

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION

Home Office guidance on Criminal exploitation of children and vulnerable adults: county lines

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/criminal-exploitation-of-children-and-vulnerable-adults-county-lines/criminal-exploitation-of-children-and-vulnerable-adults-county-lines>

What is county lines exploitation?

“County lines” is a violent and exploitative form of drug distribution. A common feature of county lines is the exploitation of children, young people and vulnerable adults who are instructed to deliver and/or store drugs, and associated money or weapons, to dealers or drug users, locally or in other counties.

The Home Office published updated guidance which is primarily aimed at frontline staff who work with children, young people and vulnerable adults. This includes professionals working in-education, health, adult social care, children’s social care and early help/family support, housing, the benefits system, policing, prisons, probation and youth justice, multi-agency partnerships, related partner organisations, for example in the voluntary sector.

The signs and vulnerabilities associated with county lines exploitation may present differently to different professionals and safeguarding processes will vary depending on local contexts. However, the information provided here is intended to be useful to all. This document provides links to other resources to assist professionals to consider in further detail how this guidance relates to their role and responsibilities. It may also be helpful for carers, parents and others in the community, although they are not the primary audience.

child criminal exploitation

“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.” (Serious Violence Strategy)

Criminal exploitation of children is broader than just county lines and includes, for instance, children forced to work on cannabis farms or to commit theft. However, many of the characteristics of county lines exploitation will be present in other forms of child criminal exploitation. Likewise, victims of county lines may also experience other overlapping forms of exploitation, such as sexual, in addition to criminal.

Forms and methods of exploitation

County lines exploitation can be perpetrated by individuals or groups of any gender or nationality and can appear unsophisticated or organised. It is typified by some form of power imbalance, which perpetrators use to force, coerce, groom and/or entice victims into county lines activity. They can employ several methods to do so, such as:

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- offering an exchange – carrying drugs in return for something, such as money, clothes, drugs, status, protection or perceived friendship, a sense of belonging or identity, or affection;
- physical violence or threats of violence – used to intimidate and punish victims and their families and can involve weapons, including knives and firearms;
- abduction or kidnapping – sometimes victims are forcibly moved and held in a location away from home;
- emotional abuse or psychological coercive control – by manipulating, threatening, controlling or monitoring the movements of the victim;
- sexual abuse and exploitation – this can be experienced by all genders;
- blackmail – by forcing victims to commit a crime so they can hold it over them and threaten to report it if they do not comply;
- the use of social media, messaging apps, gaming sites and other online platforms – including marketplace websites and smart TVs to target and communicate with victims. These modes are used by exploiters to falsely build online trusted relationships, or to post fraudulent job adverts which seem legitimate, or to cyberstalk victims in order to groom, entrap and coerce them into county lines activity;
- “cuckooing” (also known as “forced home invasion”) – a tactic used by criminals, typically drug dealers, to take over the homes of vulnerable individuals, such as care leavers or those with addiction, physical or mental health issues, and use the property as a base for criminal activity. This is a common characteristic of the county lines business model and can occur in a range of settings such as rental and private properties, student accommodation, prisons, and commercial properties;
- coerced internal concealment (also known as “plugging”) – the practice whereby a child or vulnerable adult is controlled or coerced into concealing drugs internally as a method of transportation to avoid detection. Drugs or sim cards are usually concealed within a condom or similar packaging and inserted into a bodily orifice (rectum or vagina) using lubricant, or swallowed;
- debt bondage – a form of entrapment when a victim owes money to their exploiters and is made to repay their debt, either financially or through another means such as transporting drugs. The exploiter may groom the victim by initially providing money or goods which the victim will then be made to pay back. The exploiter may also deliberately manufacture a debt, for example by staging a robbery of drugs or cash in the victim’s possession in order to extort money from families or to ensure the victim will continue to perform tasks for them. The debt may also be inherited from parents and siblings; and

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- financial exploitation – financial exploitation can take many forms. In this context, we use the term to describe exploitation which takes place for the purpose of money laundering. This is when criminals target children and adults at risk and take advantage of an imbalance of power to coerce, control, manipulate, or deceive them into facilitating the movement of illicit funds. This can include physical cash and/or payments through financial products, such as bank and cryptocurrency accounts.

Who is vulnerable to county lines exploitation?

Any child, young person or vulnerable adult could be a victim of county lines exploitation as exploiters continue to adapt who they target to avoid detection.

- age: 15-17 year olds make up the majority of the vulnerable people involved in county lines but children of primary school age and adults are also known to be targeted (National County Lines Coordination Centre).
- sex/gender: people of all genders can be exploited. Women and girls may be exploited to perform different roles and may experience other forms of harm alongside and so are often under-identified as victims of criminal exploitation – professionals should not make assumptions when working with a girl or young woman about the intervention required.
- ethnicity: people from all ethnicities and nationalities are targeted and the demographics of victims of exploitation vary across England and Wales. In some areas, there is an over-representation of people from black and mixed ethnic groups, while in others, victims are mainly white.
- location: county lines are widespread nationally, in rural and urban areas, and while they can involve the movement of drugs across county borders from one area of the UK to another, some lines supply the drugs market locally, within the same town, city or county in which they originate. County lines grooming can take place in a range of settings, including in homes, public spaces, schools and universities, prisons and youth offender institutions as well as online.

