

Child Criminal Exploitation

What is criminal exploitation?

Criminal exploitation is child abuse where children and young people are manipulated and coerced into committing crimes.

What is County Lines?

County lines is a form of criminal exploitation in which criminals groom and manipulate children into drug dealing. The 'lines' refer to mobile phones that are used to control a young person who is delivering drugs, often to towns outside their home county.

How are young people recruited?

A child or young person might be recruited into a gang because of where they live or because of who their family is. They might join because they do not see another option or because they feel like they need protection. Children and young people may become involved in gangs for many reasons, including:

- peer pressure and wanting to fit in with their friends;
- they feel respected and important;
- they want to feel protected from other gangs, or bullies;
- they want to make money, and are promised rewards;
- they want to gain status, and feel powerful;
- they've been excluded from school and don't feel they have a future.

Studies show that a child is more at risk of being recruited if:

- they've been excluded from school;
- they have special education needs;
- there are problems at home like neglect, domestic abuse or sexual abuse;
- they have problems with their mental health;
- they live in existing gang territory.

Organised criminal gangs groom children and young people because they are less suspicious and are given lighter sentences than adults.



Signs of child criminal exploitation (CCE)

Knowing the signs of child criminal exploitation (CCE) can help give a voice to children. A child is unlikely to know they are being groomed or exploited and might not speak out. Any child can be groomed into exploitation, though some children may be more at risk. Children who are more vulnerable, for example children in care and children with disabilities, may be more heavily targeted by groomers who want the child to become dependent on them.

Any sudden changes in a young person's lifestyle should be discussed with them. It is important to remember that warning signs will be presented differently for each child or young person being exploited. Teens might also behave in a way that could be seen as 'normal teenage behaviour', masking the exploitation.

Signs that a child or young person is being groomed or exploited into criminal activity or county lines include:

- Persistently going missing from school or home and/or being found out-of-area;
- Excessive receipt of texts or phone calls;
- Spending more time online or on their devices;
- Using more than one phone;
- Suddenly acquiring expensive gifts such as mobile phones, jewellery – even drugs – and not being able to explain how they came by them;
- Having hotel cards or keys to unknown places;
- Being secretive about who they are talking to and where they are going;
- Relationships with controlling older individuals or groups;
- Leaving home/care without explanation;
- Unexplained absences from school, college, training, or work;
- Returning home unusually late or staying out all night;
- Coming home looking dishevelled;
- Suspicion of physical assault or unexplained injuries;
- Carrying weapons;
- Starting or increasing drug use, or being found to have large amounts of drugs on them;
- Starting or increasing alcohol use;
- Loss of interest in school and significant decline in performance;
- Using sexual, gang, drug-related or violent language you wouldn't expect them to know;
- Meeting with unfamiliar people or associating with a gang;
- Becoming isolated from peers or social networks;

- Self-harm;
- Significant changes in emotional well-being;
- Sudden changes in lifestyle;
- Increasingly disruptive or violent behaviour;
- Getting into trouble with the police.

Dangers of criminal exploitation

It is important to be aware of the risks of criminal exploitation or being involved with a criminal gang. They can use different tactics to recruit and exploit children and young people, including bribing them with rewards, befriending them, and threatening them, or coercing them.

Dangers of criminal exploitation include:

- being subject to threats, blackmail and violence;
- being exploited and forced to commit crimes;
- being arrested, including for crimes committed by the gang that they have not directly committed under the law of joint enterprise;
- not being able to leave or cut off ties with the gang;
- having their safety or the safety of friends and family threatened;
- risk of physical harm, rape and sexual abuse;
- risk of emotional abuse;
- risk of severe injury or being killed;
- abusing drugs, alcohol and other substances;
- long-term impact on education and employment options.

Exploiting a child into committing crimes is abusive. Children who are targeted can also be groomed, physically abused, emotionally abused, sexually exploited or trafficked. However, as children involved in gangs often commit crimes themselves, sometimes they aren't seen as victims by adults and professionals, despite the harm they have experienced. It's important to spot the signs and act quickly if you think a child is being groomed or is becoming involved with a gang.

Useful Links

<https://www.nspcc.org.uk/what-is-child-abuse/types-of-abuse/gangs-criminal-exploitation/>

<https://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/information/professionals/resources/defining-child-criminal-exploitation>



<https://paceuk.info/criminal-exploitation/what-is-child-criminal-exploitation/>