



A systematic map and synthesis review of Child Criminal Exploitation

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Authors: Nina Maxwell, Catrin Wallace, Aimee Cummings, Hannah Bayfield, and Helen Morgan

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Key terms and definitions

Branded line	A mobile phone line that is established in the market which receives customer orders and is usually controlled by a third party.
Child / children	Under the Children Act (1989) children have a right to protection until they are 18 and as such, this report adopts the terms 'child' or 'children' to refer to any child under the age of 18.
Child criminal exploitation	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 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 (Home Office, 2018)
Child Sexual Exploitation	Child sexual exploitation is a form of child sexual abuse. It occurs where an individual or group takes advantage of an imbalance of power to coerce, manipulate or deceive a child or young person under the age of 18 into sexual activity (a) in exchange for something the victim needs or wants, and/or (b) for the financial advantage or increased status of the perpetrator or facilitator. The victim may have been sexually exploited even if the sexual activity appears consensual. Child sexual exploitation does not always involve physical contact; it can also occur through the use of technology (Home Office, 2017)
Clean skins	Children with no prior criminal record.
County Lines	Drug networks (both gangs and organised crime groups) who use children and young people and vulnerable adults to carry out illegal activity on their behalf. Gangs dealing drugs is not a new issue but the extent to which criminal exploitation (often organised) of children and vulnerable adults, as well as the increasing use of violence, has become an inherent part of it through county lines makes it especially damaging (Serious Violence Strategy, 2018).
Cuckooing	The process where adults and/or children are used to take over houses acquired from vulnerable adults including class A drug addicts
Debt bondage	Children are robbed by members of their own network or are encouraged to run in to debt for commodities acquired from the network (e.g. drugs) in order to remain indebted to them.
Elders	Middle level of decision makers, or elders, that develop gang organisation by generating sales and building an active customer base.
Going country	Where children are groomed and recruited in large cities and urban areas, they tend to be used to transport drugs to rural or coastal areas.
Runners	Refer to children who are used to transport drugs

1.0 Summary

1.1 Introduction

This rapid review was commissioned by the Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel to assess what is known in the literature about child criminal exploitation, in relation to the early identification of children vulnerable to child criminal exploitation and key messages for an effective service response for children involved or at risk of becoming involved in child criminal exploitation. In doing so, the review found that there is little academic research and data relating specifically to child criminal exploitation.

1.2 Method

A systematic map and synthesis review was conducted in April 2019. As child criminal exploitation is only currently being explicitly defined and understood, the search parameters were limited to sources that referred to child criminal exploitation and excluded human trafficking, domestic servitude, child sexual exploitation, gangs and youth crime. The search comprised five databases and eleven online resources. The mapping review identified 2970 records. The search was supplemented by contacting six key authors which resulted in an additional 7 records. Hence, 2977 potential sources were identified, with 2924 excluded as they did not meet the search parameters. Therefore, 53 sources were included for the review.

1.2.1 Selection Process

Title and/or abstract screening was conducted independently by two authors, with disagreements resolved through discussion. Full texts of studies were retrieved for selected papers with screening conducted independently by two authors.

1.2.2 Data extraction

Data was extracted into NVivo v12 computer software with reference to a coding frame which included coding for text relating to the problem, demographics, risk factors, identification, activities, professional attitudes, strategies, help and support for children and for parents.

1.3 Evidence of good practice in the early identification of young people vulnerable to Child Criminal Exploitation

1.3.1 Legislation and policy

- There is no specific legislation or policies for child criminal exploitation. Hence, child criminal exploitation is captured under legislation including the Modern Slavery Act (2015), the Children and Young Persons Act 1933, the Child Abduction Act 1984 and the Children Act 1989.

1.3.2 Urban to county locations and the transportation of drugs and cash by exploited people between locations

- Data published in 2017 reported that of the 43 police forces in England and Wales, 65% have reported the exploitation of children linked to County Lines. However, recent improvements in intelligence gathering suggest that this is an underestimation.
- Children are groomed and used to transport drugs via 'plugging' where drugs are stored internally. Children may be forced to continue their involvement through 'debt bondage' where they have money or drugs stolen from them by other members of the network.
- To evade police detection, various tactics are used including the recruitment of children representative of the ethnicity in the specific area, targeting children with no previous offences, ensuring children are rotated across lines and ensuring children are only away from home for short periods of time.

1.3.3 A branded phone line

- Branded mobile phone numbers are essential to the functioning of county lines as they are used to advertise, collect and relay drug orders. Each branded line has multiple individual lines linked to the same number.
- As a result of the Digital Economy Act 2017, police and the National Crime Agency are now able to request that phone lines be shut down if County Lines involvement is suspected.

1.3.4 The exploitation of young people and adults

- There are a wide range of risk factors that can increase potential vulnerability to child criminal exploitation. These include poverty, abuse, neglect, behavioural difficulties, school exclusions, special educational needs, children looked after, those who are missing, drug users, and those with physical or mental health issues.
- While individual factors can increase potential vulnerability to child criminal exploitation, the presence of multiple vulnerabilities heightens the risk.
- There are multiple reasons why a child may become involved in County Lines. These include financial or material gain, protection, kudos or respect. Consequently, some children may not be aware that they are being exploited.
- Some children may find themselves involved purely due to where they live and feel they have no choice. Some children are kept on the periphery of drug networks and used as a cheap, dispensable workforce.
- Drug networks use serious violence to ensure children's compliance and loyalty.
- While children of all ages can be criminally exploited, older children may be perceived as more autonomous in their involvement and where involvement is seen a lifestyle choice rather than safeguarding issue.
- As well as the storage and transportation of drugs, children are also forced to reside in cuckooed dwellings to sell drugs where they are often being subjected to an environment of normalised drug use, physical and sexual exploitation.

1.3.5 Use of intimidation, violence and weapons

- Child criminal exploitation is linked with other forms of exploitation including child sexual exploitation and serious violence.
- Exploited children can be both the victims and perpetrators of violence, with children carrying weapons as a warning as well as to protect themselves.

1.4 Views from the literature about what makes an effective service response for young people involved or at risk of becoming involved in child criminal exploitation

- There is little research about what works in responding to children who are involved or at risk of becoming involved in child criminal exploitation.
- There is no statutory definition of child criminal exploitation.
- Many local authorities do not appear to have protocols for dealing with child criminal exploitation.

1.4.1 Risk Assessment

- Comprehensive training is required for professionals across the safeguarding partners and relevant agencies to enable professionals to understand and recognise child criminal exploitation.
- A multi-agency older children's risk panel may enable agencies to share information and develop joint risk assessments.

1.4.2 Data collection and sharing

- There is currently no systematic data collection for criminally exploited children.
- There is currently an intelligence gap about missing children and the relationship with County Lines. This could be rectified with more consistent use of return interviews.
- Data sharing protocols and practice are reliant on resourcing and clear guidelines as to what information can be shared under the new General Data Protection Regulations.

1.4.3 Police

- There has been an increase in the numbers of 10 to 17 years olds arrested for possession with intent to supply class A drugs since 2015.