Some of the factors that may heighten a person's vulnerability include:

- having contact with the criminal justice system
- having experience of neglect, physical abuse, sexual abuse/exploitation or a lack of a safe/stable home environment, now or in the past (including domestic abuse, parental substance misuse or parental criminal involvement) – trauma, including adverse childhood experiences, can negatively impact on an individual's ability to develop trusted relationships or access support services;
- social isolation or social difficulties – the lack of a support network can mean someone is less able to get help;

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- economic vulnerability – offers of material possessions or money for victims or their family may be more readily accepted out of a feeling of necessity and lack of legitimate financial alternatives;
- homelessness or insecure accommodation status – there is a lack of a safe environment to provide security and privacy;
- connections with other people in gangs – some individuals are targeted through family or friends who are already involved in criminal activity themselves and sometimes a drug debt owed by them is passed on to peers or family members;
- having a physical or learning disability, or being neurodivergent – victims may be less able to recognise they are being exploited, or less able to communicate it or access support;
- having mental health issues – exploiters may target poor emotional wellbeing or low self-esteem;
- having substance misuse issues
- being in or leaving care
- being excluded from mainstream education, and/or a pupil at an alternative provision such as a pupil referral unit – factors influencing a child’s exclusion may indicate they are exposed to exploitation, while being disengaged from meaningful activity and peers can evoke feelings of disenfranchisement and, for those with a reduced timetable or not attending school at all, time spent unsupervised can offer opportunities for exploitation; and
- insecure immigration status – for example, unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and refugees may have a number of vulnerability factors that can increase their exposure to exploitation, including social/cultural isolation on arrival to the country and potentially links to organised crime from their journey.

Signs to look out for

Exploitation through county lines often leaves signs. Any sudden changes in a person’s lifestyle should be discussed with them.

Some potential signs of county lines exploitation include, but are not limited to:

Behaviours

- going missing from school or home, an unwillingness to explain their whereabouts and/or being found in areas they have no obvious connections with (out-of-area);
- school exclusion(s) and/or a significant decline in school attendance, results or performance;

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- self-harm or significant changes in emotional well-being, personality or behaviour;
- anti-social behaviour or involvement in other criminality; and
- use of drug and county lines-related slang (see further resources).

Possessions

- unexplained acquisition of money, clothes, or mobile phones;
- excessive receipt of texts/phone calls and/or having multiple sim cards or handsets – this could be a ‘burner phone’, often an older model which uses an unregistered sim card, but it may also be a smart phone which can utilise web-based apps without a phone number;
- carrying or storing weapons;
- misuse of substances or possession of drugs or drug paraphernalia such as discarded needles, scales, small snappy bags or cling film;
- possession of train tickets for unusual train journeys; and
- possession of a rucksack or a bag that they are very attached to or will not put down.

Relationships

- relationships with controlling/older individuals or groups; and
- isolation from usual peers or social networks.

Appearance

- suspicion of physical assault/unexplained injuries – these tend to be visible but minor injuries which are issued as a threat, such as cigarette burns or small cuts, but can also be much more serious life-threatening injuries, such as stab wounds.

Signs to look out for online include:

- spending increased or unusually excessive amounts of time online day and night;
- building inappropriate relationships online or appearing anxious or secretive about their online activities and who they are communicating with;
- unexpected or excessive sharing of personal information online, such as full name, address, or phone number;
- experiencing bullying, harassment or threats online; and
- receiving or sending money, gifts or gaming tokens/coins to someone online.

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Signs of a cuckooed property include:

- the presence of unfamiliar individuals coming and going from the property at all hours or an increase in key fob activity;
- an increase in foot traffic or loitering in the area around the property or takeaway deliveries at unusual hours;
- an increase in noise and disturbance levels, including late-night parties or arguments or other signs of anti-social behaviour such as littering around the property;
- damage to the property, such as broken windows or doors; and
- threats or intimidation towards other residents or neighbours.

Signs of coerced internal concealment include:

- refusing to consume food or drink;
- being in possession of lubricants, condoms or similar packaging;
- a dishevelled appearance with stained clothing; and
- being physically unwell.

Signs of financial exploitation or a debt bondage include:

- receiving large or unexplained sums of cash or deposits in a bank account;
- unusual financial transactions or being made to make financial transactions they do not understand;
- a new preoccupation with earning money;
- asking for money or stealing money/items to pay back a debt; and
- opening new accounts with banks or crypto exchanges
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