viewed as already embedded within statutory systems, leading to assumptions that additional safeguarding is unnecessary or unlikely to be effective. Such assumptions shift attention away from the role of policing and overlook the disadvantages that many care-experienced young people face. Importantly, similar rates of charge and prosecution among care-experienced and non-care-experienced children suggest that care experience does not reduce the likelihood of criminalisation. Instead, it appears to limit access to active safeguarding, leaving care-experienced children vulnerable to continued exploitation without meaningful support. Policing responses must move beyond treating non-prosecution as evidence of protection. Instead, care experience should trigger enhanced safeguarding assessment and support. Without this, opportunities to identify and address exploitation may continue to be missed.

3.5.3. Safeguarding, Social Work, Youth Justice Practitioners and Policing

Given the often-adversarial nature of police contact and its negative impact on trust, exploited young people suggested that additional safeguarding for care-experienced children should be delivered by professionals independent of the police. Social work support was pivotal in helping young people understand their experiences of exploitation and gradually disengage from illicit drug markets. Several participants described reaching a critical turning point, made possible through the consistent support of a dedicated social worker. In these cases, social workers played a key role in helping young people recognise the grooming and manipulation they had endured, while also taking the time to understand their underlying and intersecting vulnerabilities. By building trusting, meaningful relationships, they were able to provide tailored, individualised support that ultimately enabled young people to move away from gang involvement.

‘My youth worker helped me find my place in what I wanted to do... helping me think about what trade I want to do and help me see that I could get out’ (YP10).

‘I will always remember [name of social worker]. She listened. She got me a place in [name of place], like a support accommodation thing, and I took to it, slowly got to know everyone and moved on. If I’d stayed here, it would have just went on the same’ (YP21).

The absence of a trusted adult in whom they could confide was a significant obstacle to young people’s comprehension of their exploitation. Without this personal connection, many saw little value in having a social worker or youth worker. Instead, they perceived professional involvement as just another authority to navigate or, for some, a pathway to increased surveillance and restrictions. This discouraged disclosure of victimisation and left them more vulnerable to further harm.

‘These guys [social workers] don’t really know what you’re going through... If you talk, boom, that’s it. You put yourself on a whole different thing [supervision]. So it’s like you keep silent. When you get arrested, that’s when social workers come regardless. But when you talk to them, that comes with other things. Risks come for you, concerns come for you, people watching you more, you don’t want to tell them anything, so you just play the game’ (YP9).

This account suggests that safeguarding interventions were often experienced as a process of monitoring and control rather than one based on trust and supportive relationships. Many participants described a lack of meaningful and consistent relationships with social workers, often due to frequent changes in allocated staff, sometimes every six months. As a result, some young people viewed social workers in much the same way as criminal justice practitioners, seeing them as figures of monitoring and control rather than trusted sources of support. From the perspective of exploited young people, social work was most effective when grounded in stable, trusting relationships. Where this was achieved, it created the conditions for more meaningful safeguarding and, in some cases, supported pathways out of exploitation. In contrast, when professional involvement was associated with monitoring or punitive consequences, young people responded rationally by withholding information. This not only constrained opportunities for protective intervention but, in some instances, exacerbated their vulnerability to further exploitation.

While these findings primarily reflect experiences of social work, they carry significant implications for policing practice. When police engagement is perceived as enforcement-led or closely tied to surveillance and escalating supervision, similar patterns of disengagement emerge. Young people may become reluctant to disclose exploitation, limiting the effectiveness of safeguarding responses. These findings suggest that policing should focus on building trust and reducing unnecessary contact through enforcement. Close partnership working with social care and youth justice practitioners is also important, as they are often better placed to provide ongoing support. However, support is most

effective when it is delivered through consistent relationships built over time. Trust develops when young people work with the same practitioner, creating opportunities for more effective safeguarding and intervention.

3.6. Conclusion

This chapter has examined the relationship between vulnerability, involvement in drug markets and policing outcomes. By integrating self-reported data, arrest records and interviews with children and young people, the findings suggest that children's involvement in drug markets is rarely associated with a single factor. Instead, involvement is frequently associated with multiple forms of disadvantage, including poverty, gender, care instability, educational exclusion, neurodivergence, mental health needs, racial inequality and exposure to violence. While these vulnerabilities are often visible in young people's trajectories over extended periods, they do not consistently translate into early safeguarding intervention. Across the analyses, notable differences emerge between patterns reported in the self-report survey and those observed within police arrest data. These differences are not consistent across all groups but reflect variations in how vulnerability is recognised and responded to in practice. Several key dynamics are evident:

- Girls frequently self-report involvement in drug markets yet remain underrepresented in arrest data, although the reasons for this difference cannot be determined from the available data and may reflect differences in roles, offending patterns, enforcement exposure or police responses.
- Younger adolescents frequently report early experiences of coercion and recruitment, while older adolescents are more likely to experience enforcement-led outcomes following arrest.
- Black children are disproportionately represented in arrest data relative to self-reported involvement and are more likely to experience charge or prosecution outcomes than White British children.
- Exploited children report high levels of neurodivergence, SEN, trauma and mental health difficulties, yet information relating to these needs is inconsistently recorded within police data.
- Children with care histories face heightened exposure to exploitation, yet recorded care experience is associated with lower levels of safeguarding and diversionary outcomes than among children without recorded care experience.

The qualitative accounts provide insight into how these structural patterns are experienced in practice. Participants describe repeated police contact that failed to disrupt exploitative relationships or address underlying drivers of involvement. In some cases, criminal justice responses restricted access to employment, education and professional opportunities after young people had disengaged from gang activity, making it more difficult for them to move on with their lives. In others, NFA resolved the immediate procedural encounter while leaving young people embedded within exploitative networks. Safeguarding was most effective where trust, continuity of support and multi-agency engagement were present. However, such responses were uneven and frequently dependent on local resources or individual practitioner initiative rather than systematic practice. The findings suggest that vulnerability-related information is not recorded or reflected consistently within police datasets and post-arrest outcomes. These patterns raise concerns about unequal access to safeguarding and differences in post-arrest outcomes across groups of children and young people. At the same time, it constrains policing's capacity to disrupt exploitative drug market dynamics that rely on the continued recruitment of vulnerable children and young people.

Addressing these challenges requires greater consistency in the identification and recording of vulnerability indicators, alongside earlier engagement pathways that function independently of arrest. More systematic approaches to identifying and recording vulnerability may enable safeguarding responses to occur earlier and independently of arrest. Without such shifts, policing outcomes are likely to continue reflecting uneven patterns of protection and enforcement, with implications for both harm reduction and long-term desistance among children involved in drug markets. The

findings provide a clearer understanding of how exploitative drug markets target children and keep them involved through multiple forms of disadvantage. They also show how policing responses can result in different levels of protection and criminalisation across groups of children. While this chapter does not seek to evaluate policing strategies in full or propose comprehensive reform models, it establishes the structural conditions under which safeguarding becomes selective and reactive. In doing so, it provides critical evidence for the wider report's examination of policing effectiveness and the organisational changes required to reduce harm and improve protection for children involved in drug markets.

Chapter 4: Police Accounts of Child-Exploitation in Drug Markets

4.0. Introduction

This chapter draws on interviews with 62 police officers, police staff and safeguarding partners to explore responses to child exploitation. Their accounts of drug markets provide insight into the significant geographical variation that exists across regions. These differences are critical to understanding marketplace dynamics, as localised supply models develop in accordance with local crime profiles, user demand, law enforcement strategies and the broader structures of society. The insight offered into drug supply across these regions revealed significant differences between the way supply models operate and the role of children within this, though some themes cut across all regions. Most often, these variations related to the nature of broader criminal activity within a region, but sometimes the picture offered was heavily shaped by the extent to which professional knowledge was attuned to the reality of drug supply. In some cases, professionals weren't looking to understand the extent of the problem and were at times dismissive of it. By contrast, in other areas, the identification of newly emerging trends around illicit substances, modes of supply and the exploitation of vulnerable populations was at the forefront of professional practice.

4.1. Children at the Centre of the County Lines Business Model

Across all force areas in the study, county lines operated as a key supply model under which child exploitation occurs. Significant geographical differences existed regarding how county lines supply models manifested at a localised level. Some of the professionals participating in the research were in large exporter forces, others in importer forces, while others worked in force areas where county lines tended to operate on an almost exclusively internal basis. Those working in national positions pointed to national trends that indicated that the geographical distances covered by lines were shortening over time. However, for some force areas, this had always been the case, and this did not represent a mutation in the business model of drug dealers.

The accounts offered by professionals indicate that a broad range of county lines models continue to operate across the country and draw upon the exploitation of children in a variety of ways. First, lines running from exporter forces to importer forces continue to rely on the transportation of children across significant geographic distances via rail and road networks, under the popularly conceived traditional county lines model, as the following example from the North West demonstrates:

'So we had a child... who was 15, he was paid £2,000 a week to go and man a trap house... He was missing from home for three weeks, and he was arrested for being concerned in the supply of drugs because the house they found him at was full of drugs... he had been given a train ticket from the Wirral [where] he is from... to Scotland... He was there for three weeks, obviously earned a few thousand pound or whatever, got arrested, went to prison' (Police, North West).

Second, lines operating across force boundaries are also understood to exploit children who reside in importing forces to sell and transport drugs. Under this approach, OCG members travel and identify children in the host area who are exploited to run drug operations while remaining in their area of origin. The development of this model was seen as a response to law enforcement strategies that focused on children who went missing for protracted periods and who were identified by police while using rail and road networks. This was understood to allow criminals to continue to expand the geographical territory of their enterprise while simultaneously drawing on the labour of vulnerable children in a manner that circumvented law enforcement methods. Thus, under this mutation of the county lines model, the geographical distance of the lines tends to remain the same, while the geographical patterns of exploitation become altered.

Third, many respondents sought to draw attention to the geographical contraction of lines, suggesting that county lines were moving towards a 'local drugs for local people model' (Police, South East). The veracity of this assertion tended to be upheld in areas that had traditionally operated as major exporter hubs and where the proliferation of local lines was clearly discernible:

'Your traditional method is that county lines... is where we have your crime group... a controller has control of a mobile phone in Merseyside and the other half of it is in one of your, I say importer forces, but... importer areas, because more and more we're seeing county lines now go to a local method [in force]' (Safeguarding Professional, North West).

For some professionals, this increasing focus on the development of local lines represented both the recognition of changing practices of some crime groups, while also illustrating the heterogeneity that had long since formed an integral feature of the county lines approach:

'People are very reluctant now to push a child 300 miles into Aberdeen from London than they were maybe two or three years ago, and that's probably because of the work [we have done] and the way that business model has changed... It doesn't mean to say the exploitation is not there, and we've already said within the line, with the county lines methodology, that distance is irrelevant. As long as you've got the organised drug dealing, the violence and exploitation are attached to it, then it's going to be an organised drug line, which means it's going to be a county line' (Police, South East).

In many force areas, the localised drug supply model represented a long-standing norm that had characterised county lines since their inception (NPCC, 2025). The North East, in particular, was understood to have operated a well-established internal county lines model which was closely related to the operations of local crime groups:

'We get a lot of county lines where our children are exploited. We don't really have external county lines as such, more internal county lines... So for me, that is where that main exploitation comes from. I think a lot of it is, obviously, we live in a really deprived area... We also have quite a lot of children linked to our OCGs. So we have a lot of violence, a lot of serious and organised crime violence... And a lot of our principal and significant members recruit the children often to commit the criminality for them' (Police, North East).

The county lines model appears to have been recognised as a successful approach worthy of replication across a broad range of criminal actors. Police and partners identified the way in which the sale of drugs via telephone lines using trafficked children had been adopted by groups including long-established local crime families, domestic gangs, peer crime groups and TOCGs alike. The way in which they engaged with children tended to vary according to the operational priorities of the groups involved. High-level OCGs – particularly those with an international footprint – tended to favour discretion and were understood to encourage children to employ specific techniques to avoid the attention of police and safeguarding authorities. By comparison, USGs, LCGs and OCGs were understood to behave more openly and recklessly in relation to their exploitation of children:

'We had this one kid who was getting exploited by an OCG [which was] Russian and funded internationally... all we did was start putting his face up as a missing child. The organised crime group kept dropping him because he was too hot... But that's very different to gangs. Because gangs don't care because they see the kids as disposable. You really have to think about the group that you're working with. If it's an organised crime group, you want to make the kid as visible as possible because they don't want the attention. A gang loves the attention, so you want to do the opposite' (Police, South East).

4.1.1. Familial Exploitation of Children

Interview data from across all force areas suggests that one of the key routes into drug supply for children is through the familial model of exploitation. Under this model, children tend to become criminally exploited from an earlier age than those exploited by those outside of their family. Several respondents suggested that when children exploited by their families encounter the criminal justice system at around the age of 10, they have often been involved in criminality for a significant number of years. In many cases, involvement in drug markets was preceded or accompanied by participation in acquisitive offences such as theft of, and from motor vehicles and residential burglary:

‘And we do see those interfamilial patterns linking up whereby the children have got OCG links through their family. We will see from quite early on they will become involved with that world, but what we do notice is whether or not it’s from outside of the house or inside of the house, the patterns of grooming don’t change’ (Police, North East).

Crucially, respondents also identified the way in which familial models of CCE are not dependent on cohabitation. Rather, exploitation was understood to occur at the hands of a variety of family members who did not necessarily reside at the same address as the child. Furthermore, when parents are implicated in the exploitation of their own children, professionals sought to draw attention to the way in which exploitation often continues once a child is subject to a local authority care order and is separated from their parent. Care orders, in this sense, therefore cannot automatically be understood to operate as a protective factor against familial criminal exploitation:

‘The chances are that child is already care-experienced. So it might not necessarily be that they’re living with Dad, but Dad will still be their upstream. It doesn’t really change the violences, types of coercion used, how that exploitation plays out’ (Police, Wales).

4.1.2. Familial Exploitation Models Are Harder To Disrupt

The use of children to commit crime in this context was understood to be driven by three main factors. The first very much mirrored motivations to exploit children, which exist in wider drug markets, in that child exploitation essentially represented the outsourcing or minimisation of risk. This was achieved in some cases by using children under the age of criminal responsibility or by using children over the age of 10 but who were less likely to receive a criminal conviction than an adult. The second explanation offered for the familial model of exploitation is related to cultural understandings present in families and communities in which criminality is a well-established practice. Crime becomes an established part of life, and so it becomes expected that children will follow suit and become involved:

‘You will then see more familial organised crime families... And you will see those young people, you know, just taking over from that family business, as it’s seen... In [these areas] if you are [family name], then you’re a drug dealer. It’s just been a family business for 30, 40 years. It’s all the generations have ever done’ (Police, North West).

The final explanation for this model of familial recruitment related to the socioeconomic context in which exploitation tended to occur. Exploited children, across all force areas, were understood to be drawn from incredibly disadvantaged backgrounds and communities characterised by economic hardship and limited opportunity. Within these communities, criminality in general and drug dealing in particular, represents a tangible opportunity to make money and tends to be the sphere in which visible, successful local role models (including family members) have thrived:

‘If a 14-year-old from a housing estate... was surrounded by crime... family were criminals, you were brought up not to trust authority, you didn’t go to school, you didn’t like the police... Am I going to go and work in Gregg’s as an apprentice?... Or do I take this instant wealth that’s on display and that I’ve seen on

display forever... You might have to knife a few people, and you might have to watch your back, but ultimately that's not new... Not many people come up through different routes; it's normally through the traditional cultural or family- based crime groups that sit behind it all' (Police, North East).

That within these contexts, crime in general and drug markets in particular, come almost to be seen as an assumed career path, significantly complicates the issue of desistance for young people exploited in this way. The ability merely to envisage an alternative was described by professionals as being particularly challenging for those whose family members exploited them. The role of family members in exploitation was also understood to significantly reduce a child's willingness to engage with support and safeguarding for fear that they might implicate their relations or be perceived negatively by family members.

'We've worked with a lot [of] young people who are part of organised crime families, and they're getting exploited by their mums and their dads... and the simple fact is, they don't know any different. This is their way of life. So another reason why they can't get out of the exploitation is because they don't know how. They don't know what's out there, what the other options are' (Safeguarding Professional, North East).

Under this familial model, children were understood to be more broadly embedded across a wide spectrum of criminal roles when compared to their counterparts in extra-familial models of exploitation. These roles involved violence and drug storage, transportation and sales. What emerged from the interview data was that OCG members are acutely aware of both the general utility of children and the power of their own children to recruit others. The recruitment of children from outside the family was identified as a key role for children of OCG members:

'We see a lot of those young people who have been exploited themselves, and then they become, in terms of the terminology, it's not correct but the "alpha victim"... I don't like that term. But they are forced to exploit associates or younger children to almost protect themselves' (Safeguarding Professional, Wales).

The final theme relating to harm which occurs to children from within families, perhaps more closely relates to extra-familial exploitation associated with the county lines model, whereby young people who are exploited within county lines, gangs or OCG models can pass on their debt and duties when they can no longer fulfil them. Examples offered related to instances where young people had been imprisoned or killed:

'It's mostly debt... but it doesn't always have to be money, I think; sometimes it could be, "Your family member did something so now you have to carry it on." So... where a family member has gone to prison for drug dealing, so now the debt fell onto the other family member. A little brother or something' (Police, South East).

While this example does not directly relate to coercion and control from within the family to become involved in drug markets, it demonstrates how the responsibility to do so in perpetuity can impact children within families where other members become enmeshed in coerced drug-related activity.

4.1.3. Geographical Variation in Drugs Sold by Exploited Children

In terms of the commodities they supply, county lines have traditionally been located at the more serious end of the spectrum, most commonly associated with the distribution of highly addictive Class A substances such as crack cocaine and heroin. More recently, they have also come to be regularly involved in the supply of cannabis. Across some regions, the specialisation in hard addictive substances is believed to continue, with those in the South East and Wales suggesting that their county lines OCGs remain at the more serious end of the market, though some recognition was made that ketamine had also come to feature more heavily.

‘Primarily, crack and heroin. However, we are seeing an increase in some other commodities. So cannabis in particular, some of the other recreational drugs [including ketamine]. But I would say crack and heroin, cannabis, primarily’ (Police, Wales).

In the South East, the continued tendency towards market separation appears to relate in part to the significant role played by transnational organised crime in particular areas of the drug markets, where those from the Western Balkans have cornered the powdered cocaine market. Conversely, in the North East and North West, powdered cocaine was considered to play a significant role in the county lines supply model, but its inclusion was understood to be dependent on characteristics of the end user:

‘I would say it’s cocaine as well, but it’s mainly heroin, crack and cocaine. So they’re the three main ones. And the cocaine not really being for the party types, I think the demographic is your vulnerable communities. So your heroin, your crack and your cocaine are going into your vulnerable users’ (Police, North East).

The application of the county lines model from a policing perspective was therefore context dependent. However, one Southern officer suggested that police perceptions were heavily influenced by the types of drug dealing that are most visible to them as an institution. This, he suggested, was influential in shaping the widespread belief among police officers that county lines related to the supply of drugs into vulnerable communities with heavy addictions:

‘I think you see it more in crack and heroin because you find them easier than party lines because of how party lines work. So unless you stop the kid on the street with all the drugs, you’re not going to find that he’s running a party... whereas crack and heroin is a lot easier to find because there’s a bigger market where it’s more blatant... The customers, they’re on the street corners... so you’ll have 15 waiting on a corner. What I noticed in [area]... the drug dealers wouldn’t turn up unless there was a good number of customers’ (Police, South East).

