



# Professionals Learning Briefing: Criminal Exploitation and County Lines

## Overview

This briefing is for professionals working with children, adults with care and support needs and their families or carers. However, it can also be used as a source of information and advice for individuals, families, carers and members of the public to:

- Provide [key definitions](#) relating to criminal exploitation, Organised Crime, County Lines and cuckooing.
- Highlight [groups at risk](#) of exploitation;
- Outline signs of [criminal exploitation](#) and [cuckooing](#);
- Provide advice and guidance on [what to do if you are concerned](#);
- Provide [further resources](#) and news articles (local and national), which can be used with people you work with or for yourself.

## Definitions

### Criminal Exploitation

Criminal Exploitation occurs where an individual or group takes advantage of an imbalance of power to coerce, control, manipulate or deceive a child, young person under the age of 18 or an adult with vulnerabilities (including those with care and support needs) 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 (such as to support serious organised crime), and/or
- (c) through violence or the threat of violence to ensure compliance.

The victim may have been criminally exploited even if the activity appears consensual. Criminal Exploitation does not always involve physical contact; it can also occur using technology and/or social media.

[Adapted from Child Criminal Exploitation definition in Working Together:DfE:2018:107 and Home Office:2018: 46]

Because they are more likely to be easily detected, individuals who are exploited are more likely to be arrested and criminalised for criminal behaviour, than those individuals or groups who are exploiting them.

Individuals who are being criminally exploited can be involved, linked to or considered to be (by themselves or others) as part of a “gang” (Factor et al:2015). It is important when children or adults with vulnerabilities (including those with care and support needs) identify or are identified as being affected or involved with gang-related activity that involves the use of actual or threatened violence and/or drug dealing that professionals also consider that they may be victims of criminal exploitation.

Criminal exploitation is broader than but often part of organised crime and county lines.

## Organised Crime & County Lines

Organised Crime is “serious crime planned, coordinated and conducted by people working together on a continuing basis. Their motivation is often, but not always, financial gain.” Organised crime groups are “organised criminals working together for a particular criminal activity or activities.” (National Crime Agency: 2018).

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 (including those with care and support needs) to move, [locally supply] and store the drugs and money. They will often use coercion, intimidation, violence (including sexual violence) and weapons. (Home Office:2018:2)

### Cuckooing:

This term is “named after the nest stealing practices of wild cuckoos. It describes the situation where a county lines dealer ‘takes over’ accommodation located in the provincial drugs market, using it as a local dealing base.” (Coomber and Moyle: 2017)

An individual or group can do this by taking over the homes of local adults and families with vulnerabilities (including children and adults with care and support needs) through an abuse of power or vulnerability by coercion, control and/or force so that they can provide a base for the supply of drugs into the local community. This places the adult and/or families at an increased risk of eviction (if they are in social or privately rented housing) and isolation from their communities due to the anti-social activity it can create. Cuckooing often forms part of wider ‘county lines’ activity and is also a form of criminal exploitation.

### The context of Criminal Exploitation

Criminal exploitation (including cuckooing) can include several different types of abuse.

The types of abuse that can often be present/relied upon include:

- Modern Slavery and trafficking
- Physical Abuse
- Neglect (including self-neglect)
- Domestic Abuse
- Psychological Abuse
- Emotional Abuse
- Sexual Abuse (including exploitation)
- Financial Abuse

Criminal exploitation can involve complex and organised abuse involving one or more abusers and several children and/or adults with vulnerabilities (including those with care and support needs).

Criminal exploitation often takes place outside of the family or home environment. As is indicated in the ‘groups at risk’ and ‘signs’ sections below; it is often a combination of the interplay between the relationships and circumstances both inside and outside of the family/home environment that can lead to a child or adult with vulnerabilities (including those with care and support needs) being criminally exploited.

It is therefore important that a multi-agency **contextual safeguarding** approach (Firmin:2017) is adopted which considers and addresses the individual needs, risks and protective factors within (including the needs and capacity of parents/carers) and outside (including the impact of social conditions) of the family/home. This approach should also be taken when a child or adult with vulnerabilities (including those with care and support needs) is being considered as a potential perpetrator.