- Police services do not use a vulnerability flag for child criminal exploitation, meaning that children who are arrested for possession with intent to supply class A drugs may not be treated as vulnerable.

1.4.4 Children's Services

- Current definitions and thresholds may not be appropriate for abuse that occurs outside of the family.
- More consideration is needed of the wider context with which children live when considering risk factors.
- Where children are brought to the attention of services, professionals and parents experience difficulties in accessing support as many children fail to meet current service thresholds

1.4.5 Health

- Health staff should be trained to identify children at risk of criminal exploitation, share data and in supporting the provision of appropriate interventions.
- There is a need for therapeutic interventions for children suffering from exploitation and services that are persistent in the engagement of children who may still be subject to exploitation or fearful of reprisals.

1.4.6 Youth Offending Services

- Youth Offending Services and Children's Services should be coordinated to ensure the streamlining of practices and approaches aimed at criminally exploited children.
- Youth Offending Services have local intelligence that can be used to ensure that vulnerable children, including care leavers and those who are discharged from custody, are not clustered together in particular accommodation, or locations that heighten the risk of child criminal exploitation.

1.4.7 Education

- Education plays an important role in the identification, protection and prevention of child criminal exploitation.
- There is a need for school staff to be trained in identifying those at risk of child criminal exploitation.
- There are increasing numbers of children being excluded from school, either temporarily or permanently.
- It has been suggested that networks may regard Pupil Referral Units as places to recruit vulnerable young people.

1.4.8 Employment and Training

- Given the link between deprivation and child criminal exploitation, the development of education and training opportunities can be used to combat the risks around lack of employment opportunities.
- There may be scope for local employers and colleges to develop suitable work and training pathways for children affected by child criminal exploitation.

1.4.9 Family

- There are multiple familial risk factors that leave children vulnerable to child criminal exploitation, including domestic violence, parental drug dependency, abuse, neglect and familial involvement in criminality.
- Not all children who are criminally exploited come from fractured families.
- Financial pressures may be exploited where parents must work multiple jobs leaving children alone for long periods or where county lines involvement is used to contribute to the household budget.
- Where children had histories of service involvement, parents reported feeling blamed and excluded by professionals rather than being helped and supported to manage their child's behaviour.
- For children who were not known to services family concerns went unheeded or unsupported.
- While family-focused interventions, and those that are combined with education interventions can be helpful in the prevention of child criminal

exploitation involvement, once children have become exploited, families may need additional support.

1.4.10 Community measures

- Community participation and outreach measures are proactive prevention strategies that could be used in areas where children are at a high risk of criminal exploitation.
- Local policing teams and street-based youth workers can befriend children and help develop community-based programmes such as mentoring and sport and create leisure facilities and safe spaces.

1.5 Conclusion

- The systematic map and synthesis review highlighted that child criminal exploitation is an emerging problem that affects vulnerable children across all ages and ethnicities.
- There is currently limited evidence about the nature and scale of the problem and what works in the identification and prevention of children becoming criminally exploited.
- The review found that three key elements appear to be particularly important:
 1. Children should be seen as the victims of criminal exploitation rather than the perpetrators of crime.
 2. Children who are at risk of, or who are being criminally exploited require strengths-based, relationship driven approaches.
 3. This is a complex social problem and therefore it requires interventions at national, community, family and child level.
 - At the national level, the National County Lines Coordination Centre is aimed at developing a national intelligence picture to determine the scale and scope of child criminal exploitation.
 - At the community level, the review highlighted that community participation and outreach measures may be useful tools in the proactive prevention of child criminal exploitation.

- At the family level, the serious violence and abuse associated with child criminal exploitation renders it difficult for parents to address these behaviours without support from services.
- At the individual level, exploiters capitalise on children who have limited social, economic and or emotional capital.
- Effective approaches and strategies are needed to protect children who are vulnerable to exploitation.
- There is a need for research, policy and preparedness across agencies to try new ways of responding to children and families. Where possible, young people should be involved in shaping this response.

2.0 Introduction

In the wake of the child sexual exploitation scandal in Rochdale and Rotherham, child criminal exploitation has been described as the 'next big grooming scandal' (Ann Coffey, MP, 2017), with services continuing to underestimate the scale of the problem and to treat children as perpetrators rather than victims (Children's Commissioner, 2018). According to the Home Office (2018), child criminal exploitation is,

...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 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

While there are similarities between child criminal exploitation and child sexual exploitation, children who are criminally exploited are forced into transporting and selling drugs, are manipulated into becoming indebted to their exploiters and are vulnerable to violence and exploitation from rival drug networks (Hudek, 2018). Additionally, children are frightened of repercussions, either to themselves or family members, if they are suspected of being 'snitches' or are suspected of, or found to be, trying to escape exploitation (Hudek, 2018).

While the National Crime Agency first reported a threat assessment for what the police and other agencies term 'County Lines' in 2015, Andell and Pitts (2013: 12-13) have reported that the increase in child criminal exploitation has been created by a 'perfect storm' of factors in the UK. These include austerity measures, the reduction in services in local areas, the scarcity of appropriate accommodation for care leavers and children leaving custody and reductions to resources for youth service provision. In addition, there has been a decrease in legitimate employment opportunities for young people and the emergence of local street gangs and where there are a lack of safe gang exit routes for children (Andell and Pitts, 2013). In their view this has

contributed to the increase in County Lines which the Serious Violence Strategy (2018) defined as,

drug networks (both gangs and organised crime groups) who use children and young people and vulnerable adults to carry out illegal activity on their behalf. Gangs dealing drugs is not a new issue but the extent to which criminal exploitation (often organised) of children and vulnerable adults, as well as the increasing use of violence, has become an inherent part of it through county lines makes it especially damaging (Serious Violence Strategy, 2018).

These drug networks may consist of local street gangs or gangs that have evolved into more organised criminal networks who are running unregulated, exploitative businesses involving serious violence (Robinson et al, 2019, Andell, 2019; Local Government Association, 2018). While out of the scope of this report, there has been academic debate surrounding the conceptualisation of gangs, where some academics have argued that the term 'gang' can serve to label young people from deprived areas and/or black and ethnic minority children, while others have counter-argued that failure to do so has created inertia in policies and practices addressing the emergence of youth gangs (Andell, 2019). What has become apparent is that the boundary between street gangs, organised crime networks, drug retailers, wholesalers have become blurred and embedded where the,

proliferation of dealing networks has been facilitated in part by the concentration of gang-involved young people from different regions in the same prisons and Young Offender Institutions and by schemes designed to relocate gang members at risk of death or serious injury at the hands of their own or rival gangs, a long way away from the source of the threat (Andell and Pitts, 2017: 17)

Drug supply has become a fluid operation that quickly adapts to changing circumstances and where market forces have seen the growth of competition necessitating the use of violence as a show of strength to establish territory or in response to territorial threats (Pepin, 2018). The move out of cities has, in part, been due to the saturation of drug dealers in urban areas causing drug networks to seek

out new customer bases and take over drug supply in areas where there is less competition (Robinson et al, 2019; Andell and Pitts, 2018; Windle and Briggs, 2015, Home Office, 2013). Exploitation has emerged as central to drug distribution with children and vulnerable adults being used by drug networks to protect themselves from detection (Home Office, 2018). In this respect the sale and distribution of drugs has developed into a multi-level organisation consisting of around,

three levels of power and decision-making authority: (a) a higher level, or “inner circle”; (b) a middle level of decision makers, or elders, that develop gang organization by generating sales and building an active customer base; and (c) a lower level of youngers who are directed by their elders and thus accountable, punishable, or capable of being rewarded by them. As these names imply, some degree of organizational evolution is age graded (Densley, 2014:532).