There is, therefore, a potential intelligence gap around the diversification of traditional county lines networks into new commodity markets, and this is worthy of consideration. Professional accounts were, nevertheless, able to offer insight into the ways in which this model had been adopted by a broad range of crime groups, including localised networks involving familial networks, OCGs, LCGs and USGs, and professionals. Moreover, they were able to demonstrate how these groups had applied the model to the sale of a broad range of substances, particularly across the North East and North West:

‘I think it all involves the children. I don’t think that they are specific about what their drug preference is, in terms of them being involved in the dealing of drugs. No, I think it is just a multi-commodity [approach]... Our dealers will sell whatever they can get their hands on to make some money, and then they will use whatever methods. And using children is just another tactic, isn’t it? That’s ridiculously sad, but they will just get the children to do whatever they can get them to do. It doesn’t matter’ (Police, North East).

While awareness of county lines was ubiquitous, the extent to which professionals were able to articulate the specific dynamics of child exploitation in county lines in their force area varied enormously. Many forces had adopted this as a priority and had invested time and resources in mapping the problem, meaning that they were able to offer detailed insight into the extent and nature of the problem. Two forces had less well-developed intelligence pictures around their county lines and were consequently unable to articulate the role that children played in this context. In one force, an officer stated that they did 'not have any county lines using children' (Police, North East). Others were more open to the possibility that this ostensible absence of child-exploitation might be the result of significant intelligence and resourcing gaps:

'With... our mapped members of OCGs... the majority of ours are for drugs... and I can't think of any kids that are mapped. I know there [aren't any], mapped [child] members of an OCG within [our force]. That's not to say, though, that kids aren't [involved]... of course they are, we'd be naïve to think that they weren't... It's just that intelligence getting fed in that links up with the exploitation... that's where we need to get better' (Police, North East).

With the support of the NCLCC, however, they were beginning to establish procedures to build policies and practices that might allow them to capture more accurate intelligence around this to improve their response.

4.1.4. Drug Markets Are Increasingly Online

Within the qualitative data collected from police employees and safeguarding practitioners, social media emerged as a key factor in the recruitment of children. Mirroring broader transformations in consumer markets, the introduction and development of social media have recently revolutionised the way in which people interact with drug markets (Atkinson-Sheppard et al., 2025; Densley et al., 2018; Irwin-Rogers, 2019; Warburton, 2024; Whittaker et al., 2020). The convenience, anonymity and reduced risk associated with online ordering has meant that social-media sites have become an extremely popular means of purchasing illegal drugs (Warburton, 2024). The burgeoning online market for drugs appears to be less likely to involve the sale of heroin and crack cocaine, largely due to the circumstances of dependent users who are unlikely to own smartphones due to the need to service addictions. There is, nevertheless, a thriving market in almost all other types of drugs in online and social media spaces. The extent of children's exploitation in these markets is something that requires further research, given the increasing market share of online sales. Crucially, however, police accounts indicate that children continue to experience harm and exploitation as drug sales move online for several reasons.

In the first instance, some academic accounts of online drug sales emphasise democratisation and pacification as key features of these markets (Bhaskar et al., 2019; Childs and Bernot, 2025). However, police officers' experiences suggest that ownership and control structures remain largely unchanged. They also indicate that violence continues to play a significant role, as the following account illustrates:

'We have seized more firearms doing a year of this [policing online drug sales] than we did in five years of doing the crack and heroin lines... [The reality is] "I am a serious and organised criminal nominal who uses firearms to enforce my drug dealing business. In order to avoid being caught or brought to justice, I am using the anonymity of the social media sites to do my business"' (Police, North West).

4.1.5. Children Continue To Be Exploited in Social Media Drug Markets

While social media platforms have enabled small-scale suppliers to enter the market, the same risk dynamics associated with traditional drug supply models continue to characterise these new landscapes. Professional accounts suggested that children remain central to online drug markets reliant on local delivery. Additionally, their status as digital natives is perceived as particularly valuable, with their networks and marketing skills offering clear advantages:

‘Children have an innate understanding of how social media works, and it’s native to them. They also have access to a large customer base if you think around ketamine, nitrous oxide use, cannabis use, edibles use... Where we see children being used is often the most sophisticated and best profiles. The best shopfronts for these cottage industries are managed and manicured by children because they know how to create the content, imagery and the customers who are the subject of these businesses’ (Police, North West).

Given the ongoing importance of children in these new contexts, their exploitation is likely to continue. Intelligence around the dynamics of online drug markets and the role of children within them remains a significant intelligence gap within policing. Given the wholesale transfer of huge swathes of the market to these online spaces, this is something that is worthy of significant consideration if children are to be protected effectively. The limited evidence available suggests that children continue to be exploited in this space, which, compared with traditional drug markets, is policed far less intensively. Understanding and evidencing these dynamics should therefore be a priority for those seeking to safeguard children from harm.

4.2. Multiple Grooming Pathways in Child Exploitation

During interviews, police and safeguarding practitioners drew attention to a multitude of techniques used by exploiters to secure the participation of children in drug supply networks. Some interviewees suggested they had witnessed an evolution of grooming strategies over time, whereby exploiters were understood to have moved from an overtly aggressive approach based on threat, violence and debt bondage, to one utilising charm-offensives and incentivisation. Others suggested that, rather than approaches developing over time, it was more accurate to suggest that different types of actors were more likely to employ specific grooming techniques. What appears to emerge from the accounts is a picture whereby exploiters have a range of techniques available in their arsenal, which they choose to deploy in different circumstances. Exploiters operate almost as marketing professionals who are adept at identifying people’s needs and desires and tailor their approach accordingly. Exploiters appear to use a mixed economy of approaches which favours the avoidance of detection, but which is not averse to the use of violence when required. The transmission of trade craft underpinned many grooming techniques, enabling children to continue to operate in drug markets with reduced likelihood of detection and apprehension, and this was often interpreted by children as affection:

‘They were telling their runners “behave at school, go to school, don’t skive because if you do, you’re going to get social services involved. The police are going to get involved.” So they wanted the young lads to be model students so that they just flew below the radar. They weren’t threatening them; they were looking after them... [One] young lad... he [was] just constantly telling us “You’re calling them a gang, but they’re not a gang, and they’re family; you don’t understand. They look after me”, and that whole grooming process is fully entrenched without any threats at all’ (Police, North West).

4.2.1. Debt Bondage

The use of orchestrated thefts or taxing continues to play a core role in the creation of debt and the subsequent control of children. Among the wider repertoire of techniques, the provision of food using the chicken shop model also continues to allow recruiters to prey upon those who are drawn from backgrounds of poverty and deprivation. At the

same time, gifting of expensive goods such as bikes, trainers and clothes allows recruiters to tap directly into the feelings of exclusion and relative deprivation present in children targeted in county lines. While the commodities vary in these approaches, the outcome remains the same, whereby children become indebted and compelled to repay debts through their involvement in drug supply. A further route into debt bondage was identified in the provision of free drugs, most commonly cannabis and ketamine.

‘I think because it’s so cheap it’s an easy commodity to give away to get people involved in that world... So a lot of kids will be given ketamine... “Well you don’t have to pay us for your ketamine now, you just have to do this”, and that is how they will be paid for running the county line or becoming involved in the county line... Ketamine is certainly the drug of choice for the younger generation at the moment’ (Safeguarding Professional, Wales).

4.2.2. Pop-Up Parties

Very often, coercion through the gifting of drugs was identified as taking place through classic child-to-child models, whereby young recruiters supply free drugs to children of a similar age. The use of pop-up parties was also identified as a key grooming mechanism across the North East and North West regions. Some of these parties are known to take place in invaded (i.e. cuckooed) homes, while others are held in Airbnb or Booking.com rental properties:

‘The house party environment is quite a common MO whereby it’s not necessarily the person whose house they’re attending is the person giving the drugs, but they will invite the drug dealer, they will invite the children and therein then you have that grooming taking place... It is a mix of sexual offerings, ketamine, cannabis, alcohol, vapes all under one roof... Rather than what historically they always to encourage us to look for in terms of the nice shoes, etc. It is more that invite to the house party is now the red flag for us’ (Police, North West).

4.2.3. Status, Consumer Goods and Enrichment

Beyond traditional forms of debt bondage, respondents highlighted that many children perceive themselves as willing participants in drug markets, rather than victims of coercion and control. In these circumstances, criminals actively recruit children into their networks by offering a sense of inclusion or belonging or by offering a path to enrichment and opportunity. Given the backgrounds of children overrepresented in drug markets, these offers are profoundly appealing, meeting unmet needs for acceptance, inclusion, belonging and care, and powerfully draw children towards gang activity in ways that are difficult for professionals to challenge:

‘And the problem is, I think some of these kids are so lonely... They might not see the risk, but they feel that they’ve got the boys. “I’ll be fine, because I’ve got my boys. They’ll protect me.”... it’s probably more that they feel a sense of belonging, and that gets preyed upon massively’ (Police, North West).

The opportunity for personal enrichment also operates as an intensely powerful pull factor towards criminal involvement for children who lack access to legitimate opportunity structures. In a society where consumer symbolism serves as a proxy for individual worth, crime’s ability to provide access to key material goods operates as a powerful motivation for those experiencing relative deprivation and economic exclusion. The architects of child recruitment procedures are highly attuned to these dynamics and therefore place the portrayal of consumer goods, personal wealth and glamourised gangster lifestyles at the heart of the public-facing representation of groups involved in drug supply.

‘So the grooming process is very much, “You can look like a gangster, like me.” It’s social media, “How do I look on social media?” That’s what they want to look like. So you review the phones of one community...

they might take a picture of themselves with a joint in their hand... It's wads of cash, it's stood in front of cars, it's making drill videos' (Police, North West).

4.2.4. Online Grooming

Social media and drill videos were identified by participants as key means of transmitting this imagery to children. They suggested that while this cannot be considered a causative factor in children's recruitment into drug supply, it is one which was understood to interact with the numerous and compounding forms of vulnerability they experience. The effect is that they come to consciously perceive crime as a route to success and subconsciously as a means of escape.

'So we see a lot of social media and music influences... not as a general [grooming] approach but... like we know if we see this out there enough, we want to get out our name and our brand so that when the kid is offered it... they will be like, 'Oh, yes, that's that lifestyle, I definitely want that'' (Police, South East).

Beyond these more subtle approaches to align perceptions of criminal involvement with concepts of material success, personal enrichment and consumer distinction, criminal networks were also reported to be using social media in more directly targeted recruitment campaigns. These campaigns often emulate the adverts which abound on social media platforms, offering to help people make money from the comfort of their home. Sometimes, these adverts make generalised offers of employment, while others showcase the success stories of those who have sold drugs on a line:

'We'll see a lot of people advertising Snapchat videos, you know, "Look... here's all the cash, here's my new trainers", basically doing like a social media influencer vibe and being like, "Just ran county lines for a week, look how much money I made." So they're selling a glamorous lifestyle that way. You'll also see the violent videos, "Here's us stabbing... ", there'll be a video of some stabbing happening... and some kids that will appeal to' (Police, South East).

Police suggested that public discussion around the risk of online grooming and recruitment of children into county lines has operated on the assumption that these techniques are based on unsolicited contact from strangers. Conversely, their experience suggests that successful online recruitment networks are dependent on pre-existing social networks offline. Children don't tend to be plucked at random from society and recruited online onto a county line. Rather, they tend to have pre-existing social connections with someone linked to that county line. Evidence was offered of criminal groups using blanket social media recruitment campaigns. However, even in these circumstances, new participants often need to be vouched for by someone with an existing link to the perpetrator or gang, illustrating the continued importance of offline relationships:

'[I]f I'm a 25-year-old line holder, and I've got my 15-year-old already in my grip, I know that in his Snapchat, he's going to have three or 400 other kids that are into the same thing as him, because that's how social media works... And not only does it remove me from the offending... but he has, or she has, the network of people to bring into the game. And that's why you see classes of children go missing together for carriers. Because when they put the adverts out saying, "Who wants to earn some Ps?", you go to your mate Dave and say, "Dave, I've just been on the county line. Did you know?" "Yeah, this geezer up on Snapchat, he'll sort you out"' (Police, South East).

This account illustrates how local drug market structures operate through hybrid recruitment mechanisms that combine digital outreach with embedded child-to-child social networks. Children are positioned as intermediaries who simultaneously function as both targets of exploitation and active facilitators of market expansion. The use of children allows OCGs to minimise risk by creating layers of separation between senior organisers and frontline drug supply activities. This structure decentralises operational responsibility while maintaining hierarchical control over distribution

networks. At a national level, these locally embedded recruitment networks enable county lines operations to expand organically into new areas with limited direct oversight. Reliance on vouched introductions further strengthens network security by reducing the likelihood of infiltration by law enforcement or rival groups. Thus, exploited children operate simultaneously as recruiters and gatekeepers to drug supply roles. Participants linked this process to the geographical clustering of victimisation identified in intelligence profiles. By extension, this provides insight into why particular care homes and educational institutions function as key recruitment sites for geographically dispersed crime groups. These environments often contain concentrations of children with overlapping vulnerabilities, inadvertently creating accessible recruitment pools for exploitation. Consequently, drug markets are sustained not only by demand but through the systematic exploitation of social vulnerability across multiple online and offline sites.

4.3. Vulnerable Children Are the Targets of Exploitation

Interviews with police and practitioners explored how intersectional vulnerabilities are recognised and addressed. Officers demonstrated significant awareness of key indicators, including gender, ethnicity, neurodiversity and care experience. From a policing perspective, children are now central to the functioning of UK drug markets, undertaking roles such as storage, transportation, sales and the use of violence. Their labour, whether paid or unpaid, is pivotal to the success and enrichment of well-established criminal actors. Children are a valuable resource in drug markets because of their intrinsic malleability, their reduced likelihood of being apprehended and charged, and their role in distancing senior offenders from direct involvement. Children, therefore, represent a commodity to those operating in drug supply, although certain characteristics make some children more vulnerable to exploitation than others. Police interviewees described their encounters with a broad range of children of various ages, genders and ethnicities, but across all respondents, there was consensus that:

‘Everybody they’re targeting they’ve got one thing in common, and [it’s that] they’re vulnerable’ (Police, North East).

This consensus across force areas demonstrates a high degree of professional recognition that vulnerability is the primary organising principle shaping recruitment into drug supply networks. Vulnerability in various guises operated as a key determinant of the likelihood that a child would become recruited into drug supply networks. Moreover, the presence of vulnerable children in key environments where their needs remained unmet presented particularly fertile hunting grounds for those seeking to harm children. While officers and safeguarding professionals were generally clear in identifying these vulnerabilities, their accounts also revealed variation in how consistently such recognition translated into preventative or diversionary responses.

Age

The age of criminal responsibility currently stands at 10 in England and Wales. Officers and practitioners reported encountering children as young as 10 in drug market exploitation, although this was not typical. However, there was a clear consensus that the age of those exploited is decreasing, increasingly including children aged 10 and under:

‘The [name of area] is horrendous at the moment... the people who are exploiting are a lot younger and then the people who are being exploited are clearly a lot younger... under 10. It’s as bad as that’ (Safeguarding Professional, North East).

Professionals widely recognise age as a key factor in exploitation, with younger children often used strategically by exploiters to avoid police attention. This was cited as driving the recruitment of children around 11 and 12, particularly as they transition from primary to secondary school, when oversight decreases. At this stage, children were described as becoming fair game for roles in storing and distributing drugs and weapons. However, most children encountered by

professionals were aged 14-17, with 15- and 16-year-olds often recruited to bring in younger peers. While age-related vulnerability was clearly acknowledged, interviewees reported limited early-intervention strategies targeting the youngest children.

Gender

Across all force areas, children criminally exploited to sell drugs were understood to be overwhelmingly male. Some girls had come to the attention of police and professionals in the study, but they tended to be in the minority. While it was generally felt that this gender imbalance reflected the reality of children exploited in drug markets, there was also an acknowledgement that the extent of this imbalance was influenced heavily by professional assumptions. It was suggested that safeguarding professionals are more closely focused on spotting signs of sexual exploitation instead of criminal exploitation in girls. The result, of course, is that girls involved in the supply of controlled substances are less likely to attract law enforcement attention and are therefore of potentially greater value to criminals. Some of the more reflective professionals were aware of this dynamic and sought to highlight their limited knowledge in relation to girls in drug markets:

‘We are not asking the right questions for girls... I don’t think for a second [that] girls are not being used to run drugs. I just think they’re probably blending in more and [standing out] less’ (Police, North East).

‘I think we suffer from unconscious bias in relation to... gender. I mean, we know that women and girls’ roles within county lines is pretty much an intelligence gap for us. Because... if... you’ve got four... youths, teenagers, acting suspiciously, police are called. You’ve got grounds to stop and search; there’s three males and a female... Who are you naturally going to search? You’re going to search the males’ (Police, South East).

While it was deemed safe to assert that a greater number of boys than girls are criminally exploited to sell drugs, participants suggested it is likely that this disparity is overrepresented in official measurements. The persistence of assumptions and stereotypes shaping professional judgement and decision-making is likely to obscure the true extent of female victimisation in drug-related CCE. Importantly, some officers explicitly recognised this bias, suggesting a developing awareness of gendered blind spots within policing. However, recognition did not always appear to be accompanied by systematic changes in detection or safeguarding practice. Perversely, the persistence of this gender-based myopia serves to increase the vulnerability of young females by increasing their utility to criminal exploiters (Moyle, 2019). To better protect young females whose exploitation remains undetected, professionals would need not only to acknowledge gender bias but to operationalise strategies to address it.

Race and Ethnicity

In the academic and grey literature on county lines drug supply and child exploitation in drug markets, issues of race and ethnicity remain at the forefront of debate. Interviewees’ perceptions around the ethnic profiles of victims of CCE in drug markets seemed to be highly geographically dependent. Across the North East and Wales, those affected by exploitation were understood to be overwhelmingly White, but this appeared to relate to the demographic composition of the communities from which victims were drawn. While professionals in these areas engaged with Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic children, they were not understood to be disproportionately represented. There were, however, areas of the North West where Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic children were identified as being disproportionately represented, and this was understood to relate both to the concentration of particular ethnicities in certain areas and to wider forms of societal racism, economic disadvantage and attendant vulnerabilities. It was suggested, however, that while Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic children are overrepresented in some areas, White children were heavily

represented in others. Professionals were keen to stress that, when viewed as a whole, the commonality between these areas and the children who were victimised within them was poverty, rather than race and ethnicity.

‘So if you go to... [area] you’re going to get a lot of young Black lads running around involved just because... that tends to be the demographic of that area. You go out to your... wider divisions where it might be a bit more rural... and you’ve got young Asian lads, young White lads... Again... from poor... socioeconomic... backgrounds. It’s just massive pull factors for them... “Well, look at that money there”... It does come down to money on every level, from the exploiters’ level, from the victims’ level, it’s that desire’ (Police, North West).