## Vulnerable Groups at risk.

As with other types of exploitation, individuals (both adults and children) who fall into the following vulnerable groups are more likely to be at risk of being criminally exploited. Individuals or families who fall into more than one of the groups, who have the presence of signs of criminal exploitation or cuckooing as outlined below, should be considered at the greatest risk:

- Teenage children and young adults;
- Have previously or are currently experiencing abuse or other Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)
- Have a lack of a safe/stable home environment, now or in the past (for example due to domestic violence or parental substance misuse, mental health issues or criminality);
- Are homeless or have insecure accommodation status;
- Live in a neighbourhood which is exposed to violent crime, gang-related activity and deprivation;
- Are socially isolated, lonely or experience social difficulties;
- Are economically vulnerable (such as in debt, experiencing poverty or are poor at financial management);
- Have connections with other people involved in gangs;
- Have a physical or learning disability;
- Have mental health or substance misuse problems (in particular Class A dependant drug users);
- Are or have been in care (particularly those in children's residential care and those with interrupted care histories).
- Children excluded from school (either permanently or temporarily); or who are not fully engaged/attending their educational provision or those in alternative learning provision (Tapper:2018)

(Home Office: 2018)

## Signs of criminal exploitation

There are several signs that may indicate that an individual may be subject to criminal exploitation. The more signs outlined below that are present for an individual indicate a greater level of risk. Signs listed at the top of the list are most concerning in respect of risk:

- Persistently going missing or being absent from school/college/work or home and / or being found out-of-area;
- Leaving home / care without explanation;
- Unexplained bus/train tickets or regularly being transported in taxis or unknown vehicles;
- Unexplained acquisition/gifts of money, clothes, or mobile phones
- Excessive receipt of texts /phone calls/use of social media
- Access to numerous phones or regular change of phone
- Relationships with controlling /older individuals or groups
- New "friendships" with people who are not known, gang association or isolation from positive peers or social networks
- Use of unusual terms (such as 'going country')
- Suspicion of physical assault /unexplained injuries
- Parental/Carer concerns
- Carrying weapons or keeping them within the home
- Significant decline in school/college/work performance

- Refusal, resistance to or significant reduction in attendance and/or engagement with services or professional sources of support;
- Secretive behaviour
- Self-harm or significant changes in emotional well-being

[Adapted from Home Office: 2018 and Crimestoppers:2018]

Any sudden changes or presence of the below signs should be discussed with the individual (where possible) in the first instance to explore with them the reasons behind the behaviour and try to improve their own understanding of the potential risks.

## Signs of cuckooing

Cuckooing not only has an impact on the individual or family whose home has been taken over, but also the neighbours and neighbourhood of the property that has been cuckooed. Signs of cuckooing may therefore be more evident to neighbours than professionals in the first instance so comments and reports from them must be noted and considered by professionals working with individual or families.

Much cuckooing takes place in rented or social housing, including multiple occupancy housing provision. However, individuals who own their own homes, particularly those in the vulnerable groups listed above may also be targeted.

The following signs may indicate that an individual or family's property has been cuckooed:

- Unknown people frequently staying at/moving into the property; often described by the individual or families as "friends";
- The individual or family moving out or regularly staying away from the property while the unknown individuals remain;
- New vehicles regularly parking or remaining outside the property;
- An increase in the number of comings and goings throughout the day and/or night, including people who/vehicles that have not been seen before;
- An increase in anti-social behaviour (such as property damage, littering, regular loud music or 'parties' evidence of verbal or physical aggression) in and around the property;
- The individual/family refusing entry to or restricting access to certain parts of the property to neighbours, friends or professionals (particularly if they have allowed it before).

## Professionals: What to do if you are concerned

Criminal Exploitation, including county Lines and cuckooing put the safety of vulnerable groups (including children and adults with care and support needs) and the public in our local community at risk. It is therefore important that individuals, communities and public services all work together to prevent and protect vulnerable groups and our communities from this harm.

If you have specific information of criminal activity taking place, please contact West Mercia Police on 101.

If a child or adult is in immediate danger please contact 999.

