

## **What is Child Criminal Exploitation?**

Child Criminal Exploitation (CCE) can be understood as: the exploitation of children and young people aged under 18 years in the storage, distribution and selling of illegal drugs, under violent coercion or exploited through the use of debt, or promise of cash or drugs. Patterns of grooming behaviour by adults can be seen to be similar to those associated with child sexual exploitation (CSE). There will be a power imbalance and children and young people involved in CCE should not be viewed as at fault, 'choosing a lifestyle' or making an informed choice. Criminal exploitation is not restricted to drugs; some children are transporters of cash as well as firearms and weapons, and are coerced into carrying out theft and burglaries.

Many children and young people subject to CCE are exploited by criminal gangs. A gang is considered to be a relatively durable, predominantly street-based group of young people who:

- (1) See themselves (and are seen by others) as a discernible group,
- (2) Engage in a range of criminal activity and violence,
- (3) Identify with or lay claim over territory,
- (4) Have some form of identifying structural feature, and
- (5) Are in conflict with other, similar, gangs (Dying to Belong 2009: Centre for Social Justice).

Children and young people involved in criminal exploitation are often sent to differing locations within the United Kingdom to carry out tasks for gangs, such as supplying drugs to suburban areas, market and coastal towns. Gangs are usually based in cities. This criminal activity is known as 'county lines' – a term that is used by the police. This type of movement of children falls within the legal definition of trafficking in the Modern Slavery Act 2015. Child trafficking is defined as the 'recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt' of a child for the purpose of exploitation. CCE needs to be viewed in the context of broader vulnerabilities and other forms of exploitation and abuse. This could be within families, communities or more sophisticated organised crime groups. There needs to be consideration around the overlap and links between familial violence and/or criminality, trauma, peer to peer abuse, CSE, gang violence, going missing, and (as above) trafficking and modern day slavery.

## **Who is affected by CCE?**

Particularly at risk are vulnerable children and those who do not have support networks. Gangs and other exploiters target children with special educational needs, mental health problems or

disabilities. Those exploiting children and young people also look for emotional vulnerability, such as children experiencing problems at home, absent parents or bereavement. Exploiters seek to fill that emotional gap for the child and become their 'family'.

Boys are more likely to be exploited in this way but girls are also affected. The most common age for children to be exploited is between the ages of 15 and 16 but it also affects children below the age of 11. Gangs and other exploiters are increasingly looking to recruit 'clean skins' i.e. children with no previous criminal record who are unlikely to be stopped by the police. Often looked after children, particularly those in residential children's homes and those who have been placed out of their home area are targeted for exploitation.

### **Risk indicators of CCE**

Anyone working with children and young people should be aware of the following risk indicators to help identify CCE:

- Persistently going missing from school or home and / or being found out of the area where they live;
- Unexplained acquisition of money, clothes, or mobile phones;
- Excessive receipt of texts / phone calls;
- Relationships with controlling / older individuals or groups;
- Regularly leaving their home without explanation;
- Suspicion of physical assault / unexplained injuries;
- Parental concerns;
- Carrying weapons;
- Significant decline in educational attainment and attendance;
- Arrested for possession and intent to supply of significant quantities of drugs, particularly heroin and crack cocaine;
- Arrested away from their own home area; and
- Arrested on public transport, particularly on trains.

### **What should practitioners do?**

It is important that practitioners are open to the fact that children and young people do not always recognise that they are being criminally exploited. They will often not wish to disclose information relating to their exploitation due to fear of repercussions and also the fear of losing the group they belong to and identify with. Similar to CSE many children and young people are groomed by exploiters prior to the criminal exploitation occurring.

If you believe that you are working with a young person who may be subject to Criminal Exploitation, you will need to refer to Social Care as you would usually do. To make the referral to Social Care, you will need to complete the referral forms for Contextual Safeguarding. We will read this and will decide with you whether an assessment is necessary, a strategy meeting or whether the young person can be supported via early help. You will be invited to attend a Multi-agency Contextual Safeguarding meeting, held twice a month on a Thursday morning. This will enable all agencies to discuss the young person, assess any risk and make a plan with you.