The National Crime Agency (2018) have estimated that there are around 1000 branded networks with around 2000 individual lines in the UK. Each individual line can make £800,000 profit per year, with nationwide profits estimated to be £500 million (Grierson, 2019a). This poses significant challenges to service providers as drug supply is a lucrative business and as such, the drug supply model is evolving and adapting to efforts directed at disrupting the exploitation of children (Home Office, 2019). It is important to note at the outset that not all county lines include the use of children and that whilst there is evidence that child criminal exploitation is extending across the UK, this may reflect rising awareness as opposed to an actual increase in the extent of child criminal exploitation. This systematic map and synthesis review was commissioned by the Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel to assess what is known in the literature about child criminal exploitation, in relation to:

- Evidence of good practice in the early identification of young people vulnerable to CCE;
- Key messages for developing an effective service response for young people involved or at risk of becoming involved in CCE;

In doing so, the review found little research and findings relating to child criminal exploitation, and where research does exist, this is dominated by only a few key authors. While the review was commissioned to focus upon child criminal exploitation, it draws upon wider literature relating to gangs and child sexual exploitation, where appropriate to inform discussion.

3.0 Method

Child criminal exploitation is an issue that is only currently being explicitly defined and understood. However, there is a long history of studies of related or overlapping issues that might be of relevance. This includes large literatures on gangs and youth crime and child sexual exploitation. To make this systematic map and synthesis review manageable a decision was made to focus on child criminal exploitation excluding sources pertaining to human trafficking, domestic servitude, child sexual exploitation, gangs and youth crime unless they made reference to child criminal exploitation. However, the review draws upon the wider literature relating to gangs and child sexual exploitation where appropriate to inform discussion.

A systematic map and synthesis review was conducted in April 2019. The following databases were searched: Embase, Medline (including Medline In-Process and Medline ePub), PsycINFO, Scopus and Social Policy and Practice. The Medline search strategy is presented as an example in appendix A. A search for grey literature, using key terms, was conducted of the following online resources: Barnardo's, Children's Commissioners' offices for the four UK nations, Children's Social Care Innovation Programme, Children's Society, Child Welfare Information Gateway, GOV.UK, Early Intervention Foundation, Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner, National Crime Agency, NSPCC and Safeguarding Hub. Searches were limited by year to post 2000 and to the English language. All records were imported into reference management software and deduplicated, resulting in 2970 records (see Appendix B for PRISMA diagram).

Searches were supplemented by contacting six key academics identified in the literature resulting in a further 7 records. Hence, 2977 potential sources were identified, with 2924 excluded as they did not meet the search parameters. Therefore, 53 sources were included for the literature review.

3.1 Selection Process

Two researchers screened titles and abstracts independently for eligible sources. Disagreements between researchers were resolved by consensus or arbitration involving a third author where necessary. Full texts of studies were retrieved for

selected papers and divided across the research team, with two authors evaluating each record to ensure it met inclusion/exclusion criteria. Disagreements were resolved through discussion.

3.2 Data extraction

Authors worked independently to extract data from included papers using NVivo v12 computer software. A coding frame was devised for data extraction, including the problem, demographics, risk factors, identification, activities, professional attitudes, strategies, help and support for children and for parents.

4.0 Evidence of good practice in the early identification of young people vulnerable to child criminal exploitation

4.1 Legislation and policy

Where children are suspected of being exploited the police should be notified so they can investigate the offence, Children's Services should be notified so they can consider whether to undertake a s47 child protection investigation and a referral should be made to the National Referral Mechanism. Referrals to the National Referral Mechanism have increased every year since its introduction in 2009. In 2017, the number of potential victims of exploitation referred was 2,121. Almost all referrals were made by the police (45%) and Home Office (45%) with only 36 made by local authorities (HM Government, 2018a). Once information from the s47 investigation is collated, a strategy meeting is normally held to assess what is known about the child, identify information gaps and produce a plan. However, in practice this is not always happening (Children's Society, 2018). There is often confusion as to what should be addressed first, criminality or child protection needs. Further, while exploitation can be taken into consideration by the criminal justice system, there is no consistent policy as cases are considered on an individual basis (Children's Society, 2018).

Current legislation for child criminal exploitation is complex. According to the Crown Prosecution Service (2018) children should be referred to the National Referral Mechanism in order to determine whether they are victims of modern slavery. In cases where exploitation is determined but there is no evidence of trafficking, children can be considered under section one of the Modern Slavery Act 2015, which includes slavery, servitude, forced or compulsory labour regardless of whether the child consented (Crown Prosecution Service, 2018a). Such considerations should include the vulnerability of the child including physical, mental illness or disability and family relationships. Where children do not reach the Modern Slavery Act (2015) thresholds, the Crown Prosecution recommends that offences can be considered under the Children and Young Persons Act 1933 of cruelty to persons under sixteen or where a child has been removed from their family can be considered under sections 1 and 2 of the Child Abduction Act 1984 relating to as false imprisonment or

kidnapping. For children looked after, abduction can be considered under the Children Act 1989. Where trafficking can be determined, adult exploiters can be charged under section 2 of the Modern Slavery Act 2015. In what is considered to be the first conviction under the Modern Slavery Act 2015 s2, a Birmingham drug dealer aged 21 was convicted of the human trafficking of three teenagers, two 15-year-old boys and one 14-year-old girl (Crown Prosecution Service, 2018b),

using them to sell drugs on his behalf in Lincoln, a county town some 100 miles from Birmingham, operating from a small, cold and squalid flat also occupied by heroin-dependent intravenous users. Having transported them to that base by car or train he had controlled them by cell phone instructions, ferrying in fresh supplies when required, until the 'drawn, tired and hungry' children were found at the flat by the police where they were in possession of drugs, substantial sums of money and hunting knives (Stone 2018:285)

There was no evidence that the children had been forced to travel or participate or that they had received any payment for their involvement (Stone, 2018). However, Stone (2018) warns that convictions may be less clear for older children, children with criminal histories or where they refuse to name their exploiters. In cases where children are controlled through,

violence, the threat of violence, sexual abuse, alcohol and drug abuse, emotional abuse, manipulation through cultural practices and imprisonment to suppress victims and ensure their compliance. For that reason, victims may not fully cooperate with an investigation or prosecution for fear of reprisals. Offenders may also attempt to abduct or coerce the child whilst criminal proceedings are on-going and while the child is being cared for by the local authority (Crown Prosecution Service, 2018)

The National Crime Agency (2017) highlighted the cost implications of the judicial response, reiterating caution that children may be unwilling to engage for fear of reprisals either to themselves or their families. Recent Home Office (2019) guidance has recommended that the strategic use of disruption tactics can be used to deter

child criminal exploitation. This approach is reliant upon information sharing between agencies so that appropriate legislation can be used to address different aspects of child criminal exploitation. The following sections outline the five key components of County Lines as identified by the National Crime Agency (2017: table one) before considering legislative and service approaches.