Race and ethnicity, however, appeared central to understandings of victimisation patterns among professionals working in the South East region. In the first instance, most professionals understood Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic children to be overrepresented among victims of CCE. In their attempts to explain this overrepresentation, some drew attention to the way in which Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic communities were more likely to be subject to the vulnerabilities and hardships associated with victimisation in their force area, and this, in turn, made their children more susceptible to exploitation:

‘Let’s look at the structural racism in this country, Black boys are most likely to be excluded from school, most likely to be in unemployment... poverty breeds... exploitation’ (Police, South East).

For others, the disproportionate representation of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic children exploited in their regional drug markets was more accurately attributed to the intensive policing to which they were subjected. One officer commented:

‘In [our force] we have been criticised for being racist repeatedly, and it was probably because we are’ (Police, South East).

The more intensive policing and harsher treatment of Black communities were understood to increase the number of children processed by the police for drug charges. However, one participant described intelligence, suggesting that racial bias within policing was beginning to shape the business models of organised criminals. Specifically, young Black boys were viewed as less appealing targets for exploitation compared with other children. Thus, while broader processes of structural racism create the conditions in which Black children become more vulnerable to victimisation, the fact that they are subject to greater scrutiny reduces their appeal to those with more carefully considered business models, principally TOCGs. It is worth noting, however, that this would also not be applicable to recruitment models used by domestic gangs:

‘And you also are now seeing less Black kids being targeted and more Albanians. Because when a Black person gets arrested... you tend to see that they’re more likely to get remanded or more likely to be charged with a higher offence... Black men are more likely to have the PWITS [possession with intent to supply] charge against them than Albanians or even people with other ethnicities that are non-British. So you start to see more organised crime groups use other ethnicities... So it tends to be people who are first-generation from Eastern Europe and those places. Because they’d be less likely to be remanded and then be back out’ (Police, South East).

Respondents disagreed on the influence of race and ethnicity on exploitation, but some officers acknowledged how structural racism and differential policing shape both vulnerability and criminalisation. Understanding of race varied by area, sometimes framed through poverty, other times through institutional bias. Across all forces, migrant and unaccompanied asylum-seeking children were seen as especially vulnerable and appealing to TOCGs due to their relative

invisibility. They were also understood to pose unique challenges to policing once exploited, given their lack of documentation and links to domestic institutions.

4.3.1. Care Placement and Heightened Vulnerability to Exploitation

The location of children in the care sector was identified by all respondents as something that exposed them to heightened risk. Rather than acting as a protective factor, experience of the care system was described as both increasing a child's chances of becoming exploited and reducing the likelihood that they are seen as a victim. Children entering the care system are often more likely to have experienced factors that predispose them to victimisation (Shaw and Greenhow, 2020; Turner et al., 2019). However, interviewees also drew attention to features of the care sector that systematically failed to meet children's needs and left them exposed to CCE:

'From what we see as well, if a child's looked after, they've been taken into care, and by virtue, they've probably got so many ACEs and so much trauma... They're in care for a reason... Especially if they're on a full care order... And then the nature of the care system is they'll be put in one setting that can't necessarily meet their needs or cope with them, so they get moved and moved and moved' (Police, North West).

Interviewees highlighted that, when moving children, local authorities often failed to take adequate account of their individual circumstances. In some cases, placements were made in areas where children faced active threats or were housed alongside rival gang members. As a result, care provision was described as exacerbating rather than ameliorating the complex challenges faced by children within the system. Care placement staff were also identified as sometimes lacking the knowledge and skills required to recognise and respond to exploitation. Consequently, care settings were described as active sites of recruitment for criminals and OCGs across all regions:

'At the moment, it seems to me what they're doing is they're targeting children who are vulnerable, particularly from care homes, but targeting children who are less likely to draw police attention' (Police, North East).

4.3.2. Unregulated Care Settings

The active recruitment of children from care settings was described by a Welsh safeguarding professional as an 'unforgivable failure' of Local Authorities entrusted with the care of society's most vulnerable children. However, problems of chronic under-funding across the care sector were understood to be contributing not only to the growth of the unregulated care sector, but also to the likelihood of Local Authorities commissioning such services where vulnerabilities become amplified:

'It's a problem everywhere. There isn't sufficient provision, there isn't enough residential, there isn't enough foster care, there isn't enough secure... there is just not enough provision. The complexity of individual cases now means that the market is very much in control' (Safeguarding Professional, Wales).

Rather than being a marginal problem, unregulated settings were understood to have proliferated to the extent that they now dominate the market in some geographical areas. Professionals were keen to illustrate the way in which the placement of vulnerable children in unregulated care networks considerably increased their risk of exploitation. In the first instance, children were often moved out of area into locations with low property prices and which often had significant issues with county lines. Second, a lack of information sharing was identified as putting children at significant risk, as recipient authorities were often not notified of transfers. Third, given that placements operated outside of regulatory frameworks, professionals identified a lack of engagement with safeguarding protocols, meaning that children were not subject to the same levels of care compared to local authority provision. Fourth, there was a tendency to rely on agency staff in unregulated settings. This was portrayed as detrimental to children, as such staff often lacked

the skills required to work with those with complex needs and were rarely present long enough to form meaningful relationships. Moreover, some people working in unregulated care settings were also found to have links to criminality, OCG activity and drug supply:

‘A prime example of this is we had a kid who was really susceptible to exploitation; a few kinds of learning difficulties, didn’t understand risk.... So then we find out that one of the women looking after him [in the unregulated care home] had a baby with one of our OCG members... But we know that this kid had issues around drug dealing and things like that, and she was attached to this drug-dealing family’ (Police, North East).

Thus, several professionals highlighted significant shortcomings in the care provided within these settings, which served to undermine the safety of the children they housed. Chronic underfunding has driven the marketisation and deregulation of care for children with complex needs, increasing their vulnerability. While local authority placements can exacerbate risk, unregulated settings can amplify it further, making these placements a critical focus for safeguarding efforts.

4.3.3. Unmet Needs as Primary Drivers of Exploitation

Beyond care experience, several key factors were identified by professionals as significantly increasing a child’s vulnerability to criminal exploitation. These factors included mental health problems, SEN and neurodiversity, ACEs, including domestic abuse, educational exclusion and poverty. Summarising these factors, one professional stated:

‘It’s really tough to not generalise, and I want to be really clear here... that it can be anyone. But there are obvious factors that lead to the people who are far more likely to become exploited... parental neglect, chaotic factors in the home environment, mental health... people who are out of school, huge ADHD or other undiagnosed SEN... you’ll have issues where children either can’t learn well enough, play up, get expelled, or fundamentally aren’t suited for a school environment, or get put into a PRU’ (Police, South East).

These characteristics of disadvantage were identified as making children more susceptible to exploitation via two separate mechanisms. First, disadvantage resulted in vulnerability, making them less able to resist the coercive efforts of exploiters. Thus, those with SEN were understood to be intrinsically more malleable:

‘With the special educational needs... You’ll have children that will believe anything they say. As long as you seem convincing and you seem sort of a little bit older and a little bit wiser, they’ll be quite easy to manipulate’ (Police, South East).

Second, professionals were emphatic that society’s failure to support children in addressing these needs was the most influential factor in creating vulnerability to exploitation. Huge barriers to access were identified across a range of services, meaning that children remained unsupported and risk factors were unaddressed. In relation to neurodiversity and SEN, one safeguarding professional stated that 50% of the high-risk children in her care had SEN and suggested that this was an underrepresentation due to undiagnosed conditions:

‘We’ve recently just done our last three months, and they’ve determined 50% of the kids who I have are high risk are all SEND [Special Educational Needs and Disabilities]... Actually, we think it’s higher; we just didn’t have it... recorded completely. I think neurodiversity is huge; it’s undiagnosed. Sadly, the best way for a child to get speech and language assessment quickly is to be involved with Youth Justice. That is ridiculous’ (Safeguarding Professional, South East).

Difficulties in accessing diagnostic services and mental health professionals were universally recognised as hugely problematic, with waiting lists in some areas as long as seven years. Under such circumstances, many professionals recognised the potential of criminal justice interventions to expedite access to essential support services for children. Relatedly, the frequency with which unsupported children are subject to educational exclusion without being offered suitable alternative provision was identified as a key risk factor. Interviewees described this as one of the primary mechanisms through which children became vulnerable to criminal exploitation. PRUs were described as ‘hotbeds of recruitment’:

‘The problem with the PRUs [is that] you get all the kids who have been naughty and carrying knives and all that stuff. And you’ve got the people in the PRU who are there because they’ve got SEN and other stuff. And they can’t cope with a normal school, so they get recruited by their mates from the school... So we see a lot of very vulnerable children who probably won’t make it a long way up a ladder, but they will be used for county line runs’ (Police, South East).

The success of criminal exploitation is dependent on the presence of vulnerability. Many of the risk factors associated with victimisation do not in themselves create vulnerability within children if they are responded to meaningfully. Professionals from across the country provided evidence of the widespread absence and failure of services to adequately support children and young people. Interviewees argued that it is systemic failures which create opportunities for exploitation, rather than the mere presence of risk factors themselves. In this sense, practitioners recognised the effects of intersecting needs, including care experience, disability or neurodiversity, and poverty, but they emphasised how limited service capacity and barriers to access constrain effective preventative responses. In many cases, however, poverty was identified as the most significant risk factor in explaining the increased exploitation of children involved in drug markets:

‘[It’s] just fucking straight out economic poverty, and unless you’ve been poor, you don’t understand the stink of poverty... and how it affects every space of your life and that you’ll do anything for money... Anything for a new pair of Nike Air Jordans... because that’s what drill says you should have... Moncler jackets... Nike Tech fleeces... Now that’s a week’s salary for some parents. So if you can’t be given those, how do you get it? And if you’ve got this Fagin there saying, “Come in, little blood. You work for me, I’ll sort you out”, they do it because they’re desperate’ (Police, South East).

This reference to poverty illustrates how consumer culture and localised youth identities intersect with economic marginalisation, producing acute pressures to perform belonging through material display. In this context, exploiters are positioned not simply as coercive actors but as providers of access to status, resources and recognition otherwise unattainable (Disley and Liddle, 2016). Recruitment was described as relational and manipulative, with exploiters targeting children’s unmet economic and emotional needs under the guise of opportunity. Importantly, practitioners’ accounts suggest that vulnerability is not inherent to poverty itself. Rather, it emerges where deprivation interacts with reduced institutional support and limited protective capacity. Where families are struggling and services are overstretched, exploiters fill the void, offering immediate and tangible solutions to structurally produced disadvantage. Exploitation, therefore, operates within a broader political economy of austerity and inequality, where unmet need becomes a recruitment pathway (Barker et al., 2025; Hall et al., 2023; Reid, 2022).

4.4. Serious Violence Against Children in Drug Markets

Violence is an intrinsic feature of drug markets and forms a key part of children’s experiences within them (Children’s Commissioner, 2021; Home Office, 2023; Spicer, 2021; Stone, 2018). Exploited children were described by professionals as having widespread experiences of violence as both victims and perpetrators. This dual positioning creates challenges for policing responses, as officers are required to recognise exploitation and vulnerability while also responding to

serious criminal harm and offering protection to wider communities. Often, children's first experiences of violence in drug markets come in the form of orchestrated taxing at the hands of their exploiters and, in some cases, the subsequent punishment beatings they are subjected to for losing early consignments of drugs. However, their exposure and subjection to violence is something which continues well beyond their entrance into drug supply activity. The pervasive nature of fear and violence under these circumstances has led to the proliferation of weapon ownership. One officer remarked that:

'Now most of the [county lines] warrants we do, we're recovering Rambos and machetes, flick knives, all the usual weaponry [from children]' (Police, North West).

Across the country, some regions experience much higher levels of weapon-enabled drug-related violence than others. Despite these regional variations, almost all criminally exploited children are immersed in cultures where threat, violence, fear and the possession of weapons are pervasive (Brewster et al., 2023). While some gun-related violence was documented across the North East and Welsh forces during interviews, firearms were much more prevalent in forces across the South East and North West. Here, members of gangs and OCGs systematically used children to carry out shootings as a means of distancing more senior members from criminality, and therefore as a method of outsourcing risk to less powerful actors. Teenage boys around the ages of 16 and 17 tended to be implicated in these drive-by style shootings, while girls were utilised to hold and transport firearms for gang members while being exploited under the boyfriend model. The use of violence to manage gang-related territory disputes was also routinely understood to involve beatings, vehicle ramming, arson and other serious assaults. Because this type of violence frequently occurs in public settings, where the likelihood of detection remains high, these activities are often outsourced to under-18s. From a policing perspective, such incidents require immediate enforcement responses to protect life and public safety, but these same responses can make it more difficult for officers to identify the children involved as victims of exploitation.

'We'll see this with dealers, for example, [as soon as] somebody comes onto that line... and they'll be tooled up, they'll have a machete or a knife at least without doubt for that protection against other dealers, against potentially their own OCG who could turn on them (Police, North East).

Within the context of trap houses, children were described by participants as being instructed to carry out acts of violence against vulnerable drug users who have had their homes taken over. These acts of violence are often perpetrated by very young children and include behaviours ranging from humiliation to serious beatings and instances of individuals being encouraged to set victims on fire in exchange for drugs (Police, South East). Children are forced into violence both to instil fear and control under gangs and to create online content that reinforces status and desensitises them. Much like drill videos that link crime to status and personal enrichment (Hall et al., 2023), cultural imagery that dehumanises drug users and normalises violence was understood to erode moral barriers to children's exploitation in drug markets. These dynamics also shape policing encounters, as children who have perpetrated serious violence may be viewed primarily through an enforcement lens, even where their offending is strongly linked to coercion and exploitation.

Across all participating force areas, the possession and use of knives and machetes was seen as an almost universal experience for children exploited in drug markets. This phenomenon was widely attributed to the fear and insecurity that pervade their everyday experiences. The fear of violence from others involved in drug supply means that weapons become perceived as essential upon entry into drug markets. However, in some areas, weapon carrying was identified as beginning from a very early age, sometimes from as young as 8 years old. The everyday normalisation of violence in communities affected by CCE and gang activity has created a pervasive sense of fear that affects even very young children:

‘Everybody carries knives all of the time in [city] because everyone’s so scared... We have this massive community trauma where children see [stabblings] all the time’ (Police, South East).

As a result of the saturation of weapon ownership, officers from all areas reported an escalation in the size and seriousness of the weapons chosen by children. This escalation was explained as being linked to the levels of fear they experienced and the nature of the threats they faced:

‘The bigger the knife, the more protected you are, because if you watch videos of... kids fighting, it’s like fencing... They’re trained to stab in three places... and as soon as you nick one of those, they’re dead... so they all have Z knives. So this comes from the mouth of a kid. When we nicked him... he had about a two-and-a-half-foot sword, right, and he’s like, “Well people want to come and kill me, they’re going to come with knives, I can stand next to my door and I can fend them off because they’re not going to get close to the sword unless they’ve got a three-foot sword”’ (Police, South East).

Within this environment of persistent threat, professionals described children as becoming increasingly desensitised to violence and death. Violence was often framed by children as an accepted occupational risk associated with drug supply networks. One officer described delivering a drug-related Osman (Threat to Life) Warning to a 21-year-old young man who refused protection and indicated that he was prepared to die. However, the accounts of police and safeguarding partners suggested that children often found threats of violence and sexual violence directed towards their families much more difficult to manage. Threats to harm loved ones were widely understood to be a common means of control, ensuring children’s ongoing compliance. During the research, numerous examples were shared by professionals whereby acts of sexual violence were used against siblings, parents were intimidated and family homes were damaged. The desire to protect family members was therefore identified as a key factor in the deeper entrenchment of children in criminal exploitation. Crucially, however, these protective impulses were also identified by some practitioners as a potential point of intervention. One respondent suggested that older siblings who had already experienced exploitation could act as credible deterrents for younger family members at risk of exploitation:

‘What we’ve found quite successful is when you get... brothers... who’ve been in the gang... culture... When their younger brother starts getting dragged into it, the person who’s most against it is the older brother because he’s the one that knows exactly what it’s like, and he knows it’s not all the glam. So when you’re looking at role models... the older brother is usually a good role model... to keep the young people out of the gangs’ (Safeguarding Professional, North East).

These findings illustrate how violence simultaneously shapes policing responses and perceptions of effectiveness. The serious and immediate risks associated with violent offending often necessitate rapid enforcement action to protect victims, communities and the children themselves (CSJ, 2024). However, these same enforcement imperatives can obscure recognition of exploitation and limit safeguarding opportunities. The data, therefore, highlights the complex balancing act faced by police officers, who must respond to children as both potential victims and perpetrators, within environments characterised by coercion, fear and organised criminal control.

4.4.1. Sexual Violence in the Exploitation of Children in Drug Markets

Given the hidden character of sexual violence, it is impossible to obtain accurate information regarding its nature and prevalence in any circumstances (Berlowitz et al., 2013; Cockbain et al., 2017). Within the context of children exploited in illicit markets, an additional layer of complexity surrounds attempts to understand the contours of sexual victimisation and attendant police responses. All interviewees who discussed this subject highlighted that police and related professionals know very little about the true nature and scale of this phenomenon because children are highly unlikely to disclose their experiences. This reluctance to disclose significantly constrains policing responses (Barlow et al., 2022),

as safeguarding frameworks, including the Modern Slavery Act 2015, the NRM and statutory guidance such as Working Together to Safeguard Children, rely heavily on the identification and recognition of victimisation. Where sexual violence remains hidden, opportunities for referral, protection and multi-agency safeguarding are substantially reduced (Harvard et al., 2021). Nevertheless, the accounts offered by professionals provide insight into some of the ways sexual violence is used against children within drug markets and how this violence directly undermines police efforts to safeguard them.

4.4.2. Sexual Violence as a Form of Initiation

In the first instance, sexual violence was described as being used against boys as an instrument of control to ensure their continued participation in drug supply roles. This type of violence tended to involve initiation procedures whereby young males would be forced to carry out sexual acts on another male. Recordings of these acts would then be used to control the young person and secure ongoing compliance:

‘Like an initiation where... they will often be filmed... performing sex acts on another man... being raped... The idea being that... “We now have this video of you... the last thing you now want to do is fuck us over”. There is a hyper-masculinity in the drugs market.... [and they use this to say], “I want control over you because I want you to come back and do the other things”’ (Police, South East).

Such practices create powerful barriers to disclosure and engagement with police. Shame, fear of exposure and threats of further violence or reputational damage can deter children from reporting abuse or cooperating with investigations (Hlavka, 2016). This form of coercion also complicates policing responses, as boys subjected to sexual violence may subsequently be identified primarily through their offending behaviour rather than their victimisation (Cockbain et al., 2017). This reinforces the well-documented victim–offender overlap in CCE and presents significant challenges for safeguarding-focused policing (Bosma et al., 2018; Lydon and Emanuel, 2025). Young boys also appear to be exploited to carry out sexual assaults against other children subjected to initiation processes. One officer described a 13-year-old who had been exploited in a county line operating several hundred miles from his home. Although he was used to carry out a significant role in drug supply, he was also used to sexually assault other children. Cases such as this illustrate the complex policing dilemma created when exploited children perpetrate serious harm. Officers retain a legal duty to investigate and prevent violence, yet enforcement responses can make it more difficult to recognise the coercive context in which such offending occurs. The extent to which sexual violence is used against boys exploited within drug markets remains a substantial intelligence gap, since these experiences tend to surface only through digital forensic evidence recovered from confiscated devices rather than through direct disclosure to police.

