

## One Minute Guides - County Lines and Child Criminal Exploitation July 2018

### What is County Lines and Child Criminal Exploitation?

The UK Government definition states:

**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 young people and vulnerable adults to move (and store) the drugs and money and they will often use coercion, intimidation, violence (including sexual violence) and weapons.

**Child Criminal Exploitation** occurs where an individual or group take advantage of an imbalance of power to coerce, control, manipulate or deceive a young person under the age of 18 into any criminal activity a) in exchange for something the victim needs or wants and/or b) for the financial or other advantage of the perpetrator or facilitator and/or c) through violence or the threat of violence. The victim may have been criminally exploited even if the activity appears consensual. Child Criminal Exploitation does not always involve physical contact; it can occur through the use of technology.

### Who is vulnerable to County Lines Exploitation?

The national picture continues to develop. However, children are especially at risk of being exploited. Child Criminal Exploitation is typified by some form of power imbalance in favour of those perpetrating the exploitation and involves some kind of exchange; both tangible (eg: money, drugs or clothes), or intangible (eg: status, protection or perceived friendship). Criminal groups (gangs) are establishing bases in different parts of the country to develop their markets. This can include taking over an address of local vulnerable adults by force or coercion, which is known as "cuckooing". It is important to consider the children and adults who reside at these properties.

Children are vulnerable in a variety of ways and cases include:

- Children as young as 12 years old have been exploited by criminal groups outside of their local area; 15 - 16 years is the most common age range
- Both males and females are at risk of being exploited with females also having increased risk of Child Sexual Exploitation
- White British children are being targeted because criminal groups perceive they are more likely to evade police detection
- The use of social media to make initial contact with the child
- The child may not recognise themselves as victims of abuse and exploitation and are often used to recruit other young people
- The high use of violence including the use of weapons and firearms to intimidate and control members of the group is prevalent
- Children being exposed to varying levels of abuse including physical, mental and sexual harm
- Children have been sent away, often for weeks at a time, to stay with adults they don't know and with no means of getting back

## What are the indicators?

Criminal groups or gangs will often target the most vulnerable children, including those who are looked after by the local authority, who have a history of going missing or who have chronic and traumatic lives. Indicators of criminal exploitation can include:

- Persistently going missing from home or school and / or being found out of area
- Unexplained acquisition of money, clothes or mobile phones
- Excessive receipt of texts or phone calls
- Relationships with controlling and/or older individuals or groups
- Leaving home / care without explanation
- Suspicion of physical assault or unexplained injuries
- Parental concerns
- Carrying weapons
- Significant decline in school results / performance
- Gang association or isolation from peers or social networks
- Self-harm or significant changes in emotional well-being

## What to do if you are concerned

Any agency or practitioner who has concerns that a child may be at risk of harm as a consequence of child criminal exploitation should contact:

**The Portsmouth MASH (0845 671 0271/023 9268 8793** or by completing an [inter-agency contact form](#))

**The police (101).**

Where there are concerns that children are being criminally exploited they should be referred to the **National Referral Mechanism (NRM)** as potential victims of modern slavery / human trafficking.

Professionals should consider completing an Early Help Assessment for children where there are early signs to raise concerns and to identify additional support due to risk of involvement in criminal or gang activity.

Complete the Missing Children Toolkit, which can be found on the [PSCB website](#)

When children who have been missing return home they must be offered a return interview and the opportunity to speak with an independent visitor. This provides an opportunity to ask questions around criminal exploitation; although fear of violence and retribution may make it difficult for young people to ask for help and often they may not see themselves as victims. Return interviews are carried out by Children Social Care for cases open to them, and Barnardo's for those below the threshold of statutory intervention.