Table one: Five components of County Lines

Five components of County Lines	
1.	A network between urban and county locations between which drugs are supplied
2.	A branded mobile phone line
3.	The exploitation of young people and vulnerable adults to store, supply drugs, move cash or secure dwellings (commonly referred to as cuckooing)
4.	The transportation of drugs and cash by exploited people between locations
5.	Use of intimidation, violence and weapons.

Source: National Crime Agency (2017)

4.2 Urban to county locations and the transportation of drugs and cash by exploited people between locations

4.2.1 Prevalence

According to figures published in 2017, of the 43 police forces in England and Wales, 65% (28) reported the exploitation of children linked to County Lines (National Crime Agency, 2017). While 42% (18) reported the use of children as ‘runners’, where children are used to transport drugs up and down drug lines (National Crime Agency, 2017). More recently, improvements in intelligence gathering have revealed quarterly increases in the numbers of children linked to county lines (Grierson, 2019b). Hence, the extent to which children are used remains unclear.

Where children are groomed and recruited in large cities and urban areas, they tend to be used to transport drugs to rural or coastal areas. This is commonly referred to as going “out there” or “going country” and involves children being given train tickets. Given the extent to which County Lines relies on the railway network, British

Transport Police are working with the National Crime Agency and National Police Chiefs to share intelligence. Paul Furnell, head of crime and public protection at British Transport Police has reported a rise in vulnerability reports made by railway workers who have increased professional curiosity and who 'look beyond the obvious' (Grierson, 2019b).

Children may also be transported by an older gang member who owns or rents a car (Robinson et al, 2019; All-Party Parliamentary Group, 2017),

The person who I was doing it for picked me and my mates up from Liverpool and we just drove there at night with like five ounces of heroin plugged...the person you do it for answers the phone and we were just going out there to serve the smackheads [drug addicts] (Robinson et al, 2019: 701).

Regardless of how children are transported, drug networks ensure that they are away from home for no more than two weeks at a time,

it's like working away for two weeks ... [you] do your stuff, then once you've made your money come back, buy more do the same thing (Participant quoted in Windle and Briggs, 2015)

In doing so, these networks have identified that children are less likely to be detected for relatively short periods where they are missing (discussed further in section 5.3.1). Where children are known to services, they tend to be rotated around lines to minimise the chances of them being recognised or becoming too familiar in an area. Such practice also obstructs police stop and search checks, and safeguarding tools such as the issuing of warrants or safeguarding checks (Andell and Pitts, 2017; National Crime Agency, 2017; Windle and Briggs, 2015).

4.2.2 The transportation of drugs and cash by exploited people between locations

Children are forced to conceal drugs in their luggage or by 'plugging' which refers to concealing drugs internally within the gastrointestinal tract, vagina, or they may be stored in their cheeks. This puts the children at risk of harm as drugs wraps may rupture inside them or are easily swallowed if approached by police (HM

Government, 2018a; Williams, 2018; National Crime Agency, 2017; Pepin, 2018). Currently, police do not have the equipment or powers to detect these drugs (Andell and Pitts, 2017). Only small amounts of drugs are couriered at any one time, lowering criminal liability and financial loss if children are caught (Pepin, 2018; Andell and Pitts, 2017). A common feature of County Lines is 'debt bondage' where children are robbed by members of their own network in order to remain indebted to the network and where they are forced to pay off the inflated debt (Andell and Pitts, 2017). There was evidence of debts being passed to other family members, including younger siblings who may be criminally or sexually exploited as well as children being used to groom other children (Children's Society, 2018; Ofsted, 2018). Children may also experience 'taxing' where violence is used as a form of control and where children who have 'done wrong' may be marked or injured as a lesson to others (National Crime Agency, 2017:11). Further, children are also at risk of attack by other gang members or from their customers (Andell and Pitts, 2017).

In addition to being coerced into transporting and selling drugs, children may also be financially exploited and used for money laundering (Violence and Vulnerability Unit, 2018). In these cases, the appearance of large sums of money in children's accounts can be an indicator that a child is being exploited.

4.2.3 Not just urban to rural locations

The findings demonstrated that rather than just sending children from urban areas to rural or coastal towns, children are also being recruited in rural areas and may be sent across the rural area to deliver drugs, collect payments and seek out new customers (Pepin, 2018; Andell and Pitts, 2017). Where children are groomed at the local level, they may not affiliate with one particular gang, but can be used by multiple gangs at any one time (Pepin, 2018).

Review findings suggest that children are being recruited to reflect the ethnic group within the market area. Hence, national findings have shown an increase in the number of white British children and those from affluent backgrounds (Home Office, 2018; Hudek, 2018). This may reflect the recruitment of children from rural areas or an attempt to evade detection by targeting children who are less likely to draw police attention (The Children's Society, 2019). According to the National Crime Agency

(2017), the ethnicity of young people varies in accordance with where they live, so for example, young people in London-based County Lines were black whereas those from Birmingham tended to be Asian and those from Liverpool or Manchester were white.

4.2.4 Service response

As noted, current legislation for child criminal exploitation is complex. As well as offences under the Modern Slavery Act (2015) there are a range of police powers that can be used. For example, Child Abduction Warnings can be issued to deter potential exploiters. However, Child Abduction Warning Notices can be impeded by the need for a caregiver statement as some caregivers may be fearful of gang or drug network reprisals or they may be reliant on the child's financial contribution to the household (Williams and Finlay, 2019). Recovery Orders (Children Act, 1989) can be also used where a child has been unlawfully taken or kept away from caregivers. As well as legislation, the Home Office (2019) recommend that joint action plans be devised between the police and other agencies. Such plans should be made for locations where exploitation-related incidents have been recorded, including town centres, parks, bus or train stations and that staff should be given awareness briefings about exploitation. The Home Office also recommends the use of high visibility local police teams, the installation of lighting, review of CCTV and development of outreach work by youth services.

4.3 A branded phone line

Anonymised phone lines are essential to functioning County Lines and can be worth thousands of pounds (National Crime Agency, 2017). The county line model encompasses multiple individual mobile phone numbers and cloned phones that relate back to one branded county line which is an established line in the market which receives customer orders, operated by elders in the urban hub (Pepin, 2018). Some numbers are used to send out messages that advertise the drugs on sale and for customers to place orders while others are used to relay orders to dealers in the rural market (Pepin, 2018; Home Office, 2018a). The phone numbers are changed regularly to evade detection, although areas vary in the frequency with which

numbers are replaced, with some numbers only used when there is product to sell (Pepin, 2018; National Crime Agency, 2017).

4.3.1 Legislative powers

In order to address this component, the Digital Economy Act 2017 introduced the Drug Dealing and Telecommunications Restriction Orders Regulation in 2017 which allows the police and National Crime Agency to apply to the courts that communications providers close down particular phone lines suspected of county lines involvement.