4.4.3. Sexual Victimisation of Girls in Drug Markets

Sexual violence against girls was also described as a routine technique used by those operating county lines. In some areas where sexual service markets were less established, individuals involved in running county lines were also known to be involved in selling the sexual services of underage girls online. In these cases, sexual exploitation sometimes operated alongside, rather than directly within, drug supply activity, acting as an additional income stream for exploiters. Although this activity is formally categorised as child sexual, rather than criminal, exploitation, it nevertheless sits within broader safeguarding and modern slavery frameworks. These cases highlight the necessity for policing responses to recognise the overlap between different forms of exploitation, as children may be subjected to multiple forms of abuse simultaneously.

Within gang structures, girls were widely described as occupying the lowest hierarchical positions, with non-monetised sexual exploitation forming a significant part of county lines models. Girls were often described as operating outside trusted criminal networks, with their primary role being to ‘sexually provide for the boys’ (Police, South East). Respondents described how girls were initially offered free drugs, most commonly ketamine and cannabis, to incentivise

involvement before being drawn into systems of dependency and coercion. Sexual abuse frequently occurred within environments such as pop-up parties, which were described as key recruitment spaces for county lines activity. In these settings, girls were sometimes subjected to gang rape by both established gang members and individuals being recruited into drug markets. These forms of violence create additional safeguarding challenges, as they are frequently normalised within peer cultures and remain difficult for police to detect without victim disclosure. The concept of gift girls was described by several respondents as a mechanism used to reward males involved in drug supply activity:

‘Gift girls [are] where they put girls into trap houses to keep the people who are working in the trap houses happy’ (Police, North East).

Girls identified as gift girls were also understood to play roles in recruiting other girls, partly through social network access, but also as a survival strategy designed to deflect abuse away from themselves. These dynamics reinforce the coercive and relational nature of sexual exploitation within drug markets, where victimisation is frequently embedded within systems of peer pressure and survival behaviour. From a policing perspective, these complex relational dynamics can make victim identification particularly difficult, as children coerced to commit modern slavery offences themselves may not self-identify as victims and may instead appear complicit in exploitation networks. In one example, the sales performance of a young boy reportedly resulted in him being rewarded with the opportunity to sexually assault a girl who had been gifted to a trap house:

‘He was really proud of this because... he got the most [sales] on the day or he earned it the quickest, whatever it was, and so he got to go first in [what was] essentially gang rape of a child’ (Police, South East).

Footage of this incident demonstrated the normalisation of sexual violence within the group, with participants laughing and boasting about the assault. The officer describing this case emphasised that the boy involved demonstrated little understanding that he had committed serious harm. Such accounts illustrate how exploitation environments can reshape children’s perceptions of violence, complicating both investigative and safeguarding responses:

‘The boy had no concept he’d done anything wrong. In fact, he was boasting about the fact that he was... I think he was 14 or 15, and he goes, “Ah, I got to have sex with this stupid girl... and we all got to have sex with her... I got to go first because I made the most money...”’ (Police, South East).

4.4.4. Role-Related Sexual Violence in Drug Markets

Sexual violence was also described as a direct tool for controlling girls criminally exploited in drug-related roles, which, mirroring the experiences of boys, functions as an initiation process designed to establish dominance and secure compliance. In contrast to boys, this abuse was reportedly less likely to be filmed for blackmail purposes and more likely to take the form of gang rape as a demonstration of control. Anal and vaginal rape were also described as being used pragmatically to increase girls’ capacity to internally conceal drugs (plugging or banking). Wider sexual violence was also described as a mechanism of debt bondage, where sexual services were used to repay drug-related debts. Respondents described cases involving children as young as 12, sometimes involving repeated sexual exploitation over prolonged missing episodes. Beyond digital forensic recovery, police were widely understood to have limited capacity to detect or gather evidence of CSE occurring within drug market contexts. This limitation significantly constrains safeguarding responses and contributes to persistent intelligence gaps. Nevertheless, the limited information available strongly indicates that sexual violence plays a central and extremely harmful role in sustaining child exploitation within drug markets. The hidden nature of this abuse continues to present major challenges for policing effectiveness, particularly in balancing enforcement responses with safeguarding duties and ensuring that sexually exploited children are recognised and treated as victims under existing child protection and modern slavery frameworks and legislation.

4.5. Conclusion

This chapter shows that modern drug markets are flexible and rooted in local contexts and that the exploitation of children is central rather than incidental to how they operate. Across all force areas, county lines continue to function as a central organisational model, yet the data reveals significant geographical variation in how these networks manifest. In some contexts, long-distance supply routes remain prominent, while in others, drug markets have contracted into localised or hybrid forms that combine offline recruitment with digitally mediated distribution. The diversification of commodity markets and the replication of county lines practices across familial, local, national and transnational crime groups illustrate the dynamic and evolving character of exploitation. Across the qualitative data, several core empirical findings emerge:

- Child exploitation is structurally embedded in drug market organisation, with children performing a wide range of operational roles including recruitment, delivery, violence and digital market facilitation.
- Drug market structures are increasingly hybrid, combining traditional county lines mobility with localised supply networks and social-media-enabled distribution models.
- Familial exploitation represents a significant but often under-recognised pathway into drug markets, particularly in areas characterised by long-standing organised crime traditions and economic marginalisation.
- Violence operates as both a governance mechanism and a recruitment tool, shaping children's everyday experiences while complicating policing responses that must prioritise immediate community safety.
- Sexual violence plays a central yet largely hidden role in sustaining exploitation, creating profound barriers to disclosure and limiting safeguarding intervention.
- Police recognition of vulnerability is widespread but unevenly operationalised, with notable intelligence gaps in relation to online markets, gendered exploitation and the scale of coercion experienced by children.
- Intersecting disadvantages, including poverty, care experience, neurodiversity, educational exclusion and structural racism, shape patterns of recruitment and criminalisation, though their influence varies geographically.
- Unmet need rather than vulnerability alone is decisive in enabling exploitation, as delays in access to support, fragmented services and systemic under-provision create conditions in which criminal networks can position themselves as providers of opportunity, belonging and protection.

These findings illustrate how contemporary drug market exploitation is sustained through the interaction of rapidly evolving criminal business models, structural inequality and institutional constraint. Children's involvement is shaped not only by coercion but by relational recruitment processes that capitalise on unmet emotional, social and economic needs. This produces complex victim–offender overlaps that challenge traditional policing frameworks and complicate the balance between enforcement and safeguarding. Understanding how these dynamics shape police perceptions and practice is therefore essential.

Chapter 5: Balancing Enforcement and Safeguarding for Children Involved in Drug Markets

5.0. Introduction

The preceding chapter illustrated the layered and often overlapping forms of violence that shape children's exploitation in county lines drug markets. These harms create a complex operational landscape for policing, requiring responses that address both children's vulnerability and their criminalisation within exploitative networks (Coomber et al., 2025; Spicer et al., 2020; Walsh, 2023). At present, the police response to county lines is governed by the national 4P strategy, Prevent, Pursue, Protect and Prepare, which structures activity around disrupting offenders, safeguarding victims, strengthening resilience and preventing further exploitation. The framework encompasses a broad range of strategies aimed at enforcement and disruption, the safeguarding of victims, and partnership working to inhibit both perpetration and victimisation within communities. It aspires to deliver a holistic response, addressing the deeper drivers of criminality and exploitation while maintaining a robust criminal justice approach. However, those involved in its implementation describe an inherent tension within this model. In practice, balancing enforcement and safeguarding across national provision is complex (Maher and Dixon, 1999; Spicer, 2021). The dominance of one perspective can undermine the effectiveness of the other. Where enforcement priorities intensify, safeguarding risks become secondary. Where safeguarding is prioritised, disruption outcomes may be perceived as diluted or insufficiently robust. These tensions are not confined to a single tactic. Rather, they operate across multiple elements of the county lines response.

5.1. The Dominance of the Home Office Agenda in Justice Responses

Home Office directives have been highly influential in reshaping enforcement and disruption responses to county lines (Home Office, 2023, 2025a, 2025b). The use of Home Office funding to create County Lines Taskforces across national exportation hubs has helped police overcome longstanding issues relating to finite resources and cross-border working. By deploying a standardised deal-line eradication methodology, measured against Home Office Key Performance Indicator (KPI) frameworks, Taskforces have become an extremely effective mechanism for removing lines and disrupting visible drug supply activity. The implementation of these techniques enables police to make high-volume arrests supported by court-ready charge packages. Commended for its efficiency, the National County Lines Programme was described by every respondent as having significantly improved policing's response to drug markets. The methodology was described as having radically reduced the timeframes associated with processing those involved in county lines drug dealing. Rapid arrest-to-charge processes were presented as a core strength of the model:

'They certainly get charged straightaway overnight; they're probably remanded, never bailed. And the majority of our lines are closed that way. I think [one force] reckon they have got from arrest to guilty plea down to about 50 days. It's really bloody quick because arrest and charge will be in the 24 hours. They're arrested with a charge package ready to go' (Police, South East).

The efficacy of this approach in achieving arrests has led to the replication of Taskforce methodology across non-exporting forces through devolved funding streams administered by the NCLCC. These additional resources were universally welcomed by interviewees. However, some respondents argued that funding alone has been insufficient to overcome force-level structural resourcing deficits. In particular, the absence of staffing capacity has limited forces' ability to capitalise fully on available funding:

'This year there are less bids now than there is money available... [because] there isn't the capacity within the forces. Because we're basically saying if you want to go and do drugs jobs, and county lines jobs, and child exploitation operations linked to county lines... there's some money here you can bid for. People have bid in, but they haven't exhausted the pot... because what they've got is sufficient for what they're able to do, which is not great... I would have expected that to be oversubscribed' (Police, South East).

5.1.1. Perverse Outcomes of Performance Metrics (Key Performance Indicators)

The narrow focus and predetermined methodology associated with Taskforce activity were identified as central to their success. However, this same focus was also associated with two significant limitations. First, officers reported that the KPIs linked to line eradication constrained upstream investigations to target more senior members of the hierarchy:

‘We would always obviously want to work upstream, take out those who are high up the hierarchy... but we are very much judged by our KPIs, we have to shut — for example, 700 drugs lines this year — you can’t do that whilst consistently going upstream’ (Police, South East).

This KPI-driven model influences the level at which policing interventions occur. It reinforces activity at the point of line possession rather than at the level of control and coordination. Respondents suggested that this has contributed to the adaptation of county lines structures. Criminal networks have reorganised to ensure that criminal justice intervention remains concentrated on exploited individuals rather than controllers:

‘We’re seeing that the gangs are changing their tactics. They used to have [it that] the line holder and the supplier were the same person. They’ve now given the line phone to a [vulnerable person]. We just disclose all our tactics all the time, so naturally our gangs change their tactics. So... now... what we’re finding... it’s really difficult to identify the... line controllers, because... the way [line-eradication] works, whoever’s holding the line takes the charge’ (Police, South East).

In pursuing the longer-term goal of dismantling wider drug supply networks, officers described having their ‘hands tied’ by the conditions attached to Home Office funding. The funding model was seen as outcome-driven in a narrow sense, with limited space for intelligence-led upstream disruption:

‘We’re not paid to [go upstream]... It’s that simple. Our whole programme, the NCLCC programme, so the County Lines Taskforces, the BTP, the six forces, we’re paid to close lines, that’s it... And the money stops if we don’t hit the target set by the Home Office... We’re sitting on so much data, which, if the Home Office invested, you could throw it all into one big system, pick out all the upstream. We could be sending [intelligence] packages off left, right and centre, but we can’t afford to do that with the money we’ve got’ (Police, South East).

For some respondents, these constraints reflected increased central control of the county lines space. By contrast, they suggested that earlier funding arrangements, such as the Mayor’s Office for Policing and Crime funding, permitted more complex and exploitation-focused investigations. Alongside upstream disruption, the pursuit of exploitation and modern slavery charges was described as a second casualty of the current funding model. Respondents emphasised that Home Office KPIs are not aligned with child protection outcomes:

‘The Home Office KPIs are not how many exploited children you can rescue, how many child trafficking charges you can get, it is solely how many lines you can close’ (Police, South East).

As exploitation is often secondary within the Taskforce framework, officers suggested that mobile phones seized on arrest for drug supply offences may not always be examined in depth for evidence of CCE. Digital devices frequently contain material capable of evidencing coercion, trafficking or control. However, where enforcement priorities are structured around rapid disruption, the investigative focus may centre on proving supply rather than establishing exploitation. Securing Modern Day Slavery charges, offences under the Modern Slavery Act (2015), including trafficking and exploitation, was viewed as significantly more labour-intensive than drug supply offences. As a result, exploitation offences were often deprioritised in favour of drug-supply charges, which were regarded as more straightforward, evidentially secure, and aligned with key KPIs centred on line closures and arrests. This creates a structural incentive to

pursue what is most measurable rather than what may most directly address harm. Building on this observation, interviewees suggested that the introduction of more meaningful scrutiny of safeguarding procedures and exploitation investigations might offer a positive way forward:

‘In my experience, the best way to effect change in policing at the moment is for HMIC [His Majesty’s Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services] to ask a question about it. So if we think about... how do we apply the least pressure to get the best result? The best way to do that really is to make sure that HMIC inspectors are really well versed on this stuff and that they’re asking the right questions because if they ask those questions of chief officers, those chief officers will ask the questions of their sort of mid-level manager, inspectors and the like and there will be significant motivation to get this stuff right’ (Police, North West).

While some officers demonstrated strong commitment and expertise in applying Modern Slavery legislation, they also identified CPS variability as a key barrier to embedding exploitation-focused prosecutions within routine practice.

‘Even though to me the legislation is very clear, it again very much depends on who you get in the CPS... So we’ve been working with the Complex Case Unit in the CPS, who have then got their own CSE and CCE specialists, and they’re just amazing. They are like, “This is what we need to do, this is what we need to gather”, and it will fit, and it seems very clear-cut. But then I’ve had cases where we’ve gone to local CPS, and they’re very much saying, “It’s not enough, it doesn’t fit”, but the evidence is more or less the same’ (Police, Wales).

Contemporary county lines policing was therefore perceived as having the unintended consequence of targeting the least harmful actors within national networks. By focusing predominantly on drug or line possession, policing responses were seen by some as failing to reach those responsible for violence and exploitation:

‘Not every drug network, but drugs in general, drive violence because... they sustain groups involved in violence and exploitation. But that doesn’t mean every single person involved in drugs is inherently violent, because... if you have a violent network, you don’t want your person holding the drugs to be violent, because then they’re getting seized by police. We often go for the people who have got stacks and stacks of drugs... For me... I’m like, well, you’ve just not gone for the harm then, because that person is not going to be dumb enough to be stabbing people, because they have enforcers within networks, they have children within networks for a lot of that running’ (Police, South East).

There was widespread agreement that deal-line eradication is highly effective in targeting street-level drug dealing. However, it was perceived as less effective in addressing higher-harm dynamics, including violence and child exploitation. Despite acknowledged shortcomings, respondents attributed the continued dominance of the model to its political visibility and measurable outputs, which were understood to provide good optics for the police force and the Home Office:

‘From a policing point of view... It’s so easy to get good results for line closures... It’s like shooting fish in a barrel... It’s so easy for us to do and it makes it look so good. It should be suspicious that, no matter how many resources and what you lose, no matter how much money, how many cars, it somehow always exceeds its targets. It not just meets it, it’s exceeding it’ (Police, South East).

Crucially, these dynamics were also identified by the research as having the potential to amplify, rather than reduce harm at the community level. By concentrating on low-level actors, enforcement procedures create vacancies in low-

level positions in drug supply markets and therefore have the potential to increase the number of exploited children in a community.

5.1.2. The Role of Civil Orders in Tackling Child Exploitation in Drug Markets

Civil orders were identified by interviewees as an important tool in disrupting those who exploit children within drug markets. The NCLCC plays a significant role in supporting forces in the use of Slavery and Trafficking Risk Orders (STROs) and Slavery and Trafficking Prevention Orders (STPOs), both introduced under the Modern Slavery Act (2015). Risk-based civil orders enable courts to impose restrictive conditions on individuals where there is a demonstrable risk of slavery or trafficking-related harm. They do not require a full criminal conviction, which lowers the evidential threshold and allows earlier intervention. In practice, this makes them a potentially powerful protective mechanism in cases of CCE. Familiarity with these orders was often lower than with Child Abduction Warning Notices (CAWNs) and Closure Orders under anti-social behaviour legislation. Slavery and Trafficking Orders were valued for regulating the broader conduct of an exploiter, rather than being limited to contact with a specific child. Unlike a CAWN, which restricts association with a named child, an STRO or STPO can prohibit wider behaviours, including travel, communication methods or interaction with children generally. This broader scope was seen as offering stronger preventative potential:

‘A CAWN is rubbish because that just says, “Well, you can’t be with that one child”, where... a modern slavery order looks at a broader picture. Far more effective’ (Police, Wales).

The quotation illustrates a key distinction between reactive and preventative tools. CAWNs are quick to issue and administratively straightforward but limited in scope, often tied to individual safeguarding cases. In contrast, STROs and STPOs function as risk management tools, aiming to constrain patterns of behaviour associated with exploitation rather than addressing a single incident. This approach theoretically enhances protection for multiple children, and STROs have been found to reduce sexual harm by 85% (Whitten et al., 2025). Awareness and confidence in the use of STROs and STPOs varied considerably across forces. In some areas, CAWNs continued to be used more frequently and were believed to carry symbolic deterrent value, particularly where reputational consequences within peer networks were considered significant. However, reliance on symbolic impact does not necessarily equate to sustained disruption. The protective effect of any civil order ultimately depends on monitoring capacity and enforcement. Where resources are limited, the broader preventative potential of slavery and trafficking orders may not be fully realised.

‘I tell you what I think really works... When we’ve been able to identify somebody who’s involved in exploiting a young person, serving them with something like a CAWN... Anything where it’s got child in the definition has the stereotypical nonce type of offence... It’s not a cool offence... Supplying Class A drugs is cool... So... it’s making the exploiters think, serving them things like that’ (Safeguarding Professional, North East).

Confidence in the use of slavery and trafficking orders was not so well established. However, their application was described as administratively complex and fragmented across legislative silos:

‘So civil orders... There are loads of them... And what I find is because they’re all under separate bits of legislation... there’s loads of work done on them in silo. The reality is that they’re all basically the same, and you get lots of different departments doing work around pushing their particular order. Whereas... if there was a bit of criminal legislation that said you can get an order when there’s a risk of future offending... you could get conditions to stop it’ (Police, Wales).

In the absence of a criminal conviction, risk-based civil orders play an important protective role due to their lower evidential threshold. However, their effectiveness was often undermined by limited monitoring capacity. Resourcing

varied significantly. Some forces had dedicated civil order teams. Others relied on frontline officers to monitor compliance. The arrangements perceived as being most effective were associated with forces that combined exploitation expertise with order oversight. Where specialist capacity was absent, officers reported limited confidence in applying civil legislation. The NCLCC's guidance and support were therefore viewed as essential:

'I think [we need] for cops to have that awareness when you don't have that dedicated team to have the confidence in how you apply for the orders, what's the evidential threshold, what you need to get an order... give guidance and stuff' (Police, North East).