AND

If you are working with or receive specific information about a child or an adult with care and support needs and/or you have concerns about a family or accommodation where identifiable children, adult(s) with care and support needs reside or visit, you should:

1. Discuss your concerns and work with (if possible and safe to do so) the child, their family or the adult. Use this document and Resources/advice for them provided below to assist you.
2. Seek advice from your line manager and/or the Designated Safeguarding Lead in your organisation.
3. Refer to and follow the relevant multi-agency safeguarding procedures:
  - a) For Children: <http://westmidlands.procedures.org.uk/>; referring in particular to the [Multi-Agency Threshold Criteria](#) and
  - b) For Adults: <http://www.keepingadultssafeinshropshire.org.uk/multi-agency-procedures-tab>; referring to the [Safeguarding Process in Shropshire](#).
4. Where appropriate, report Safeguarding Concerns to
  - a. For children: 0345 6789021 AND complete a [Multi-Agency Referral Form \(MARF\)](#)
  - b. For adults: 0345 678 9044
5. If there is evidence that the child or adult is a victim of modern slavery (see [Modern Slavery learning briefing](#) for more information) you must make (if you are a first responder) or contribute to a referral to the National Referral Mechanism (NRM). Please see the [Home Office National Referral Mechanism Guidance](#) for more information.

## Resources and News Articles (Local and National)

- IT'SNOTOKAY. Trapped- County Lines (8 June 2017). Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pLhGpS1f-F0>.

Police, local authorities, Greater Manchester Combined Authority, young people and an MP have launched a campaign to stop criminal gangs from grooming children and vulnerable adults to commit crime. The campaign has supported the completion of the below short film on You Tube to raise awareness of criminals who are grooming and exploiting children and young adults to commit crime on their behalf.

- Marks & Canyon (11 July 2012) CUCKOO *Spine* TV. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6hX58oYMBKA>.

An 8-minute documentary exploring the experience of an ex-drug user about his experience of drug dealers moving into his home. This explores the practice of drug dealers who gradually move in on the homes of susceptible users, using them as a base for selling drugs - a process that leaves many users struggling and homeless with nowhere to turn.

It touches on the blurred line between drug addiction and being a mentally ill or vulnerable member of the community and how society treats them differently.

- Children's Society (2018) "Children and young people trafficked for the purpose of criminal exploitation in relation to county lines: a toolkit for professionals". Available at: <https://www.childrensociety.org.uk/sites/default/files/exploitation-toolkit.pdf>.
- Keeping Adults Safe in Shropshire Board Hate Crime information and Resources (as part of Hate Crime Awareness Week). Available at: <http://www.keepingadultssafeinshropshire.org.uk/learning-resources/hate-crime-information-and-resources>.





- Contextual Safeguarding Network webpages: <https://www.contextualsafeguarding.org.uk>.  
'The International Centre: Researching child sexual exploitation, violence and trafficking' launched the Contextual Safeguarding Network in September 2016. The Contextual Safeguarding Network brings together practitioners across the United Kingdom to share and generate knowledge on contextual approaches to safeguarding young people from violence and abuse. The network promotes theory-informed practice and seeks to develop practice-informed research co-created with academics and practitioners. The Network seeks to accelerate the learning from, piloting of, contextual approaches to safeguarding by disseminating research findings and running in-person and online trainings and events. Members are encouraged to submit ideas for trainings or materials so that Research Team can respond to the identified needs of practitioners.
- BBC News Report 6 July 2018: The problem children who are really victims. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-44725966?S>.
- ITV News Report 29 September 2016: "Going country": ITV news reveals scale of children being exploited and sent around Britain carrying drugs: <http://www.itv.com/news/2016-09-29/going-country-itv-news-reveals-the-scale-of-children-being-exploited-and-sent-around-britain-to-carry-drugs>.
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- Shropshire Star 23 July 2018: Vulnerable man avoids jail after drug gang took over his home and bullied him into selling cocaine. Available at: <https://www.shropshirestar.com/news/crime/2018/07/23/judge-spare-cuckooing-victim-jail>.
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- Shropshire Star 2 March 2018: Drug dealers jailed after 'cuckooing' at Shrewsbury home. Available at: <https://www.shropshirestar.com/news/crime/2018/03/02/drug-dealer-jailed-after-cuckooing-at-shrewsbury-home>.

## References /Further Reading

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