4.4 The exploitation of young people and adults

There are a number of factors that make children vulnerable to exploitation. Spencer et al's (2019) thematic review of vulnerable adolescents in Croydon found many of the exploited children were living in poverty, with poor housing or housing instability with multiple adverse childhood experiences, including physical abuse, parental substance misuse, parental criminal activity, neglect, parental mental health or absent parents. Similarly, the National Crime Agency (2017) have highlighted a number of characteristics that make children vulnerable to criminal exploitation, including children with behavioural difficulties, school exclusions, children looked after, those who are missing, drug users, and those with physical or mental health issues. Individually these factors render a child vulnerable to child criminal exploitation, with multiple vulnerabilities heightening the risk,

the children who have multiple interlinked vulnerabilities – both at the individual level (such as mental health or special educational needs) and the family level (such as abuse and neglect) ... cause children to act out, or may make them susceptible to gang inducements or threats. These risks can be moderated or exacerbated by whether and how services respond when the child's needs first emerge (Children's Commissioner, 2019: 5)

4.3.1 Socially excluded

Children's involvement in child criminal exploitation is complicated as some children may choose to associate with gangs to gain kudos, protection, financial or emotional fulfilment from their new 'family',

The thing about County Lines is that people are not simply seduced by it, but it gives them somebody to be, it is recognition; being a drug dealer is to be a somebody, then they look at what's happening to the older guys driving around in a Mercedes and they think I'll have some of that. Of course, they're being exploited (Prof John Pitts, personal communication)

Jock Young's (1999) work has emphasised that children's aspirations are informed from mainstream consumerism and yet their relative deprivation can mean they are socially excluded, experiencing,

a denial of reward and a denial of recognition in the conventional world, but find both in the gang and the drugs business (Andell and Pitts, 2017: 11)

Children may perceive county lines and drug dealing as the only way to gain kudos and respect (Robinson et al, 2019; Andell and Pitts, 2017; Densley, 2014). This is fuelled by the neighbourhoods in which children live and where they may find themselves involved purely due to where they live (Children's Commissioner, 2019). Hence, some children may feel they have no choice, while others may be kept on the periphery but still exploited and used as a cheap, dispensable workforce and where 'chilling levels of violence' are used to ensure children's compliance to the gang (Children's Commissioner 2019: 6, Windle et al, forthcoming; Children's Society, 2013). Moreover, children may not be aware that they have been exploited, insisting that their actions are through personal choice. This demonstrates the targeting of children who have 'limited availability of choice resulting from their social, economic and or emotional vulnerability' (Knowsley Safeguarding Board, 2018). This is compounded by distrust of services where children believe that services are unable

to intervene and improve their situation, or if they do intervene, it could make things worse (Andell and Pitts, 2017).

4.3.2 Demographic factors

The findings showed that children across all ages can be subject to criminal exploitation with gangs exploiting service gaps to target vulnerable children (Violence and Vulnerability Unit, 2018). Children between the ages of 15 and 17 are most commonly exploited (APPG paper, 2017; National Crime Agency, 2017; Hudek, 2018 Home Office, 2018). Findings revealed that service providers may find it difficult to perceive older children as criminally exploited victims who require a safeguarding response (Chard, 2019; Violence and Vulnerability Unit, 2018; The Children's Society, 2018; All-Party Parliamentary Group, 2017). Hence, there was evidence of professionals perceiving child involvement as a lifestyle choice,

They are young, but seldom that young and innocence recedes with each passing year. They are involved in the sale of the most demonised of drugs (crack cocaine and heroin) and their drug sales do cause harm to others. Many are known to authorities before their engagement in county lines and, they may exhibit the dress and vernacular of 'road culture' (Windle et al, forthcoming)

This was compounded as some children may not present as typical victims but rather exhibit hyper-masculine behaviours based on street cultures where vulnerability is seen as weakness (Windle et al, forthcoming; Robinson et al, 2019).

Findings revealed that different age groups are associated with different aspects of criminal exploitation, for example the youngest drug runner reported was 12 years, while younger children, even those of preschool age have been found living in houses that have been taken over or, 'cuckooed' by county line groups (National Crime Agency, 2017). According to the Children's Society (2019) some local authorities were aware of children as young as 7 being targeted (Children's Society, 2019). This may reflect the dynamic nature of the county lines model where organised crime networks are constantly seeking out new ways of working to evade detection; the recruitment of younger children who are less likely to attract the attention of the police (Children's Commissioner, 2019).

There was evidence of a gendered approach to exploitation with males tending to be perceived as perpetrators while females are perceived as victims (Violence and Vulnerability Unit, 2018). In practice both males and females can be criminally exploited for county lines and both may be subject to sexual violence as a result of their involvement (Home Office, 2018; Wigmore, 2018; Andell and Pitts, 2017). While findings have shown that males are disproportionately affected (APPG, 2017; Robinson, 2017; National Crime Agency, 2017; Hudek, 2018), there has been an increase in the recruitment of girls (Children’s Commissioner, 2019; Violence and Vulnerability Unit, 2019; Whittaker, 2018). This may reflect an adaptation to the county lines model, as girls are less likely to attract attention by authorities (Whittaker, 2018). Alternatively, this may reflect an increase in female involvement with gangs. Research undertaken in the London Borough of Waltham Forest (Whittaker, 2018) has reported that female involvement differs from that of males in that they may be involved with more than one gang and fulfil a range of key roles that expose them to violence and sexual exploitation.

4.3.3 Grooming

According to the Children’s Society (2018), children can be groomed face to face or online, by a stranger or someone known to the child. Grooming involves the establishment of an emotional connection to gain the child’s trust. The National Crime Agency (2017) reported that grooming can take place in communal areas where children are given alcohol or drugs, are sexually exploited and manipulated into dealing drugs. There was also evidence of children with no prior criminal record (referred to as ‘clear skins’). In some cases, social media is used to control and coerce, for example,

a female victim being filmed while being sexually assaulted by multiple gang members. The footage was used to shame and coerce her boyfriend. In section 2 of this case study [the case study of ‘W’] we also refer to evidence that indecent images are taken and shared as part of gang initiation/vengeance/punishment (Wigmore, 2018)

In other instances the lyrics of grime music have been used to taunt children and incite violence between rival networks (Andell and Pitts, 2017). Andell (personal

communication, 2019) has also warned that in some local authorities grooming can occur where vulnerable care leavers are being placed in the same housing blocks as those who are being released from prison.

4.3.4 Cuckooing

Cuckooing is the process where children are used to take over houses acquired from vulnerable adults including class A drug addicts (who are socially excluded and less likely to report victimisation to the police), the elderly, adults with mental or physical health impairments, female sex workers or single mothers (Spicer, 2018; National Crime Agency, 2017; Andell and Pitts, 2017). Children may be forced to remain in these dwellings (commonly referred to as a 'bando' or 'trap house') until they have sold the drugs and can return home and where,

Some of these locations will be sparsely furnished, unhygienic dwellings where they are at risk of being immersed in an environment of normalised crack/heroin consumption, hazardous sexual acts (often involving sex workers)... with elevated opportunities to offend and engage in risky behaviour (i.e. smoke cigarettes, drink alcohol); with an absence of intimate handlers (parents, teachers, YOT workers) (Windle and Briggs, 2015: 112).