Since the establishment of national provision, enforcement and disruption activity around county lines has significantly improved. Standardised methodology, cross-border coordination and the dissemination of best practice have strengthened policing's capacity to close lines and secure rapid charges. However, offender adaptation and KPI-driven enforcement have limited the model's capacity to dismantle higher-harm actors and to prioritise child protection. While highly effective in measurable disruption terms, current approaches risk leaving children vulnerable to continued exploitation by failing to consistently target those responsible for violence and coercion.

5.1.3. Fragmentation of Offences and Missed Exploitation in Policing

The departmental location of county lines responses within a force strongly shapes their form. England and Wales comprise 43 separate autonomous forces and national provision remains far from homogeneous. The National County Lines Programme has created some tactical alignment, but structures and resourcing still differ significantly. This variation partly reflects the contested classification of county lines within policing. The overall county lines model encompasses multiple criminal components, including serious organised crime (SOC), exploitation, violence (often involving weapon possession) and low-level street dealing, which, when viewed in isolation, would not meet the threshold for a SOC response. The question of where county lines responses should be located within policing structures, therefore, remains highly contentious. Forces involved in the research described markedly different approaches, each with distinct implications for their capacity to disrupt county lines activity and safeguard exploited children. Some officers highlighted how their Force Intelligence Bureaus failed to formulate intelligence packages that adequately connected incidents of violence, exploitation and drug supply within their force area. As a result, policing responses sometimes addressed these issues as separate problems rather than interconnected elements of a single exploitative model:

'We've had a massive knife crime issue, and early on this year, the police set up a proper big operation to address what they were calling youth violence. Police didn't really want to link that to exploitation... "This is this kid with a knife who's trying to stab this kid with a knife", or they're robbing bikes at knifepoint, you know? That sort of stuff... I would say that was exploitation as well; it was a very easy way [for] the higher-ups getting a high-value item without getting their hands dirty, wasn't it? There was a lot of knife crime as part of that. Some of it is to do with [drug-related] postcode wars... [The Kids] They're told, "Go and attack that person"' (Safeguarding Professional, North West).

This fragmentation was especially evident in forces without dedicated exploitation teams. In these contexts, drug offences were routinely separated from their broader harm and safeguarding dimensions, resulting in cases being processed as discrete criminal incidents rather than as components of organised exploitation. Participants suggested that this categorisation obscured seriousness and diminished institutional recognition of cumulative harm. Interviewees described the consequences as self-reinforcing. When forces responded primarily to isolated acts of violence or supply, they were unable to evidence the scale, complexity or interconnected nature of exploitation-related demand. This limited their capacity to justify additional resourcing and constrained the development of sustained, intelligence-led investigations. In effect, organisational structure shaped what became visible as harm.

5.2. The Need for Dedicated Exploitation Teams in Police Forces

Dedicated criminal exploitation teams were therefore understood as more than a resourcing preference; they were framed as structurally necessary to prevent exploitation cases from being absorbed into generalist investigative workloads. Without such teams, responsibility defaulted to Criminal Investigation Departments (CIDs) already managing high volumes of domestic abuse, serious assaults, robbery and burglary. As one officer noted, in the absence of a focused team, exploitation cases become drowned in competing high-risk demand. While some forces had established exploitation teams, others had removed them, which was perceived as regressive. Participants argued that without protected investigative capacity, complex exploitation cases struggled to progress beyond immediate incident management. Dedicated teams were seen as critical in sustaining case continuity, linking related offences and maintaining a safeguarding lens alongside enforcement activity. Teams with the internal capacity to build intelligence, conduct investigations and deploy SOC tactics were regarded as the gold standard. Their strength lay in their ability to facilitate a holistic response to criminal networks and their wider criminal portfolios:

‘So the idea of SOC exploitation [hubs] is that we do look at it as organised crime. We... look at that intelligence and [are] able to develop it. But not just... in relation to exploitation, because... there’s a lot of victim survivors who don’t necessarily want to speak to us... You have to kind of be able to then disrupt the network. ... So if there [are] drugs, then, obviously, we can look at it from a drugs point of view and then put... safety... measures in place. We can call for orders... remove people from the area... get access to phones, and then we can build what that looks like in terms of exploitation, because we have the relevant material to then start looking at that. ... Because in the past, we’ve kind of looked at stand-alone incidents... and I don’t think it really works that way’ (Police, North East).

5.2.1. Serious Organised Crime Capabilities Within Exploitation Teams

Crucially, participants identified the organisational location of cases within SOC structures as being essential to avoiding the artificial separation of exploitation from drug supply. SOC arenas were described as better able to address the full business model of offending, rather than treating CCE as an adjunct safeguarding issue. In some forces, however, respondents described a persistent disconnect between SOC teams and exploitation units. Drug supply was reportedly prioritised within SOC, while the child exploitation dimension was treated as a separate vulnerability matter. This organisational division was understood to fragment investigations and dilute disruption potential. As one officer reflected, CCE and organised drug supply are intrinsically linked, yet are often managed in separate operational silos:

‘I personally think CCE should be investigated within a SOC team... They go hand in hand, don’t they?... If we have CCE-focused people within the SOC team, the disruption can be right, shut down that trap house. You know, get those adult cuckooing victims, get them into Achieve. Get housing on their back, give them housing notices that say they can’t have people there. Disruption one done; you’ve disrupted that. Disruption two, like the exploiters on license, let’s breach his license for something rather than affecting the kids. So it has to sit within a SOC setting for me. But it sits in a vulnerability setting at the moment. And that’s been the biggest barrier, because the legislation isn’t there’ (Police, North West).

The majority of participants argued that embedding CCE within SOC structures would enable more holistic disruption strategies. Rather than focusing narrowly on prosecuting children or other low-level actors, SOC-led approaches can target adult exploiters, close premises used for supply, tackle financial incentives and address associated harms like cuckooing, rather than concentrating on prosecuting children or low-level actors. In this framing, exploitation is not a secondary safeguarding concern but a central part of organised criminal enterprise. Participants suggested that positioning CCE within vulnerability portfolios limited the use of organised crime legislation and reduced access to specialist investigative tools. The broadened scope of SOC-focused holistic investigations inevitably increases the

workload associated with each case. This substantially reduces the capacity of SOC exploitation teams to take on large volumes of investigations. Where teams were able to proactively generate their own cases, they could manage workloads at a sustainable pace. By contrast, in forces where taskforces produced high volumes of drug supply charges through deal-line eradication methods, related exploitation cases were often referred separately to exploitation teams. In these contexts, exploitation teams were quickly overwhelmed.

‘So... we’ll have a missing kid, say, “Right, [county lines taskforce] go and get that kid.” They go and get that kid, get the line holder, and then we, the exploitation team, have to investigate the exploitation... Each one of those becomes an exploitation investigation and a safeguarding issue. So when I say I’m really short of staff, I’m really short of staff!’ (Police, South East).

The deprioritisation of exploitation within police responses is understood to result from structural dynamics, in many cases relating to national practice. Taskforces frequently refer potential exploitation cases to separate teams. Because taskforce methodologies are streamlined and driven by performance indicators, exploitation teams often lack the resources to manage the volume of referrals they receive. Forces operating under this model are not actively closing exploitation investigations. However, their failure to integrate drug-supply and exploitation responses within a single SOC team means that enforcement remains focused on exploited individuals, while safeguarding remains highly individualised rather than being tied to enforcement.

In recognition of the complexity and seriousness of some county lines networks, certain forces refer these cases to specialist units. This enables investigations to access specialist capabilities and pursue upstream actors, bringing exploiters and their wider beneficiaries to justice. Under this model, perpetrators associated with specialist investigations are often flagged and closed to other teams while inquiries are ongoing. Although this approach appears effective in tackling harm at scale, it presents significant safeguarding challenges. Demand on specialist teams can be extremely high, resulting in prolonged queues before cases are allocated. During this period, flagged perpetrators linked to child exploitation remain inaccessible to other units for enforcement or disruption. This can leave children exposed to ongoing harm, facilitated by the absence of timely police intervention:

‘If you’re a team looking at somebody, you can flag them on the system to say no one can look at them... One of our officers [had the case] of a really prolific gang, who was in the middle of exploiting the entire [local area].... And the specialist teams came in and said, “We’re taking the case, and we’re flagging everybody, and you can’t touch them.” And they don’t do anything on them for one year, two years, three years... Meanwhile, that person was exploiting the entire [area].... And he knew we weren’t touching him, so he got bolder and bolder. And we had a point where kids were... getting misidentified and stabbed repeatedly from behind. And we couldn’t do anything about the person because they were flagged’ (Police, South East).

To avoid the potential harms of premature action, some forces adopted a more cautious approach to intelligence flagging. Large-scale operations often generated extensive lists of individuals who could be categorised as potential victims, peripheral associates or suspected offenders. Early flagging was viewed as administratively expansive and potentially disproportionate. Instead, individuals were only formally flagged once cases progressed into active investigations. Delayed flagging of potential exploiters until the point of active investigation was therefore identified as a key means of disrupting those who may continue to pose an ongoing risk to children. This approach reflects an underlying tension between safeguarding, intelligence development and reputational or procedural risk.

‘I think it was a decision made just on account of... the breadth of the operation[s], the amount of people that can be either potential victims, potential offenders, mapped into the OCG... If we put a covert asset in, then any covert tactics, whether that’s surveillance, undercover... we would flag them at that point... [At

t]his initial stage, we don't flag them, but at the point where they become an agreed operation, at that point they become flagged' (Police, North East).

5.3. Alignment Across Local, Regional and National Policing

During interviews, participants highlighted that constraints on disrupting drug supply networks and associated child exploitation extended beyond internal force structures. They also described structural misalignment within inter-agency tasking processes involving territorial forces, ROCUs and the NCA. These arrangements were presented as inadvertently discouraging the continuation of investigations upstream beyond local enforcement outcomes. Officers described a recurring pattern in which local forces prioritised the successful prosecution of individual drug dealers, often treating imprisonment as the endpoint of operational success. However, digital devices and intelligence gathered during these investigations frequently contained information capable of advancing inquiries into wider supply chains, financial infrastructures and international controllers. Despite this potential, such material was often not progressed. According to participants, ROCUs and the NCA required intelligence to be developed to specific evidential thresholds before accepting cases. Yet territorial forces reported lacking the capacity to undertake this additional proactive work due to sustained reactive demand. As one officer described, information therefore remained in a bureaucratic no-man's-land, falling between organisational remits. This gap was said to result in missed opportunities to pursue financial flows, upstream organisers and transnational actors, including those operating overseas (Tudor, 2025). The difficulty was not framed as unwillingness, but as a structural disincentive. Local performance metrics rewarded case completion rather than intelligence development. Regional and national units, in turn, operated gateway criteria that effectively required preparatory work without providing the resources to complete it. The consequence, participants suggested, was that intelligence capable of dismantling higher-tier networks frequently stagnated, limiting the system's capacity to disrupt exploitative business models at scale.

'So... the police force are dealing with a drugs job. They seize phones, they do various different things and they eventually finish that case. So they say, "Right... We've achieved our objective, we've put a drug dealer in jail." But there's loads of information on his phones, there's loads of information in this case that's probably going to assist the upstream into the ROCU' (Police, North East).

The Home Office-accredited taskforce methodology was widely regarded as highly effective in closing deal lines. However, it was seen as far less effective in addressing upstream harm. While the removal of drug supply lines plays an important role in community protection, it does little to safeguard children if those responsible for their exploitation are not targeted. There is therefore a clear need to supplement national county lines programmes with more detailed investigations of the criminal networks controlling and supplying distribution systems involving child exploitation. Criminal business models deliberately position children and vulnerable adults at the most risk-laden end of operations, insulating senior actors from direct consequences. In their current form, policing structures can inadvertently reinforce this model by failing to pursue harm upstream. Respondents identified the allocation of resources to dedicated exploitation teams as a critical first step towards reform. Such teams would integrate intelligence, investigative and SOC capabilities and operate proactively rather than reactively, and potentially close some of the gaps present in inter-agency working.

5.3.1. Exploitation Investigations and the Limits of Cross-Border Working

As outlined above, the artificial division of crime types across portfolios within forces can undermine the effectiveness of responses to CCE in drug markets. These problems are further exacerbated by geography, particularly in relation to cross-border working. Some county lines continue to operate across force boundaries. They often flow from large exporter forces, characterised by high-harm and high-demand crime profiles, into areas with lower demand and less developed organised crime infrastructures. Under current cross-border ownership arrangements, investigations are

frequently allocated to forces already operating under significant demand pressures. As with the internal allocation of investigations within forces, the distribution of responsibility between forces was understood to leave children exposed to ongoing harm. One officer described an investigation which involved a child being trafficked into his force area for the purposes of selling drugs. As the exploitation began in the exporter force area, their police force was responsible for the related investigation. However, the officer highlighted that, because of the relatively high policing demands present in exporter forces, many of these cases may slip through the net:

‘You can imagine how many [crimes]... [the exporting force] have got to deal with... So you’ve got somebody who has... facilitated that offending in [our force], isn’t subject to an investigation by [us], because the crime sits in [the exporter force]. But how many other kids are they doing that with? What else are they doing?... By nature of the criminality, people travel... somebody’s got to own it... [and] just because you don’t own a crime it doesn’t mean that you don’t own the risk of other individuals involved... You still need to give some ethics to those individuals who might be facilitating it’ (Police, Wales).

Numerous respondents highlighted the complexities of assigning investigative responsibility in cross-border county lines operations. Under these conditions, trafficking investigations were frequently described as the first casualty of inter-force working. While drug supply offences were routinely pursued and immediate safeguarding measures implemented for identified children, longer-term disruption of exploiters was often deprioritised. Participants explained that when children were located in other force areas, local teams would collaborate in operational activity, such as executing warrants, but ownership of the investigation would typically transfer to the host force. This arrangement created tensions around case retention, performance recognition and investigative continuity. As one respondent reflected, their taskforce team often supported operations but did not retain the trafficking investigation, limiting their ability to pursue exploiters beyond the immediate recovery of the child. Capacity pressures were central to this pattern. Forces managing high volumes of missing children and exploitation-related demand described the scale of potential trafficking offences as operationally overwhelming:

‘What do we have here? 3,000 repeat mispers [missing persons] a year... children, and a large proportion of those will be involved in CCE or CSE. And if all of those involved in CCE are being trafficked every time they go missing, you’re talking about 6,000 human trafficking crimes a year... The volume would destroy us if we didn’t [just] focus [on the drugs]... [So we] just say, “Well, I don’t want to put the crime on”’ (Police, South East).

Even where police failed to record exploitation offences, the officer suggested that individual-level safeguarding measures would still be implemented where children were understood to be at risk. However, the officer was keen to explain that the failure to pursue exploiters must come to be seen as the failure to safeguard the child:

‘What you will find... the safeguarding will happen. So we all know that whoever owns the child has to do the multi-agency safeguarding... but you know, it goes further, and we go, “This child’s at risk of CCE, absolutely safeguarding needs to happen”... What I’m struggling with at the moment, [is] that... until you address the problem, you’re not actually safeguarding the child. Just sharing information and telling everyone about stuff and maybe moving the child is not helping unless we take out the exploiters in the first place’ (Police, South East).

The officer estimated that formally recording all missing episodes linked to criminal exploitation as trafficking would overwhelm forces. As a result, some teams prioritised drug offences and immediate safeguarding over pursuing trafficking charges. This pragmatic triage was seen as strategically incomplete. While multi-agency safeguarding was routine, respondents questioned whether it was sufficient without sustained action against exploiters, warning that interventions risk being temporary or displacing exploitation onto other children.

These accounts highlight a structural tension between managing volume and achieving long-term disruption. Cross-border arrangements, performance frameworks and limited capacity tend to favour short-term recovery and enforcement over sustained trafficking investigations. Consequently, children may be briefly protected while exploitative networks remain active. Once again, Home Office directives reinforce this pattern by incentivising short-term approaches rather than upstream, holistic investigations, ultimately weakening long-term protection for children.

5.4. Investment in Digital Forensics

Beyond the structures governing county lines policing, two key areas of resourcing were identified as being key to improvement of the current police response. Under Home Office funding arrangements, taskforces have been permitted to ring-fence Digital Forensics Unit (DFU) resources or embed them within teams. This was identified as invaluable in enabling the pursuit of offenders and the production of charge-ready arrest packages:

‘Because we’re a national taskforce, we obviously receive Home Office funding, and we therefore pay for posts within our DFU, and we have a turnaround of just a couple of weeks. So it’s not too bad. Obviously, that can be prioritised in the cases where we need to’ (Police, North West).

Outside of ring-fenced taskforces, investigative teams reported having to join centralised DFU queues, leading to significant delays in phone downloads and device examinations. As digital evidence is now central to most investigations, these delays were described as routine. Participants emphasised that almost all offence types now generate digital material, ‘every single offence now involves some sort of electronic device’ (Police, North West), placing sustained pressure on DFU capacity. The growth of digitally mediated crime, from mobile phones to vehicle GPS systems, has increased demand beyond existing resources, making digital forensics a foundational requirement across policing. Several suggested that even a substantial increase in staffing would struggle to meet current investigative requirements. For exploitation and drug-supply investigations, delays had serious consequences. Intelligence on networks, financial flows and upstream actors often remained inaccessible while devices await examination. In some cases, opportunities for timely disruption may be lost entirely. The issue was therefore framed not simply as a technical backlog, but as a systemic vulnerability in tackling complex and organised crime, particularly exploitation.

In county lines policing, differential access to digital forensics creates disparities in investigative capacity between forces with Home Office funding and those without. While cross-border funding can partially mitigate this, internal disparities are more acute. Exploitation investigations typically sit outside taskforce activity, leaving teams without the expedited DFU access available to drug-supply cases. This directly affects the ability of exploitation teams to achieve successful outcomes within reasonable timeframes and adds further barriers to securing exploitation charges. Professionals also felt that significantly more needed to be done at a strategic level to secure the cooperation of technology companies during investigations. Beyond capacity constraints, participants also identified legal and technical barriers to accessing digital evidence. Encrypted devices were a particular concern, with officers unable to access potentially decisive material when suspects refuse to disclose PIN codes. As one participant noted, evidence capable of securing convictions for exploitation offences may be present on seized devices yet remain beyond investigative reach. This was framed not simply as a technical inconvenience but as a systematic limitation within current legislative and technological frameworks, constraining the effective pursuit of digitally enabled exploitation.

5.4.1. Online Drug Markets and Lagging Policing Responses

A second, related resourcing concern centred on online environments more broadly. Participants widely agreed that drug supply has increasingly migrated into digital and social media spaces, which now function as operational infrastructure for recruitment, advertising, coordination and control. This shift requires specialist digital capabilities, proactive monitoring and platform-specific expertise, yet these resources were often described as underdeveloped

relative to the scale of online activity. These accounts suggest that while drug markets have become increasingly digitally embedded, policing capacity, legal powers and technical access mechanisms have not evolved at the same pace. The consequence is a widening gap between where exploitation is organised and where investigative tools remain most effective:

‘So drug supply via social media is not the new way to buy drugs. It has been the way people have bought drugs for about eight years, at least. And it stems across all demographics. I promise you, 50-year-old men will be buying cocaine on Telegram and Snapchat. And I promise you, 13-year-old children are buying cannabis on Snapchat. And it doesn’t matter about their demographic, their ethnicity, their culture... The type of drug might differ, but drugs as a thematic cuts through all those’ (Police, South East).

