

Child criminal exploitation – county lines

County lines is becoming a common theme that frequently occupies tv news items relating to the criminal exploitation and activity of vulnerable children and young people. It is closely associated with criminal gangs, criminal activity in the community, drug selling or dealing, knife and fire arms (gun) crime, trafficking and exploitation. Recent statistics show that children as young as twelve years of age are becoming involved in child criminal exploitation and that gang members are specifically targeting these children because of their age and vulnerability. Criminal exploitation – county lines is an issue for children, young people, families and the wider community.

The term 'county lines' and its' definition has received significant attention and is referenced in government guidance. Keeping children safe in education – Statutory guidance for schools and colleges, of which schools must have 'regard' to, introduced an explanation of county lines in 2018. Government guidance published by the Home Office (England) also provides additional details in the document 'Criminal Exploitation of children and vulnerable adults: County Lines guidance' 2018. The document answers some questions that helps us understand this further.

What is county lines exploitation?

County lines is a major, cross-cutting issue involving drugs, violence, gangs, safeguarding, criminal and sexual exploitation, modern slavery, and missing persons; and the response to tackle it involves the police, the National Crime Agency, a wide range of Government departments, local government agencies and VCS (voluntary and community sector) organisations.

The UK Government defines county lines as:

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

What is child criminal exploitation?

Child criminal exploitation is increasingly used to describe this type of exploitation where children are involved, and is defined as:

Child Criminal Exploitation is common in county lines and occurs where an individual or group takes advantage of an imbalance of power to coerce, control, manipulate or deceive a child or young person under the age of 18. The victim may have been criminally exploited even if the activity appears consensual. Child Criminal Exploitation does not always involve physical contact; it can also occur through the use of technology.

Who is vulnerable to county lines exploitation?

- children as young as 12 years old being exploited or moved by gangs to courier drugs out of their local area; 15-16 years is the most common age range
- both males and females being exploited
- White British children being targeted because gangs perceive they are more likely to evade police detection but a person of any ethnicity or nationality may be exploited
- the use of social media to make initial contact with children and young people
- class A drug users being targeted so that gangs can takeover their homes (known as 'cuckooing')

Criminal Exploitation of children and vulnerable adults: County Lines guidance' 2018.

How does child criminal exploitation and county lines impact upon children in the early years?

The impact upon families, including those with young children, who are associated with criminality and in particular gang culture, has been recognised as concerning for many years. The Children's Commissioner reported some worrying statistics recently stating a number of things about the extent of gang involvement and association with it in England. Here's some of the statistics.

- British Crime Survey data held by the Office of National Statistics suggests that there are 27,000 children in England who identify as a gang member.
 - 313,000 children aged 10-17 know someone they would define as a street gang member.
 - There are 33,000 children who are the sibling of a gang member
- Keeping Kids Safe – Improving safeguarding responses to gang violence and criminal exploitation. 2019*

Family involvement or sibling involvement with county lines directly impacts upon young children. It can place them at higher risk of harm because of exposure to violence, intimidation, family financial blackmail, poverty, homelessness and easy access to weapons or drugs.

Signs to look out for:

- Knowledge of family associations with crime and criminality
- Children who appear afraid or present with significant changes in behaviour
- Knowledge of family debt or significant changes in economic circumstances
- Family members suddenly acquire unusual amounts of wealth or money or high value items
- Items such as weapons or drugs hidden in children's belongings
- Talk of violence or violent behaviour displayed
- Family drug use or evidence of drug use in the child's home

If you suspect a child or young person is at risk of child criminal exploitation – county lines contact your local children's service social care teams for advice or referral.