Children may be threatened if they leave the trap house or have their phones monitored (HM Government, 2018a). There is evidence that local businesses are complicit in county lines activities with 18% (8) of forces reporting the companies providing taxis, fast food and care hire firms to county lines groups (Pepin, 2018). Findings suggest that the county lines model is evolving as 23% (10) of police forces reported the use of serviced apartments, holiday lets, hotels and caravan parks (Pepin, 2018; National Crime Agency, 2017).

4.3.4.1 Service response

Professionals have called for legal sanctions to deter grooming (Violence and Vulnerability Unit, 2018). Findings from Ofsted's (2018) joint targeted area inspections of Greenwich, Southend-on-Sea and Dorset have highlighted Southend's multi-agency model as an example of good practice. This model includes police

disruption tactics, where streets and houses being used for county lines are identified through a street engagement service and the use of outreach work for children. The police also use child abduction warning notices and community protection notices to safeguard vulnerable children. 2018). There have also been calls for a new type of power to protect young people, a Child Criminal Exploitation Protection Order (Violence and Vulnerability Unit, 2018).

4.5 Use of intimidation, violence and weapons.

The evidence suggests that child criminal exploitation is linked with other forms of exploitation, including sexual exploitation and serious violence (Robinson et al, 2019; Children's Commissioner, 2019; National Crime Agency, 2017). The literature revealed that children were identified as both victims and perpetrators of intimidation and violence,

A 16 year old male had been reported as missing from London and was considered at risk ... He was found in possession of a 6-inch kitchen knife and 30 wraps of drugs ... Whilst in custody he was found to have significant burns to his body, on his stomach area, consistent with having been burnt by boiling liquid. He would not disclose further details; however it was suspected this may have been caused by those responsible for placing him in Ipswich to deal in class A drugs (Home Office, 2018)

Serious violence can be normalised with children carrying knives as a warning to others or to protect themselves. The use of debt bondage can render children increasingly desperate in their attempts to pay off these debts or retain their status as they feel trapped in a situation where there is no help available to them (Violence and Vulnerability Unit, 2018). Pitts (personal communication, 2019) has reported that some young people are reluctant to disclose details about the violence they have suffered as they know that both the police and Children's Services have a statutory obligation to respond. Such responses can place the child and their families at risk of further violence and reprisals. Indeed, the author of the case study of 'W' explicitly stated that personal and location information was omitted to safeguard his family from potential gang repercussions (Wigmore, 2018).

While a feature of child criminal exploitation, measures to address serious violence are out of the scope of this report. The next section presents findings relating to effective service provision in identifying and responding to children who are at risk or who are being exploited.

5.0 Views from the literature about what makes an effective service response for young people involved or at risk of becoming involved in child criminal exploitation

The review found that there is little research about effective service provision for tackling child criminal exploitation. Therefore, this section brings together suggestions for practices or policies that might work or that were perceived to work by practitioners. The main emerging theme was the need for the development of a whole system approach that includes policy, prevention, disruption, protection and support across multiple agencies (Ofsted, 2018). While the statutory guidance for single agency and inter-agency working is contained within the Children and Social Work Act 2017 and Working Together to Safeguard Children (HM Government, 2018c), the following sections present evidence relating to the roles and responsibilities for each agency based on findings from the literature.

5.1 Risk assessment

Currently, there are inconsistencies in service response across and within local authorities and this can result in children continuing to be criminalised (Children's Society, 2019). Training for professionals across the safeguarding partners and relevant agencies in the assessment and understanding of the sometimes complex nature of children's lives may help them to look beyond the child's behaviours and understand the risk factors associated with child criminal exploitation (Ofsted, 2018). In a thematic review of six children, five of whom committed serious violent offences and one boy who was a victim in Tower Hamlets, Chard (2015) recommended that a multi-agency older children's risk panel be established to share information and develop joint risk assessments for older children. Such assessments should include historical information in order to provide a comprehensive picture and where professionals should also recognise the potential cumulative and interactive effect of multiple risk factors that make them susceptible to child criminal exploitation (Chard, 2019; Early Intervention Foundation, 2015).

5.2 Data collection and sharing

There is currently no systematic data collection for criminally exploited children (The Children's Society, 2019). While the National County Lines Coordination Centre became operational in September 2018 there was no evidence in the literature relating to the extent which a national intelligence picture and coordinated police response has emerged. Without this data it is difficult to map levels of exploitation across England and Wales or target services effectively. Following the Children's Commissioner's (2019) statutory data request to the Chairs of 25 Local Safeguarding Boards perceived to be at high risk of criminal exploitation only sixteen areas responded. Of these, four reported they held no such data, although it should be noted that these figures may not represent the lack of a safeguarding response from individual agencies but rather the lack of coordination from the Local Safeguarding Board (Children's Commissioner, 2019). The results showed that most areas underestimated the number of children in or at the periphery of gangs, based on their estimates on children known to agencies and most areas had not identified risk indicators. In direct contravention to guidance, one area reported they were unable to distinguish victims from perpetrators (Children's Commissioner, 2019). Risk assessment tools are required that collate information held by multiple services, to be completed by trained professionals who are able to identify both risk and protective factors and understand the needs of children of all ages (Chard, 2019; Early Intervention Foundation, 2015). However, data and sharing mechanisms must be considered within the wider context of austerity measures and the new General Data Protection Regulations (Andell and Pitts, 2017:40). Consequently, some agencies may experience difficulties in capacity and understanding around what information can be shared.

5.2.1 Children looked after

It has been suggested that children looked after by local authorities have heightened social and emotional vulnerabilities (Andell and Pitts, 2017). This may be compounded by the fact that proportionately more children who are looked after are reported as missing,

Children's care homes are particularly susceptible because they're more likely to go missing. We've got a couple of care homes in the borough that we have a lot of missing episodes from... The girls are regular high risk of missing people, CSE risks, risk to other people, risk from criminal exploitation. They perpetrate their own crimes either within the care home or outside it. So they are generators of demand and risk, themselves (Statutory professional reported in Whittaker, 2018:58).

Findings from Whittaker's (2018) research in the London Borough of Waltham Forest found increases in targeting children for exploitation in children's homes, foster homes and those who have been adopted. Despite known vulnerabilities, the Children's Society's (2019) freedom of information requests to local authorities in England and Wales, found that of 142 respondents, 54% were unable to retrieve data regarding the number of children looked after who were at risk of criminal exploitation.

The Home Office (2019) recommends that joint actions should be determined in how to respond to missing episodes with clear delineation of responsibilities for the police and other agencies. The Home Office (2019) have also stipulated that carers should be given information regarding the identities, photographs and vehicle details of potential exploiters with a police officer allocated as the first point of contact for caregivers.