By contrast, policing responses were described as not having made any meaningful transitions into online drug markets:

‘And the reason it’s rife is because it’s not policed, largely. We’re not very good nationally at policing it. There are very few units [that look at this]... Around social media sellers, there’s a very big intelligence gap, because there’s not enough [police] doing it...’ (South East).

5.4.2. Resource Pressures and Constraints on Digital Policing

The limited scrutiny directed towards online environments was widely understood to facilitate the expansion of digitally mediated drug markets, which participants also recognised as sites of child exploitation. Online spaces were frequently described as operational blind spots within current policing practice. Respondents attributed this gap primarily to resourcing pressures. Proactive monitoring of social media platforms was characterised as labour-intensive and effectively limitless in scope. As one participant observed, drug transactions can be arranged rapidly through online channels, raising the question of how many officers would be required to meaningfully monitor such activity. For smaller, high-demand forces operating in contexts of deprivation, high drug-related harm and elevated crime rates, dedicating specialist staff to sustained online surveillance was described as operationally unrealistic.

‘We certainly are not resourced as a force to dedicate much resource to looking at what’s happening on social media... How many people would you need to be proactively checking media, setting up profiles to enable that?... So if you think about this really tiny force that isn’t funded very well, where on Earth are we going to find the resource to proactively look at social media? It’s just a minefield. Because we’re swamped already, so how do you find that additionality?’ (Police, North East).

The scale and fluidity of social media environments were therefore framed as structurally misaligned with existing policing models. While drug markets have migrated into digital spaces that operate continuously and trans-locally, policing remains largely reactive and territorially organised. The result is a widening asymmetry: exploiters can utilise online infrastructures for recruitment, advertising and coordination with relatively limited proactive disruption. This gap reflects competing priorities rather than indifference, but it nonetheless marks a structural expansion of the policing problem without a commensurate expansion of resources. These accounts suggest that the migration of drug supply into online environments has outpaced the development of dedicated digital policing capability, leaving online spaces as relative blind spots within exploitation-focused enforcement, enabling business models to adapt faster than institutional responses. National policing provision, therefore, was understood to almost totally ignore huge swathes of drug supply markets and was therefore deemed unfit to adequately respond to the national threat picture. Not only was knowledge, understanding and resource unsuitable to meet this demand, legislation governing the policing of online space was also identified as being unfit for purpose:

‘But it is wrong that you, as a member of the public, can do more than I can as a police officer in terms of the social media space. That’s not right. But the code of practice is outdated. The RIPA [Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act 2000] was written in the year 2000. Facebook was invented in 2004. So the code of practice, which you have to abide by, pre-dates the definition of social media’ (Police, South East).

5.4.3. Expansion and Resourcing of Online Taskforces

Home Office-funded online drug-market taskforces represent a positive step in correcting policing’s digital limitations. However, they are small in number and limited in reach, and their reliance on short-term funding not only creates financial precarity but also undermines their ability to recruit and retain staff.

Several respondents described operating within year-to-year funding cycles, which created uncertainty around workforce stability and long-term planning. As one officer noted, staff are acutely aware that posts may be lost at the start of a new financial year. Even where headline funding levels remain stable, rising salary and operational costs have led to incremental reductions in staffing, reinforcing this precarity. This instability was understood to have direct implications for capability. Short-term or unstable funding limits the development of specialist digital expertise and restricts proactive capacity. In areas where online drug markets and associated exploitation are expanding, reliance on time-limited budgets was described as structurally misaligned with the scale and persistence of demand:

‘When we recruit people, everyone’s aware that we’re year-to-year funding and we could all find ourselves on the 1st of April redeployed elsewhere. It’s probably a bit more of a reality in the last couple of years’ (Police, South East).

The findings suggest that national policing provision is not yet configured to meet the realities of digitally embedded drug markets. While enforcement and safeguarding responses continue at the local level, strategic investment in online investigation, digital forensics and specialist exploitation capacity remains uneven and insecure. In its current form, policing is therefore ill-equipped to fully understand, detect and investigate significant proportions of contemporary drug supply and associated child exploitation. Addressing this gap requires more than incremental adjustment. The migration of drug markets into online and trans-local spaces necessitates coherent embedding of digital capability within force-level strategy and sustained resourcing at both regional and national levels. Without such reform, institutional responses will continue to lag behind evolving business models and opportunities for meaningful disruption will remain constrained.

5.5. Improvements in Police Identification of Vulnerability and Exploitation With Ongoing Gaps

In interviews with professionals, it was suggested that significant work has been undertaken nationally through the NCLCC to improve awareness and understanding of how vulnerabilities expose children to the risk of exploitation (NPCC, 2024; NPCC, 2025). Communications have emphasised how vulnerability and adverse experiences shape perceptions, which can result in children being viewed as criminals rather than victims of exploitation. Consequently, awareness and understanding of these dynamics among police officers is now improving significantly. The vast majority of police officers involved in the research held roles within specialist teams focused on county lines, complex safeguarding, child exploitation and related areas, though they had vast experience of policing beyond this area. They were therefore well attuned to the relationship between vulnerability and exploitation in drug markets. They were also often heavily involved in delivering training across their forces. Among the provision described were Continuing Professional Development inputs for detectives, the creation of National Centre for Applied Learning Technologies packages, and contributions to Police Constable Degree Apprenticeship provision aimed at improving awareness of the vulnerabilities associated with children exploited in drug markets. These accounts suggest a clear institutional effort to enhance recognition of

intersecting vulnerabilities. Officers were keen to highlight the vastly improving picture that they perceived, but they were also emphatic in their assertions that substantial room for improvement remains:

‘Practice varies really, and it’s still an area where considerable work needs to be done because... there is still a tendency to frame children who are committing crime as criminals... When we speak to frontline uniform cops who are routinely being threatened with weapons by these children, who are routinely being spat at, assaulted... who’ve ended up with broken bones.. trying to deal with these children, [it is] very difficult to convince them to treat them as a victim first and quite understandable really in a lot of respects’ (Police, South East).

5.5.1. Barriers to Victim Recognition Arising From Children’s Characteristics

Among the accounts offered by respondents, children’s uncooperative behaviour towards police officers was identified as a key impediment to their identification as vulnerable victims. It was suggested that where children were violent, aggressive and non-compliant, officers were more likely to criminalise rather than safeguard. However, those working within specialist teams were clear that such behaviour frequently reflected fear, coercion and trauma, and therefore constituted evidence of vulnerability rather than culpability:

‘No child is scared of the police. They are petrified of the gang members. So when they’re fronting the cops out, they’re fronting the fact how their little sister’s going to get raped by the gang because they’re losing 50 wraps of heroin from inside their pants. That’s what you need to teach the police officers... they’re not attacking you. They are shit scared children’ (Police, South East).

This highlights both the recognition of these issues and the challenges in putting them into practice. While specialist officers show a sophisticated understanding of coercion and fear, consistently applying this perspective in frontline responses remains difficult. Some respondents highlighted that those in neighbourhood and response roles sometimes lack understanding of exploitation dynamics. For others, the demands of policing undermined their ability to pursue lines of enquiry:

‘I think I was especially guilty of it when I was on the shift. You would have a sense of tunnel vision with jobs. You’re looking at it and you’re going, “Right, I’ve got 25 minutes to deal with this the best I can before I’ve got a risk of being pulled away”... especially with extreme high demand... and you might not necessarily have the time to correctly assess and make a decision on the matter. I think... cops generally are professionally curious in the majority of circumstances, but it takes a volume of free time which the police don’t have’ (Police, North East).

Officers also reported that children were more likely to be dealt with as criminals, rather than victims, where their behaviour was perceived to be characterised by intractability. In this sense, if children had significant prior police contact, earlier offences or repeated missing episodes, they were more likely to be held personally responsible for their involvement in drug supply and less likely to be NFA’d:

‘I’m sure there are reasons like we have a load of intel on this kid, or they’ve come to our notice 600 or 700 times or whatever it might be, therefore we’re sick of it... They’re in care, they’ve kicked off, they think... we keep arresting them for trashing the care home, and suddenly, they turn up with drugs, and we’re like, “Well do you know what, you’ve had a load of previous contact with police, so we’re going to push on with this.” So I’m certain we see that, which is probably not where we’d want it, but I’m not going to be in every decision meeting in the world to make those calls’ (Police, South East).

5.5.2. Intensified Vulnerability and Increased Risk of Criminalisation

These accounts demonstrate the way in which repeated contact with the police, often itself a marker of intersecting vulnerability such as care experience, exclusion or poverty, can increase a child's likelihood of criminalisation. Recognition of this tension was evident among interviewees, yet decision-making was described as variable and dependent on individual officers rather than embedded safeguards. Beyond behaviour, several other characteristics were identified as influencing professional judgement. Among these, age was described as key. In short, the closer a child comes to turning 18, the less likely they are to be viewed as exploited and, by extension, the more likely they are to be processed as offenders:

'Because ultimately, I think your age dictates... So say you've got... a 13-year-old, you're probably more likely to be more sympathetic towards them. But if you were 16, 17, it's a "Ah, well, you should know better" type of thing. You're nearly an adult, you know, so ultimately you should be taking more account of what it is. So I do think age is a factor, but ultimately, they don't think, well, that [a] 16- [or] 17-year-old may have learning difficulties; I think age is a huge factor' (Police, North East).

This reflects recognition among respondents that vulnerability does not disappear as children approach adulthood, yet perceptions of maturity can significantly shape responses. The intersection of age with disability or learning difficulties was explicitly acknowledged, though not consistently accounted for in practice. Moreover, the adultification of young Black males was highlighted by several respondents as leading to their criminalisation occurring from a much earlier age than their White counterparts. For some, this is related directly to forms of racism present within policing or wider society:

'It's true, we adultify and stereotype our young Black boys much more than we do our White kids' (Police, South East).

For others, race and ethnicity were understood to intersect with wider forms of disadvantage to alter the way children are perceived and treated by others, including the police:

'I still think there is a tendency that if someone presents as that intentional criminal as a child, then there is a high risk of them being dealt with that way. And as a result of that, I think there are particular demographics that are potentially more at risk of being criminalised. So those deprived areas, we know that when we start to look at factors like deprivation in some inner-city areas that can also mean that children from particular ethnic backgrounds might be disproportionately dealt with in that way' (Police, Wales).

These reflections demonstrate a notable degree of professional awareness that race, deprivation and stereotyping intersect to shape pathways into criminalisation. However, the extent to which this awareness translates into consistent procedural safeguards or anti-racist practice frameworks was less clearly articulated. Overall, interviewees expressed the view that understanding of vulnerability and exploitation within drug markets is improving across police forces. They also believed that this shift is leading to more appropriate responses to children in this context. The provision of training was understood to be increasing, particularly within specialist units. However, substantial variation in frontline practice remained evident, especially within neighbourhood policing teams and response roles. Recognition of intersecting vulnerabilities was therefore described as advancing at an institutional and specialist level but inconsistently embedded across everyday operational policing.

5.5.3. Limits of the National Referral Mechanism in Serving Children's Best Interests

In police interviews, the NRM was consistently described as a central mechanism through which officers formally recognise CCE. Submitting an NRM referral for children arrested in connection with drug supply was identified as core best practice in guidance from safeguarding bodies, including the NCLCC. Participants described structured custody processes designed to flag potential indicators of exploitation at the point of arrest. Children detained for specified trigger offences, such as drug supply, weapons possession or low-level violence, are subject to safeguarding checklists that prompt consideration of exploitation. These processes include exploring the possibility of a Section 45 Modern Slavery defence, assessing debt bondage indicators, making multi-agency referrals and submitting NRM referrals. As one officer explained, the use of custody markers and referral protocols is intended to ensure that exploitation risks are recognised consistently across subsequent encounters. Analytically, the NRM functions as a reframing device. It provides an institutional pathway through which a child's conduct can be interpreted not solely as criminality, but as potential victimisation within exploitative networks. In this sense, the mechanism operates as a counterweight to enforcement-led responses by embedding safeguarding considerations within routine procedural practice:

'So if [a child's] arrested within that sort of remit for what we would call a trigger offence, so it doesn't just have to be drug dealing, it could be something, you know, low-level violence, maybe carrying a weapon, you know, those... type of offences we would call a trigger offence. Then they get what we call, like, a custody checklist' (Police, North East).

However, while the NRM facilitates formal recognition of exploitation, its effectiveness ultimately depends on what follows a referral. As earlier sections have demonstrated, structural constraints in investigation, resourcing and cross-border coordination may limit the extent to which referrals translate into sustained disruption of exploiters through upstream investigations. The NRM, therefore, represents a necessary but insufficient condition for safeguarding within drug market contexts. Within national best practice guidance, the NRM plays an essential role in identifying exploitation and protecting children from criminalisation. Police and safeguarding partners were often supportive of the process and the protections they believed it afforded exploited children. However, the research identified a substantial number of concerns regarding its implementation. Some respondents argued that, in practice, the process was ineffective in providing children with meaningful protection. More specifically, they argued that the mechanism does not generate additional substantive protections for children beyond those already available through existing safeguarding frameworks. One respondent, for example, described the process as an:

'Absolute waste of time... The NRM is a really good idea for trafficked international people. It is not at all set up in any shape or form for [children]. It actually makes it harder' (Police, South East).

In his assessment, he sought to contrast the speedy and comprehensive response offered to exploited children outside of the NRM process with the sluggish and minimalist offering of a referral.

'So what happens when a child is trafficked, arrested, what happens within 24 hours? We have a... multi-agency strategy meeting. All the key partners are there: we share information; we come up with a strategy; Children Services open a Section 47 investigation; child protection investigation; school puts that in place; health who put that in place; medical [assessment]... What does the NRM give? [A nine-month wait for a start, yeah]... We've already done it all' (Police, South East).

He also described the way that the associated requirements of the NRM process can divert resources from what were understood to be more important tasks:

‘But this is the big problem, okay... under the Home Office... rules, an NRM has to be recorded as a modern-day slavery crime, okay. An exploitation investigation, a safeguarding investigation is not a crime.... So I’ve already investigated the exploitation by the time the NRM comes in, and then I’ve got to write a crime review, so it’s hampering me as a DS from doing my job because I’ve already done all the work already... because they’re going to get Section 45 anyway. If you’re a kid on a county line and you’ve got a weight of gear on you, all the CPS would say, “Is this kid a trafficked child?”, come to the child protection team, opened to us, case dropped. It’s that simple’ (Police, South East).

Further criticisms of the NRM process arose which centred on three concerns. First, respondents noted the protracted timescales associated with NRM decision-making, with referrals often remaining unresolved for extended periods. During this time, children may continue to be exposed to exploitation without any immediate structural change in their circumstances:

‘The NRM doesn’t work for children; I know I’m required to say that it does. It doesn’t... As an adult, it affords you a set of rights that you didn’t have. It doesn’t afford any rights to a child... other than the fact that you’ve got 18 months, maybe, for a decision to come back positive or negative’ (Police, South East).

Second, some participants suggested that the NRM can inadvertently alter enforcement dynamics. Where a child is known to be subject to an ongoing referral, frontline officers may be less inclined to pursue charges pending a decision in relation to them. In certain accounts, this was perceived to risk signalling to higher-level exploiters that the child is less likely to face prosecution, potentially increasing their operational utility within drug supply networks:

‘And for 18 months, [the child has] got a card that says that they can be exploited, because if they ever now get arrested for drugs at any point in time, you’re already under an NRM, so we’re probably not going to charge you. We’re going to have to wait for that to come back, which, rather than being a safety mechanism, basically means to a higher up the chain, that child’s untouchable... I can send that child anywhere... So the exact opposite has been achieved of what we set out [to do]’ (Police, South East).

Third, the mechanism was described as conceptually misaligned with the context of county lines exploitation. Reflecting the work of Lydon and Emmanuel (2022), respondents argued that the NRM was originally designed for adult victims of trafficking in contexts such as domestic servitude or sexual exploitation. Its application to children embedded within drug markets was therefore viewed by some as a legislative adaptation rather than a purpose-built framework. As noted by Espeute and Lanskey (2023), these accounts do not necessarily reject the principle of victim recognition but instead highlight tensions in implementation. The NRM was characterised as an instrument that can formally acknowledge exploitation, but it was highlighted that positive outcomes did not routinely translate into investigations which protect children through the disruption of harmful criminal structures. This critique reinforces a broader theme running throughout the chapter: protective mechanisms, while symbolically and procedurally significant, remain constrained by structural and legislative frameworks that were not designed for the realities of contemporary drug markets.

For some critics, the issue was not that the NRM was intrinsically flawed. Rather, concern centred on the stage at which professionals engaged with it, as delayed or reactive referral could render the process ineffective and, in some cases, harmful:

‘The NRMs... I think if they’re used correctly... they’re a good tool to use, but I think when a young person is issued with an NRM, it’s usually too late; they’re too far down the exploited thing. And a lot of the times, with what we see is when they get served an NRM at whatever age, 16ish, 17, they are then doing the exploiting... So when they get served with an NRM, they haven’t got a get out of jail free card, but they’ve got something that they should have got at an earlier stage’ (Safeguarding Professional, North East).

5.5.4. Blurred Boundaries Between Victimisation and Perpetration

The blurred boundary between perpetration and victimisation was something that many respondents struggled with in their interactions with children. The need to balance their status as victims of exploitation against the need to protect the public from their harmful behaviour was described as being a 'difficult line to tread':

'There's massive complexities now because some of those young people who have been exploited are causing real harm in the areas' (Police, North West).

National guidance consistently emphasises the importance of recognising exploitation in the causation of children's harmful behaviour. This framing underpins strong encouragement towards diversionary approaches and the use of safeguarding mechanisms in place of prosecution. However, accounts from police and partner professionals suggest that the assumption that diversion universally serves a child's best interests is, in practice, more complex. Several respondents described situations in which diversion from formal criminal justice processes inadvertently limited access to statutory intervention. Where local authority services were contingent upon the presence of a court order or formal criminalisation, efforts by police and courts to avoid prosecution could delay meaningful support. Under these circumstances, diversion functioned less as immediate protection and more as a procedural delay.

5.5.5. Diversion and Barriers to Accessing Essential Services

Police described attempting informal or voluntary interventions over extended periods, only for statutory services to become available at the point of charge. By then, valuable time may have been lost and patterns of exploitation or offending further entrenched. The critique therefore was not of diversion per se but of the lack of integration between criminal justice discretion and local authority thresholds for support:

'In policing, we try not to charge children... You end up in this situation where policing tries not to criminalise a child by delaying, and so do the courts, but then the council won't offer any intervention services if they're not criminalised by the courts. We will do some intervention for maybe about two, three years, and by the time we're "Right, we've tried everything, we're going to start charging you", that's the point when the council then step in and go, "We're going to offer you a basketball lesson." And by that time, two, three years has passed. And I'm like, "I don't think that's going to do it"' (Police, South East).