5.2.2 Missing episodes

The relationship between going missing and exploitation is complex. Wigmore (2018) notes that missing episodes are indicators of exploitation and can be used to alert services even where children are reluctant to make detailed disclosures. As such, going missing may be a warning sign that children are being intimidated or coerced as children feel dependent upon those who are exploiting them (Pearce et al. 2009). Moreover, a child's disappearance may be orchestrated by the exploiters to evade detection, to prevent the child from disclosing to professionals, or it may be due to the child's fear of the exploiters or their debt bondage (Sturrock and Holmes, 2015).

There is currently an intelligence gap about missing children and the relationship with county lines; risk assessment could be used as a potential indicator of

exploitation for vulnerable groups of children (National Crime Agency, 2017; All-Party Parliamentary Group, 2017). The National Crime Agency (2017) has called for a collaborative approach across services because missing person information is held on a range of systems across a variety of different partner agencies. Such information could facilitate the identification of a vulnerable child in another area. This is particularly pertinent as safeguarding mechanisms are dependent upon knowing where the child is for statutory responses and so that safeguarding checks can be made.

According to statutory guidance missing children should be offered an independent return interview. However, there are inconsistencies in the extent to which local authorities offer a return interview and even where interviews are offered, the child may not want to engage or may be afraid to do so (All-Party Parliamentary Group, 2017). The All-Party Parliamentary Group (2017) has recommended that return interviews should be used to identify risk and determine appropriate service provision.

5.3 Police

As noted, the Home Office (2019) has produced a Child Criminal Exploitation Disruption Toolkit which stipulates legislation and police powers that can be used to disrupt exploitation activities. There was also some evidence within the data regarding specific approaches that are being used in some local authorities. For example, in Greater Manchester police launched Operation Cougar in 2008. This is a multi-agency approach where caregivers are given a “letter of concern” which details the child’s conduct or behaviour that has been identified as increasing their risk of exploitation. This is followed with support from Manchester Multi Agency Gang Strategy (Home Office, 2010).

Generally, exploited children will come to the attention of the police where they go missing, are in the possession of drugs or through stop and search procedures. The Children’s Society (2019) findings from freedom of information requests to local authorities shows that there has been an increase in the numbers of 10 to 17 years olds arrested for possession with intent to supply class A drugs since 2015. According to their findings (The Children’s Society, 2019), most police forces

reported that these children would not be assigned vulnerability flags as there is currently no flag for child criminal exploitation. Further, the Violence and Vulnerability Unit (2018) reported that minimal responses for regular child offenders were encouraging exploitation. The criminal justice system tends to release children in possession with intent to supply class A drugs pending further investigation. There were some indications of police action against child criminal exploitation. For example, findings from Ofsted's (2018) joint inspection found that in Dorset, police have weekly meetings to gather intelligence from local policing teams to identify risks and plan disruption and investigation activity. Regional police resources then disrupt criminal activity. As noted, the Children's Society (2013) has suggested that the police work with other agencies to identify the perpetrators, locations and networks so that disruption strategies can be employed.

5.4 Children's Services

With no statutory definition of child criminal exploitation, many local authorities do not have local protocols and policies in place and even those that do may misinterpret or misconstrue child criminal exploitation (Children's Society, 2019). A theme in the literature and author interviews was that current child protection policy is focused upon familial abuse and fails to encompass other forms of child abuse (Chard, 2015; Violence and Vulnerability Unit, 2018). The use of contextual safeguarding (Firmin, 2019), which is the assessment of risk to older children derived from their environment, was recommended to address this limitation (The Children's Society, 2018).

It was also noted that the Home Office (2018) definition lacks clarity leading some professionals to focus on some aspects such as the identification of tangible exchange rather than subtler forms or exploitation where children are manipulated through friendships, kudos or belonging to a wider gang 'family' (Andell, 2019; Fitch, 2009). Further, Manchester Local Safeguarding Board (2018) highlight that,

the prevention of something negative can also fulfil the requirement for exchange, for example a young person who engages in county lines activity to stop someone carrying out a threat to harm their family

Current policies do not capture forms of abuse related to child criminal exploitation such as debt enslavement or entrapment (Violence and Vulnerability Unit, 2018). Moreover, clarity is needed around how to assess behaviours that children seemingly do voluntarily,

People talk about plugging as young people transporting drugs inserted into their bodies and I don't know whether we are saying that is a form of child abuse, so inevitably if they are doing that then they have been victimised, but I don't know whether we are necessarily immediately seeing that as a safeguarding concern (Area 1, The Children's Society, 2019: 74)

Where children are brought to the attention of services, professionals and parents experience difficulties in accessing support as many children fail to meet current service thresholds (Spencer et al, 2019; Children's Society, 2019). This means that the child's behaviour needs to escalate before services can become involved,

The children's behaviour continued to escalate; they were involved in offending, substance misuse, were victims of child sexual exploitation (CSE) or child criminal exploitation (CCE), over half were thought to be in, or affiliated to gangs, suspected of running county lines and were both victims and perpetrators of knife crime...The multi-agency response was reactive, and sometimes could be described as crisis management. As the risks and vulnerability grew, behaviour was more serious, more violent and more frequent; agencies struggled to meet their needs (Spencer et al, 2019:9)

Consequently, children may only become known to services when they are at crisis point or where their behaviours are entrenched (Violence and Vulnerability Unit, 2018; Chard, 2015). Where children are accommodated there often appears to be a lack of appropriate accommodation, trained workers and effective care planning and support (Andell and Pitts, 2017; Sturrock and Holmes, 2015). The evidence revealed that safeguarding measures that involve relocating the child and/or their family must be carefully considered as in some cases they can serve to facilitate the extension of drug networks and establishment of new lines (Sturrock and Holmes, 2015). Where

care leavers are placed, Andell and Pitts' (2017) research of drug distribution networks in Suffolk, found that children who are looked after within the county or placed from outside the county may be accommodated in children's homes or lodgings alongside children who are being criminally exploited exacerbating their risk of future involvement:

What seems to happen is when we can't safeguard our young people or when other local authorities can't safeguard their young people, they put them all in the same place. So you're putting them all in the same place where you're increasing the risk. You're putting other young women and men who are at risk in the system in the same place and it's not really thought about and we put more children at risk. We need to really be vigilant and have a look at that issue (practitioner cited in The Children's Society, 2019: 82)

5.5 Health

The Children's Society (2019) noted the lack of a public health model which addresses the demand for drugs. This is particularly pertinent as drugs networks evolve by for example, the sale of recreational drugs such as Spice to club users (Pepin, 2018).

With drug networks extending into rural and coastal areas, Williams and Finlay (2018) have recommended that health staff be trained to identify children at risk of criminal exploitation, share data and in supporting the provision of appropriate interventions. For example, some hospitals are beginning to connect children who have been subject to serious violence to youth workers (personal communication with John Pitts, 2019). However, the inclusion of health agencies will require data sharing protocols to address issues around patient confidentiality.

Regarding mental health, the Children's Commissioner (2019) found that gang-associated children were over 75% more likely to have an identified mental health need than other young people assessed by children's services, and also twice as likely to have a history of self-harm. Children over 15 years are less likely to engage with Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services, more likely to miss initial appointments and more likely to be discharged due to missed appointments (The

Children's Society, 2018). However, there is a need for therapeutic interventions for children suffering from exploitation that are persistent and consistent so that children are not discharged due to non-engagement (Ofsted, 2018; Wigmore, 2018).