These accounts illustrate a broader tension between principle and practice. While non-criminalisation is rightly framed as protective, safeguarding outcomes depend on the availability of timely, substantive intervention. Where service provision is conditional on formal justice involvement, blind adherence to diversionary doctrine may inadvertently undermine desistance pathways and leave children exposed to ongoing exploitation. The well-intentioned decision to divert children from the criminal justice system was also identified as having unintended consequences. In some cases, diversion limited access to essential diagnostic and treatment services relating to neurodiversity and mental health. Recognising that unmet needs contribute significantly to vulnerability to exploitation, many professionals described finding themselves in a Catch-22 situation. In these circumstances, criminalisation could perversely appear to serve the child's best interests by expediting access to essential services:

'We see our young people as victims and not as criminals... Unfortunately, YJS have a CAMHS worker attached to them, so any of our young people who have come through YJS... we are able to get them a sort of escalated diagnosis or assessment via the CAMHS worker with YJS. Unfortunately, that means we are having to criminalise our young people to get them the appropriate support because if they're not open to YJS... We don't want them to be charged for something that they've been coerced into doing, but then they fall into the seven-year waiting list. So it's really tricky' (Safeguarding Professional, Wales).

5.5.6. Protective Use of Criminal Justice Measures for Children

Respondents also described circumstances in which formal criminal justice measures played a protective role within high-risk exploitation contexts. While diversion and non-criminalisation are widely promoted as safeguarding mechanisms, some practitioners suggested that certain judicial controls may, in practice, provide children with leverage against exploiters. One respondent described a child who voluntarily retained an electronic monitoring tag for two years beyond the required period, using it to resist pressure from those seeking to involve him in drug supply. Although he did not explicitly disclose exploitation, his decision to maintain the tag functioned as a protective barrier. In this way, the measure operated not just as surveillance or punishment, but as an externally imposed constraint that limited his availability to exploiters.

This account complicates binary framings of criminalisation versus safeguarding. It suggests that, within coercive and violent market environments, certain formal restrictions may provide children with socially legitimate excuses to disengage from harmful networks. The protective value, therefore, does not lie in punishment itself, but in the structural authority that legal constraints confer. Such examples do not undermine the broader critique of over-criminalisation. Rather, they reinforce the need for context-sensitive approaches that recognise the diverse ways in which children navigate exploitative landscapes. Criminal justice interventions may exacerbate harm in some cases, yet in others, they may create temporary protective spaces where alternative safeguards are unavailable. Similarly, another respondent explained:

‘I’ve also seen kids ask for detailed bail conditions, so they screenshot it and send it to their exploiter... [I say]... ‘Bring it on!’... I think bail conditions should be used as a safeguarding measure... So a kid being trafficked to Hampshire, telling him he can’t go to Hampshire, is irrelevant. That’s fine, baddies will take him... tell him he has to stay at his address at this time. There’s your difference... I think we should be using bail conditions a lot more creatively to manage risk outside their home’ (Safeguarding Professional, South East).

When considered within the broader policing landscape outlined above, where systemic barriers limit the ability to bring exploiters to justice, small-scale safeguarding efforts take on renewed importance. The fact that some originate from children themselves further illustrates their significance. The examples above demonstrate that a false dichotomy exists between criminalisation and diversion when assessing a child’s best interests. In isolation, policing practice should favour diversionary principles as a means of protection. However, professionals operating within contexts of severely reduced services describe how criminal justice intervention can sometimes become the only available route to support a child’s needs. That this should not be the case is beyond doubt. Nevertheless, professional guidance and best practice must engage more honestly with the risky environments in which children live and in which policing decisions are made. As one respondent observed, ‘The road to hell is paved with good intentions.’ Practitioners and those who advise them must therefore remain alert to the potential harm caused by the unintended consequences of well-intentioned actions.

5.6. Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated that policing responses to children involved in drug markets are shaped by a persistent and deeply embedded tension between enforcement imperatives and safeguarding responsibilities. While national investment, standardised taskforce methodology and improved awareness of exploitation have strengthened policing’s capacity to disrupt visible drug supply activity, these developments have not always translated into sustained protection for children. Instead, structural incentives, organisational fragmentation and resource constraints frequently combine to prioritise measurable enforcement outcomes over the long-term disruption of exploitative networks.

Across force areas, practitioners described a policing landscape in which significant progress has been made in recognising vulnerability, and CCE Specialist teams, national training provision and the embedding of safeguarding mechanisms such as the NRM have contributed to greater institutional awareness. However, the operationalisation of this awareness remains uneven. High demand environments, KPI-driven performance frameworks and the artificial separation of exploitation from organised crime responses continue to shape decision-making in ways that may unintentionally reinforce exploitative business models.

Several key findings emerge from the analysis:

- KPI-driven enforcement models prioritise deal-line closures and arrests, often concentrating criminal justice intervention on exploited children and other low-level actors rather than those responsible for violence and control.
- Organisational fragmentation within forces can obscure exploitation. Consequently, drug supply, youth violence, safeguarding and organised crime are frequently treated as separate problems rather than interconnected elements of a single exploitative system.
- Dedicated exploitation teams with SOC capabilities are critical, enabling intelligence-led investigations that target networks holistically rather than responding to isolated incidents.
- Cross-border working arrangements and performance ownership structures can weaken trafficking investigations, leaving children exposed to ongoing harm while responsibility for disruption remains unclear.
- Resource constraints in digital forensics and online policing create significant investigative blind spots, particularly as drug markets increasingly migrate into social media and digitally mediated environments.
- Police awareness of intersecting vulnerability is improving, yet frontline understanding remains variable, with behavioural factors, prior contact, age, race and deprivation influencing whether children are treated as victims or offenders.
- Protective mechanisms such as the NRM and diversionary approaches are necessary but not always sufficient, as structural limitations within service provision can delay meaningful intervention or inadvertently create new risks.
- In some high-risk contexts, formal criminal justice controls may function as protective tools, illustrating the need for context-sensitive approaches that move beyond binary framings of criminalisation versus safeguarding.

These findings illustrate that contemporary policing responses are constrained not by a lack of professional commitment or awareness, but by systemic pressures embedded within national policy frameworks, organisational structures and resource allocation. Enforcement success, when measured primarily through visible disruption metrics, may obscure the persistence of exploitative networks that continue to generate risk for children. Safeguarding responses, meanwhile, are frequently individualised and reactive, struggling to achieve durable protection in the absence of sustained action against exploiters. The chapter, therefore, highlights the need for greater alignment between safeguarding and organised crime strategies, enhanced investment in digital capability and performance frameworks that recognise the disruption of exploitation as a central policing objective. Without such reforms, institutional responses risk remaining structurally outpaced by adaptive criminal business models.

Chapter 6: Discussion

6.0. Introduction

This discussion draws together the key findings of the report in relation to the four research questions. It examines how the evidence across the chapters contributes to understanding the structure of contemporary drug markets, the policing responses currently used, the role of vulnerability and disadvantage in relation to exploitation and criminalisation, and the structural changes needed to strengthen safeguarding and reduce harm.

6.1. How Are Local, National and Transnational Drug Markets Structured and How Do They Exploit Children, Especially Those With Unmet Needs?

The findings show that contemporary drug markets take many different forms. Rather than operating through a single county lines model, they consist of interconnected local, national and transnational networks that rely heavily on the exploitation of children. The literature describes this structure clearly. TOCGs import drugs into the UK, national and regional groups distribute them through urban hubs, and local markets sell them through increasingly flexible and digitally connected networks (Coomber and Moyle, 2018; NPCC, 2025). The literature also suggests that county lines has evolved beyond its original form. Alongside inter-regional trafficking, there is increasing evidence of blurred lines (Maxwell and Wallace, 2021) and more localised forms of drug market activity, defined as county lines (Harding, 2020; NPCC, 2025). Police and professional interviews deepen this picture by showing how officers across force areas describe three broad market formations operating at once. First, there are traditional lines in which children are moved substantial distances from exporter to importer areas. Second, there are cross-border models in which OCGs enter host force areas but exploit children already living there, allowing expansion without drawing attention through missing episodes on transport routes. Third, there are local or internal county lines in which the geographical distance is short, but the core dynamics of organised supply, violence and exploitation remain intact.

The empirical chapters also show that these markets are highly adaptive. The analysis of the literature explains that mobile phones, branded lines, Snapchat, WhatsApp and Instagram now play central roles in advertising drugs, coordinating runners and monitoring participants (Hall et al., 2023; Warburton, 2024). Police and professional interviews add that children are important not only as couriers and sellers but also as digital workers. They understand social media, can manage online shopfronts and have access to youth customer networks, especially in markets for cannabis, ketamine, nitrous oxide and other commodities outside of traditional heroin and crack cocaine markets. Officers also describe substantial intelligence gaps in relation to online markets, suggesting that significant parts of the contemporary market are poorly understood by policing. Across the chapters, child exploitation is shown to be central to market functioning, not peripheral to it. The literature outlines the familiar hierarchy of elders, line holders, sitters and runners, with children concentrated at the highest-risk end of the model (Harding, 2020; NPCC, 2025; Spicer et al., 2020). Their roles often include transporting drugs, holding money, carrying weapons, working shifts from cuckooed addresses and undertaking activities that shield more senior members from detection. Police and professional interviews confirm this and expand the picture. Officers describe children being used not only for sales and transport but also for violence, storage, recruitment of other children and the management of trap houses. In familial models, children can be drawn in even earlier and more deeply, with exploitation normalised as part of family life and family businesses. In some cases, even care placement does not break this dynamic because exploitative parents or wider family members remain upstream controllers.

The findings provide strong evidence that children are not recruited randomly. Rather, market actors systematically identify and exploit unmet needs. Self-reported data provides the clearest quantitative evidence. Among children self-reporting involvement in drug markets, 42% reported diagnosed neurodivergence, 36% reported diagnosed mental health conditions and 44% reported identified SEN. These figures are substantially higher than national estimates.

Approximately 15% of children are identified as neurodivergent, around 20-23% have a probable mental health condition and 21% of pupils in England are recorded as having SEN. Together, these findings suggest a marked concentration of neurodivergence, mental health needs and SEN within the sample (DfE, 2024; NHS England, 2023). This data also shows that exploitation is concentrated at young ages: 63% of the self-report sample were 15 or under, with 23% aged 15, 21% aged 13 and 19% each for those aged 14 and 16. This is consistent with the argument that developmental immaturity may increase children's susceptibility to recruitment and coercion. Police and professional interviews reinforce this interpretation. Officers repeatedly identify poverty, SEN, ADHD, mental health problems, exclusion from school, PRU attendance, care experience and chaotic home environments as the conditions most frequently associated with exploitation.

Importantly, officers saw these factors as more than background information. Many argued that unmet needs were a key driver of exploitation, as children became more vulnerable when support and services were not available. One safeguarding professional reported that 50% of the high-risk children in her caseload have SEN, and that this was likely an under-estimate because many needs remained undiagnosed. Officers also describe PRUs as 'hotbeds of recruitment' and argue that children excluded from mainstream settings may become more visible to exploiters. The interviews with children and young people show how these issues manifest in the context of children's lived experience. Young people describe recruitment at around 12 years old, often in contexts already shaped by violence, fear, exclusion and neighbourhood criminality. Some accounts show how experiences of violence in childhood shaped young people's views of risk and protection. Over time, knife carrying and gang involvement came to be seen as normal parts of everyday life. Other accounts showed how neurodivergence, school exclusion and instability in care reduced opportunities and increased reliance on exploitative peer groups and gangs. These accounts closely reflected those of practitioners, who described how exploiters offer more than money. They provide status, a sense of belonging, protection, food, drugs, clothes, parties and a sense of identity that many young people value.

The chapters also show that coercion is not confined to debt bondage. Police and professional interviews detail multiple grooming techniques: gifts, free food under the chicken shop model, free ketamine or cannabis, pop-up parties, social media, drill aesthetics, peer recruitment and curated success narratives. Grooming is both context-specific, as exploiters adapt their techniques to a child's vulnerabilities, and relational, with children interpreting control as affection, fostering trust and loyalty. Reflective of earlier studies (Anderdal-Bakken and Demant, 2019), children are made to feel valued, chosen and looked after, before being controlled through debt, threats, rape, violence, humiliation or threats to family members. In this sense, the market is sustained through a mixed economy of inducement and coercion, not by force alone. Finally, the findings demonstrate that violence and sexual violence are not incidental but constitutive of the market. The findings support previous county lines research showing that violence is widespread and deeply embedded within these markets (Children's Commissioner, 2021; Densley et al., 2023; Hall, A., 2020; Holligan et al., 2020; Maxwell and Wallace, 2021). Violence is used to intimidate children, enable weapon-related robbery, facilitate sexual abuse and maintain territorial control. Practitioner evidence further indicates that children are both victims and perpetrators of high levels of violence, including knife carrying, shootings, beatings, violence in trap houses, threats to families, sexual initiation and coercive sexual exploitation of both boys and girls. These dynamics do not just maintain market control; they also make disclosure much less likely, thereby insulating perpetrators from detection.

6.1.1. Key Findings 1:

- Drug markets operate through interacting local, national and transnational structures, rather than a single fixed county lines model. The analysis of the literature provides the macro structure; police and professional interviews show how this plays out across exporter, importer and internal-line force areas.
- County lines have not disappeared; they have mutated and hybridised, with more localised and digitally mediated forms operating alongside longer-distance trafficking.

- Children are structurally central to market operation as runners, sitters, holders of money or drugs, enforcers, recruiters and digital operators.
- Exploitation is organised through both grooming and coercive control, including gifts, food, drugs, social status, debt, violence and threats to family members.
- Children most likely to be drawn into drug markets are those with unmet needs, such as unsupported neurodivergence, mental health difficulties, SEN, trauma or care instability, rather than simply those labelled as 'vulnerable'.
- Self-reported data show very high rates of neurodivergence (42%), mental health needs (36%) and SEN (44%) among children involved in drug markets.
- Recruitment begins early. In the self-reported data, 63% of the sample were 15 or under and policing accounts suggest exploiters are increasingly targeting younger children because they are easier to control and less visible.
- Familial exploitation, care-sector recruitment, school exclusion and digital recruitment all feature as important routes into markets.

6.2. What Policing Responses Are Currently Used and How Are They Perceived in Terms of Effectiveness and Child Protection?

Police responses to county lines drug markets are often portrayed as balancing tensions between enforcement and safeguarding. In pursuit of the objectives contained in the national 4P strategy, policing county lines involves three broad tasks: disrupting drug supply networks, protecting vulnerable children and adults, and monitoring the movement of drugs and people across space (NPCC, 2024; NPCC, 2025). However, existing literature demonstrates how police have been criticised for prioritising enforcement over safeguarding (McLean et al., 2018; Spicer, 2019). The findings of the research extend this critique by raising questions about the extent to which current enforcement and safeguarding approaches reduce exploitation and related harms. Police and professional interviews demonstrated the way in which Home Office-funded County Lines Taskforces have come to dominate national policing responses. The approach, heralded by respondents as highly effective in terms of line closures, arrests and rapid charge packages, was widely agreed to have improved policing's ability to disrupt visible supply and close lines quickly. One officer reported that the arrest-to-guilty plea can be reduced to around 50 days, with arrest and charge often taking place within 24 hours.

However, the police and practitioner interviews also indicate that this success comes at a cost. As taskforces are judged primarily on KPIs linked to line closures, rather than child protection or trafficking disruption, officers report that their work is pushed towards line possession and street-level intervention rather than upstream investigation. This means that exploited line holders, runners or vulnerable adults become the main targets of criminal justice intervention, while controllers and organisers adapt their methods and remain more insulated. Officers explicitly stated that the Home Office KPIs are not about how many exploited children you can rescue but how many lines can be closed. Thus, the dominant enforcement model is seen as operationally efficient but strategically narrow. Under this model, volume has come to serve as a single proxy for success, and this was described as having the unintended consequence of amplifying rather than reducing harm. Participants argued that a focus on low-level enforcement may leave wider exploitation networks intact and limit opportunities to disrupt those organising and benefiting from exploitation. Despite concerns about its effectiveness in addressing exploitation and related harm, the model was often viewed as politically attractive because it demonstrated visible action by both policing and the Home Office.

The policing interviews also show that civil disruption measures play an important role. The utility of STROs and STPOs over CAWN was emphasised on account of their ability to regulate broader patterns of exploitative behaviour. Officers value them because they can constrain contact and travel and potentially protect more than one child. At the same time, confidence in using them is uneven, monitoring is resource-intensive and implementation varies considerably across forces. In other words, these tools are seen as promising but not yet embedded consistently enough to transform protection. Another major theme is that policing responses are weakened by fragmented organisational structures.

Police and professional interviews argue that county lines sit awkwardly across policing structures because they combine drug supply, organised crime, violence, exploitation and safeguarding. In some forces, these are handled in silos, meaning that violence, supply and exploitation are treated as separate incidents rather than as features of a single exploitative model. Where forces have dedicated exploitation teams with SOC capability, they are much better able to build intelligence, connect offences and pursue networks holistically. Where they do not, cases become absorbed into general CID demand and exploitation is easily missed or deprioritised. Cross-border working creates further problems. Officers explain that county lines trafficking investigations are often ‘the first casualty’ of inter-force arrangements. Drug offences and immediate safeguarding might be progressed, but responsibility for longer-term trafficking or exploitation investigations becomes unclear, especially where exporting forces already manage very high demand. Police responses, therefore, routinely leave underlying networks intact, and safeguarding interventions remain highly individualised. Officers called for the expansion of enforcement into the higher levels of drug supply networks as a key mechanism to improve community-level safeguarding responses.

Police described the way in which the dynamics of child exploitation have developed in line with transformations in drug market activity, most notably through the expansion of online drug sales. Despite the rapidly increasing market share of online sales, police were described as unequipped to operate in this space. Officers highlighted a lack of investment and expertise in this digital policing and exposed the largely unregulated space in which offenders were able to operate. Importantly, they were able to evidence the ways in which children continued to be exploited in online markets. Officers describe these markets as under-policed, poorly understood and beyond current proactive monitoring capabilities. Digital forensic delays make this worse. Taskforces with ring-fenced DFU access can progress drug charges more quickly, but exploitation teams are often left waiting in queues, reducing their ability to evidence coercion and pursue modern slavery or trafficking charges.

From the standpoint of child protection, the policing response is perceived as deeply ambivalent. Arrest data and police and professional interviews suggest that arrest often functions as an important route into formal intervention, although this does not necessarily translate into sustained safeguarding or support. The arrest data demonstrates that male suspects are much more likely to be charged than receive supportive intervention, while females are more likely to receive NFA rather than be safeguarded. Among older adolescents, charge and prosecution outcomes become increasingly common, while safeguarding outcomes become less so. Reflecting concerns of the Alliance for Youth Justice (2025), these figures show that enforcement becomes more dominant as adolescence progresses, despite continuing vulnerability. The interviews with children and young people reinforce the limits of current child protection responses. Young people described repeated contact with the police over time, yet key aspects of their vulnerability were not identified or addressed. This supports the views expressed by police officers and other professionals that safeguarding is often delivered in response to specific incidents rather than as a consistent and preventative approach.

Police and professional interviews are especially important in highlighting the contradictory effects of ‘best practice’. The NRM is widely used and intended to reframe children as victims of exploitation, yet officers describe major concerns: long delays, extra administrative burden, limited additional protection and, in some cases, children being put at increased risk by increasing their utility to offenders. Similarly, national guidance encourages diversion of exploited children from criminalisation. However, professionals understood criminalisation as a means of expediting access to key support services such as health assessments, CAMHS or local authority intervention. In other cases, practitioners described the way that interventions such as bail conditions or electronic tags could operate as protective measures by giving children a defensible excuse not to comply with exploiters’ demands. These accounts are important because they show how practitioners must consider the risk-laden environments in which children exist and the broader social fabric of crumbling service provision when they make decisions on how best to meet children’s needs. In these circumstances, some practitioners felt that strict adherence to best-practice guidance could occasionally produce unintended consequences for children.

6.2.1. Key Findings 2:

- The dominant policing response is enforcement-led disruption, especially via Home Office-funded County Lines Taskforces.
- This model is seen as operationally effective in disrupting visible supply networks, but participants questioned its effectiveness in addressing upstream exploitation and long-term child protection.
- Within many police forces, drug supply, violence and exploitation are often treated as separate issues. This can make it harder to develop a full understanding of exploitation. Dedicated exploitation teams with expertise in organised crime were described as the most effective approach.
- Cross-border arrangements frequently weaken trafficking investigations and allow exploiters to remain active even where immediate safeguarding occurs.
- Digital and online policing capacity is substantially behind market change, creating serious intelligence and evidential gaps.
- Quantitative arrest data show that child protection outcomes remain limited: for males, only 10% received safeguarding or welfare-related outcomes and only 7% of 17-18-year-olds were safeguarded.
- Principles of diversion, protection and safeguarding guide national best practice. However, the way these principles are implemented in practice can sometimes disadvantage children. In situations where support services are limited or unavailable, professionals may criminalise as a means of protecting children.

6.3. To What Extent Do Police Forces Recognise and Respond to Intersecting Vulnerabilities (Race, Disability, Poverty, Care Experience) That Shape Children's Risk of Exploitation and Criminalisation in Drug Markets?

Across the findings, there is strong evidence that police and safeguarding practitioners acknowledge the importance of vulnerability, but weaker evidence that this is translated consistently into operational responses. As indicated in the literature review (Cockbain et al., 2017; Macdonald et al., 2022; Shaw and Greenhow, 2020), police forces increasingly recognise that CCE is shaped by ethnicity, disability, gender, poverty, care experience and school exclusion, but the interaction between these vulnerabilities remains under-researched, and policing responses remain inconsistent. Officers across forces repeatedly state that vulnerability is the central organising principle through which children are targeted in drug markets. However, most importantly, children with multiple unmet needs, rather than those with specific risk factors, are the primary targets of exploiters. In this sense, the findings suggest that gaps in support provide opportunities for exploiters. Officers describe serious intelligence gaps, failures to join exploitation with missing episodes, and important blind spots around girls, online markets and some ethnic groups, which undermine their ability to respond meaningfully to vulnerability. Crucially, recognition is present, but it is not yet applied consistently across policing practice.

The quantitative data is crucial here because it allows comparison between children's self-reported vulnerabilities and what becomes institutionally visible in arrest data. On disability and additional needs, the gap is striking. In the self-report survey, 42% reported diagnosed neurodivergence, 36% reported diagnosed mental health conditions and 44% reported identified SEN. Yet in the arrest data, only 15% of cases had any recorded information on neurodiversity and only 14% had recorded mental health, self-harm or suicide data. Among those recorded cases, 20% were identified as neurodivergent and 28% as having mental health-related needs, but the more important finding is that over 85% of arrests contained no such information at all. Where information did exist, it was not often easily identifiable. This provides strong evidence that disability-related information is not routinely recorded within police arrest data. The same applies to care experience. The arrest data shows that care-leaver or care-experienced status was recorded in only 323 of 2,268 arrests, about 14% of the full dataset, and all of this data came from the North East, with none from London, highlighting substantial variation in recording practices between the two police services. Of those cases with data, 38% were care-experienced, which is high relative to population benchmarks. This suggests that care experience is highly prevalent among those arrest cases where care status was recorded. Even where care status is known, children

with care experience are less likely than peers to receive active safeguarding or diversion and more likely to have cases resolved through NFA.

Race shows a different but equally important pattern. The self-report data suggests that children encountering drug markets broadly reflect national ethnic population patterns. Within the self-report sample, 75% identified as White, 12% as Asian/Asian British, 7% as mixed ethnicity and 6% as Black/Black British/Caribbean/African. This broadly mirrors national population estimates for England and Wales, where approximately 81% of the population identify as White, 9% as Asian, 3% as mixed ethnicity and 4% as Black (ONS, 2022). This is critical because it challenges the assumption that Black children are more heavily involved in drug markets at the point of exploitation (Ford, 2018; Koch et al., 2024). However, the arrest data tell a different story. In London, 51% of arrests of children for drug-supply offences involved Black/African/Caribbean young people, despite Black/African/Caribbean communities accounting for approximately 13.5% of the London population (ONS, 2022), while White British young people accounted for 14% of arrests. Post-arrest outcomes are more troubling still: 71% of Black/African/Caribbean children were charged or prosecuted, while only 3% received safeguarding, welfare or diversion outcomes. For White British children, 43% were charged/prosecuted and 22% received safeguarding-related outcomes. These are among the clearest quantitative findings in the report and indicate substantial ethnic differences in arrest and post-arrest outcomes that cannot be explained by the self-report data alone. Police and professional interviews help explain why. Some officers openly acknowledge racialised policing dynamics, adultification of Black boys, the role of structural racism and the possibility that Black children are treated more harshly or brought to criminal justice attention more often. Others frame race more through poverty and geography. Importantly, the interviews suggest that awareness of racism exists among practitioners, although participants also identified concerns about how consistently this awareness is reflected in operational practice. This is why arrest data outcomes matter so much, as they highlight continuing disparities in access to safeguarding and diversionary outcomes for specific populations.

Gender is another area where recognition is partial and uneven. The quantitative data show that girls made up 39% of the self-report sample, indicating that they are a substantial minority of children involved in drug markets. Yet in arrest data, only 6% of suspects were female. Interviews explicitly recognise the way in which professional assumptions and practices are more closely attuned to males than females. The arrest data further shows that girls are more likely than boys to receive safeguarding-related outcomes (17% versus 10%), but girls' low visibility in arrest data means that many may not be reaching police attention through enforcement at all. These findings suggest that gender may influence how children's involvement comes to police attention and is reflected within the quantitative data.

Age is also handled unevenly. The quantitative data shows that self-reported exploitation is concentrated in younger adolescence, with 63% of the sample aged 15 or under, yet arrest data is concentrated among older adolescents: 47% of arrests involved 17-18-year-olds and 30% involved 16-year-olds. Outcomes worsen with age: safeguarding falls from 20% for those aged 12-13 to 7% for those aged 17-18, while charge/prosecution rises from 29% to 66%. Police and professional interviews directly echo this pattern; officers say that as children approach 18, they are more likely to be treated as culpable and less likely to be seen as exploited, despite continued learning difficulties, trauma or coercion. The findings suggest that many children come to the attention of services only after exploitation has become well established, at which point enforcement responses are more common than safeguarding outcomes. Knowledge about risk and vulnerability needs to be translated into earlier identification and safeguarding responses. To meaningfully protect children and young people, proactivity must come to be privileged over reactivity.

Poverty emerges across all chapters as one of the most common factors shaping children and young people's involvement in drug markets, yet it is rarely addressed directly by services and interventions. Previous studies frame exploitation as deeply tied to structural disadvantage and austerity (Alexandrescu and Spicer, 2023; Cockbain et al., 2025; Windle et al., 2020). Police and professional interviews go further, with officers explicitly stating that poverty is often the most significant risk factor, not in isolation, but because it interacts with exclusion, limited opportunity and

unmet need. The interviews with children and young people confirm this. Local deprivation, lack of alternatives, care instability, exclusion and neighbourhood violence all shape entry into drug markets. Yet poverty rarely appears to shape policing responses directly. It is often recognised as part of a child's circumstances but does not routinely trigger safeguarding intervention. Police and professional interviews highlight a clear gap between awareness of these issues and action taken in response to them. Specialist officers say awareness is improving, but they also explain that frontline practice varies sharply. Behaviour that is aggressive, fearful, non-compliant or repeated over time is more likely to be interpreted as criminality than vulnerability. Participants reported concerns that prior police contact, repeated missing episodes, care involvement and exclusion could influence how children and young people's behaviour is interpreted and responded to. This is one of the report's most important findings: children with multiple indicators of vulnerability do not necessarily receive more safeguarding or protective responses.

6.3.1. Key Findings 3:

- Police and safeguarding professionals consistently identified disability, care experience, poverty, school exclusion, ethnicity and mental health needs as important factors associated with children's exploitation in drug markets.
- However, these needs are not consistently recorded by the police. While children reported very high levels of neurodivergence (42%), mental health needs (36%) and SEN (44%), these factors appeared in only a small minority of arrest records.
- Race is associated with some of the clearest disparities in arrest and post-arrest outcomes identified in the report. The quantitative data shows that while self-reported exploitation broadly mirrors population patterns, Black/African/Caribbean children account for 51% of arrests in London and 71% of cases result in charge or prosecution, with only 3% receiving safeguarding-related outcomes.
- These findings indicate that Black/African/Caribbean children are disproportionately overrepresented in enforcement-led responses and significantly underrepresented in safeguarding outcomes.
- Care experience is strongly associated with exposure to exploitation but is inconsistently recorded and often not used to trigger active safeguarding. Of the arrest cases with care data, 38% of children were care-experienced.
- Gender and age are associated with important differences in how children appear within self-report and arrest data. Girls appear heavily in self-report data but minimally in arrest data, while older adolescents are much more likely to be criminalised than safeguarded.
- Poverty is recognised throughout the chapters as a major driver of risk but is not operationalised within policing decision-making.

6.4. What Changes Are Needed Within Policing Structures and Practices To Better Safeguard Children and Reduce Harm From Exploitation in Drug Markets?

The chapters suggest that incremental improvements alone will not be enough. Meaningful change requires a fundamental rethink of how policing responds to child exploitation, including how services are organised, funded and evaluated. The findings suggest that awareness alone is insufficient to address the challenges identified in this report. Rather, the evidence shows that drug markets have adapted faster than policing structures, while police and professional interviews suggest that current performance incentives continue to prioritise visible enforcement activity over longer-term safeguarding outcomes. Police and professional interviews were particularly clear on this point. Officers described a system shaped by performance targets, fragmented working practices, poor coordination across force boundaries, limited digital resources and safeguarding responses that are often reactive rather than preventative. The first major change required is to realign performance and accountability frameworks. Participants argued that where line closures and arrests remain the dominant measures of success, there is a risk that policing activity becomes focused on the most measurable outcomes rather than the most capable of addressing harm. Police and professional

interviews repeatedly argue that taskforce KPIs disincentivise upstream disruption and modern slavery investigations. It also suggests that HMIC inspection questions could be a powerful lever for change if they focused more clearly on exploitation investigations, safeguarding procedures and child protection outcomes.

The findings strongly support embedding exploitation within SOC-capable dedicated teams, rather than leaving it dispersed between safeguarding, CID, neighbourhood and drugs functions. Police and professional interviews are explicit that forces need dedicated exploitation teams with intelligence, investigative and SOC functions. These are described as the 'gold standard' because they can treat exploitation as a core feature of organised crime rather than as an add-on vulnerability issue. Without this, participants reported that cases are often absorbed into wider investigative demand or managed as separate incidents, making it more difficult to identify wider patterns of exploitation. Police and professional interviews reinforce this, showing that exploitation, violence, supply and recruitment are already deeply intertwined on the ground. The report points to the need for much more systematic recording and assessment of vulnerability. The quantitative arrest data makes this point clear. The substantial difference between children's self-reported needs and the information recorded within police data suggests that key safeguarding indicators are not being consistently captured. While there are acknowledged barriers to disclosure at the point of arrest, there are also substantial inconsistencies in the recording of vulnerability-related information. Without consistent recording, vulnerability remains dependent on local systems, specialist knowledge or chance. One clear implication is that factors such as care experience, neurodivergence, mental health needs, school exclusion and repeated missing episodes should lead to a formal safeguarding response. Too often, these factors are recorded but do not result in further action.

The findings of this report make a strong case for digital reform and investment. Drug markets are increasingly organised, advertised and scaled through social media and encrypted platforms, yet policing capacity here remains weak, underfunded and structurally underdeveloped. Police and professional interviews consistently highlighted concerns that digital forensic delays, limited online monitoring and existing legal frameworks leave parts of the market insufficiently monitored. They also show why this matters: children are central to online markets as customers, recruiters, content producers and delivery workers. As recruitment and coordination shift online, a predominantly reactive, street-based response risks allowing exploitative markets to outpace both enforcement and safeguarding. Stronger cross-force and cross-agency ownership of exploitation investigations is also needed and has the potential to be provided under the proposed National Police Service model. Police and professional interviews indicate that trafficking cases often fall between forces, particularly where exporter areas are overstretched. Responses frequently focus on immediate safeguarding and local drug enforcement, while longer-term trafficking and exploitation investigations can be more difficult to sustain. Officers emphasise that children are not truly safeguarded unless the exploiters are disrupted, illustrating the need for improved cross-border arrangements so trafficking and exploitation investigations are not deprioritised in the context of high demand.

One of the most important recommendations arising from this research is that safeguarding should move away from responding only after harm has occurred and place greater emphasis on early identification and prevention. Safeguarding responses need to make more effective use of information about children's needs and vulnerabilities so that support can be provided earlier, before exploitation becomes entrenched. Safeguarding therefore needs to happen earlier and be built around trusted, consistent relationships with children and young people. The interviews with children and young people are especially important here. Young people repeatedly say that routine police contact, missing returns, NFA decisions or procedural encounters did not change anything. In some cases, what made a difference was ongoing support from a trusted social worker or youth worker who understood the exploitation, built trust and helped the young person disengage over time. This does not mean police are irrelevant. This means police responses are more effective when they are supported by ongoing relationships with trusted professionals, rather than relying on short-term interventions alone. The findings therefore support a stronger partnership with social care, youth justice, education, health and third sector organisations, but also warn that those systems are themselves under-resourced and uneven. Where safeguarding measures are reactive, responses must focus on removing harmful

offenders in addition to safeguarding individual children. Without upstream enforcement, current responses risk increasing the number of children subjected to exploitation by creating vacancies in drug markets.

Finally, the report highlights the need for safeguarding approaches that are more realistic and sensitive to context. Police and professionals are very clear about the fact that diversion, NRM referral and non-criminalisation do not automatically produce better outcomes for children. In some contexts, criminal justice controls can offer children practical protection; in others, avoiding charge delays access to CAMHS or local authority intervention. The answer is not to abandon diversion, but to recognise that it will not always be protective when wider support services are limited. Thus, the findings argue that policing and safeguarding guidance needs to more realistically reflect the risky environments in which children live and make decisions.

6.4.1. Key Findings 4:

- The most important reforms are structural rather than procedural. The current model places too much emphasis on performance measures linked to arrests and line closures, resulting in responses that often fail to address the underlying harm experienced by children.
- Policing needs dedicated exploitation teams with SOC capability, so that exploitation is treated as part of organised crime rather than separated into safeguarding silos.
- Mandatory and consistent recording of vulnerability indicators is required, especially given the large gaps shown in quantitative data analysis between self-report and police data.
- There must be greater digital and online capability, including faster forensics, stronger monitoring capacity and legal tools better suited to platform-based markets.
- Cross-border arrangements need reform so that trafficking and exploitation investigations are owned and progressed, rather than displaced by force boundaries and workload pressures.
- Safeguarding needs to happen earlier and involve coordinated support from trusted professionals. It cannot rely solely on occasional contact with the police through enforcement activity. Interviews with children and young people show that trust, continuity and support are essential.
- Safeguarding needs to be reframed as proactive protection rather than a response to children in crisis.
- Guidance on diversion and non-criminalisation needs to better reflect children's wider circumstances. The findings show that even well-intentioned approaches can fail when appropriate support services are unavailable.

6.5. Conclusion

The findings show that child exploitation in drug markets is associated with adaptive criminal markets, multiple forms of social disadvantage, and uneven policing and safeguarding responses. While there is growing recognition of exploitation and vulnerability within policing, this is not yet translated consistently into effective protection. Across the report, the evidence points to the need for earlier intervention, better recognition of unmet needs, stronger disruption of exploiters and more integrated policing structures if harm is to be reduced and children are to be safeguarded more effectively.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

This report has shown that child exploitation in drug markets is sustained through the interaction of adaptive criminal business models, multiple forms of social disadvantage and uneven police responses. Across the findings, children's involvement in drug markets is not best understood as a matter of individual choice or isolated offending. Rather, it emerges within local, national and transnational market structures that rely on the recruitment, control and disposal of children, particularly those experiencing unmet needs, poverty, care instability, neurodivergence, mental health difficulties, school exclusion and exposure to violence. Drug market perpetrators thrive by exploiting vulnerable children, using coercion and taking advantage of failures in support and safeguarding. The evidence demonstrates that exploitation is embedded across a range of market forms, from traditional county lines moving children across large geographical distances to more localised and digitally mediated arrangements rooted in neighbourhood networks, family structures and online environments. Children occupy essential roles within these markets as runners, sitters, recruiters, enforcers and digital facilitators. Their exploitation is maintained through a combination of grooming, debt, violence, coercion and the manipulation of unmet emotional and material needs. In this context, the promise of belonging, protection, status or income can be as significant as direct threats in drawing children into harmful networks. The report has also shown that current enforcement and safeguarding models do not always translate into sustained child protection.

Police and professional interviews suggest that performance frameworks focused on line closures and arrests may concentrate intervention on exploited children and other low-level actors, while those organising and profiting from exploitation can be more difficult to identify and disrupt. Policing is hindered by fragmented ways of working, poor cross-border coordination, limited digital resources and weak connections between safeguarding and organised crime teams. Together, these factors make it harder to identify and prevent exploitation before serious harm occurs. Recent changes in drug market organisation appear to have increased the concentration of control among a relatively small number of OCG members while reducing their direct exposure to risk. The findings suggest that policing structures have faced challenges adapting to these changes in drug market organisation, limiting their ability to respond effectively. Exploited children often bear the consequences of these dynamics.

A central finding of the report is that police forces increasingly recognise the role of vulnerability and disadvantage in shaping children's exposure to exploitation, but this recognition is not yet embedded consistently in practice. Quantitative and qualitative evidence shows that vulnerability is widespread among children and young people involved in drug markets, yet it is unevenly recorded, interpreted and acted upon. Race, disability, age, gender, care experience and poverty are all associated with differences in how children are recorded, identified and responded to within policing systems. As a result, policing responses are associated with uneven patterns of criminal justice and safeguarding outcomes across different groups of children. Overall, the findings suggest that enforcement alone is insufficient to improve outcomes for children. Meaningful change requires earlier intervention, stronger safeguarding and better support for those at risk of exploitation. It requires a structural shift towards policing models that place exploitation, rather than drug supply, at the centre of intervention. This includes better integration of CCE within SOC responses, more consistent recording of vulnerability, stronger digital and cross-border investigative capability and safeguarding practices that operate earlier and in closer partnership with other services. Without such change, policing responses are likely to remain predominantly reactive, while drug markets continue to adapt and create opportunities for exploitation. Reducing exploitation, therefore, depends not only on disrupting criminal networks but on building policing and safeguarding systems capable of recognising vulnerability early, responding consistently and offering children meaningful routes out of harm.

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