5.6 Youth Offending Services

Youth Offending Services and Children's Services must be coordinated to ensure the streamlining of practices and approaches aimed at criminally exploited children,

So, we've got safeguarding boards pulling in one way and then criminal justice agencies pulling in another again treating this as an individual problem taking out young people who are couriering drugs, who are being exploited, sending them off to a youth justice agency, one to one work. Again, abstracting them from the neighbourhood, the relations and relationships from which these things occur (personal communication, Andell, 2019)

Youth Offending Services have a vital role to play as they often have local intelligence that can be used to ensure that vulnerable children including care leavers and those who are discharged from custody are not placed in particular accommodation or locations that heighten the risks. This is especially pertinent as many local areas were relying on Youth Offending Services to support children who did not meet safeguarding service thresholds (Violence and Vulnerability Unit, 2018).

5.7 Education

Education has an important role in the identification, protection and prevention of child criminal exploitation (Home Office, 2019; All-Party Parliamentary Group, 2017). Indeed, there was some evidence to suggest that children are being groomed outside school gates in some areas (Whittaker et al, 2018).

As with children looked after, the Home Office (2019) has identified a need for school staff to be trained in identifying child criminal exploitation indicators and to be provided with information relating to the identities, photographs, and vehicle details of potential exploiters. A link police officer should be identified as the first point of contact for schools and who attends regular meetings with the school's designated

safeguarding lead and local authority. Moreover, school staff must record missing episodes as the child's attendance may be sporadic (Hudek, 2018; Pearce, 2009).

5.7.1 Pupil referral units and alternative provision

The Violence and Vulnerability Unit's (2018) review of over 70 Locality Reviews and three Strategic Framework Assessments has found that,

In some areas, PRUs [pupil referral units] become the arena for gang rivalries which become dangerous for pupils and hard for staff to manage. PRUs are also viewed as the place where already vulnerable young people get first hand exposure to and experience of crime (drug dealing/violence/intimidation/recruitment for 'county lines'). There are growing numbers of excluded children in alternative provision and this clustering together is creating a recruiting arena for crime and anti-social behaviour

Clarke's (2019) analysis found that children in gangs were more likely to be in alternative provision, have experienced school instability, through exclusion or mid-year moves, and were more likely to be absent from school. This risk factor is particularly pertinent as there has been an increase in the number of pupil exclusions and even where exclusions are temporary, children may not be reintegrated back into school (Violence and Vulnerability Unit, 2018; Hudek, 2018). In response, Ofsted (2018) has called for schools to consider the well-documented links between missing education and safeguarding when considering school exclusions. This is supported by the Home Office (2019) who are encouraging schools not to exclude or reduce the timetables for children at risk or experiencing exploitation. While there was evidence that some schools were beginning to acknowledge gang existence and county lines, this was not true for all schools (Violence and Vulnerability Unit, 2018). There does not seem to be any evidence that colleges and universities are involved in the identification and safeguarding response to criminally exploited children (email communication with Simon Harding, 2019).

The Early Intervention Foundation's (2015) findings from their review of national and international interventions programmes to prevent children from becoming or remaining involved in gangs found that the most effective intervention programmes

were those that were run by trained facilitators and were aimed at creating positive change in children's lives (such as conflict management and combating peer pressure), combined school and family-based programmes which enabled children to practise skills (such as communication and problem solving techniques) and where programmes adhered to implementation fidelity. Programmes specifically aimed at the prevention of gang involvement such as community-based programmes and mentoring had a more limited evidence base and so their effectiveness could not be determined. Programmes that may not work included those that were based on deterrence (such as boot camps or prison visits). Finally, the evidence was unclear as to whether computer-based interventions are effective (Early Intervention Foundation, 2015).

Regarding initiatives specifically aimed at children at risk of exploitation, £13 million has been allocated to the 'Trusted Relationships Fund' to pilot approaches that foster relationships between frontline staff and young people. There has also been continuation of the 'Disrespect NoBody' campaign, an education programme aimed at teaching children about healthy relationships (State of Children's, Rights in England, 2018). More generally, education programmes are required that teach children about the risks of criminal exploitation, having designated workers in school who recognise the signs of child criminal exploitation and offer support to children and where extra support should be offered to children in high-risk areas where there may be at greater risk of being exploited (All-Party Parliamentary Group, 2017; Sturrock, 2016; Pearce, 2009; Fitch, 2009).

5.8 Employment and Training

Given the link between deprivation and child criminal exploitation, the development of education and training opportunities can be used to combat the risks around lack of employment opportunities. The Serious Violence Strategy (2018) has identified £90 million of dormant accounts money that can be used to support disadvantaged and disengaged children into work. Such measures should include working with local employers and colleges to determine realistic work and training pathways alongside support for children to maximise their knowledge and skills (Pitts, 2011). For example, Your Own Enterprise is an intervention that offers children who are involved with Youth Offending Services and on the edge of serious and organised

crime involvement, a programme of support and learning aimed at developing new skills through the development of trusted relationships and links with business partner mentors (Dodsworth and Sorenson, 2018).

5.9 Family

While vulnerability to exploitation may be exacerbated by the child's home circumstances a complex picture emerged, where family could be both a risk and a protective factor. In terms of risk, Clarke's (2019) analysis of children assessed by children's services or youth offending teams over a twelve-month period, found that gang associated children were more likely to have family members who had committed offences. Further, gang associated children were twice as likely as non-gang associated children to have practitioners record concerns about them living with offenders (Clarke, 2019). The Children's Society (2019) found that children became exploited due to family member involvement in criminal networks as well as parental drug dependency and having a criminally exploited older sibling. The evidence also suggested that fractured family relationships due to domestic violence, abuse or neglect could lead children to seek out nurturing relationships, and a sense of belonging, from gang membership (Clarke, 2019; Andell and Pitts, 2017). Conversely, children may be more susceptible due to parental absence arising from the need for parents to work several low paid jobs (Whittaker, 2018). Indeed, the link with poverty and criminal exploitation is complex as children may also seek out county lines involvement in order to contribute to the household budget (Violence and Vulnerability Unit, 2018).

It is important to note that not all children who are criminally exploited come from fractured families,

The difference with my boy is he has a family and I feel he was drawn into it more because of... how to describe it, he shut me down (Andell and Pitts, 2017:21).

This notion of being 'shut down' was linked to children being more influenced by their peers than their parents (Spencer et al, 2019; Andell and Pitts, 2017). Consequently, parents reported difficulties in managing their child's behaviour or mitigating the risks yet they reported frustration as to what to do and where to go for help and support

when children became involved in county lines (All-Party Parliamentary Group, 2017). Where children had histories of service involvement, parents reported feeling blamed and excluded rather than being helped and supported to manage their child's behaviour (Spender et al, 2019; Hudek, 2018). For children who were not known to services family concerns went unheeded or supported,

A recurrent theme of our visits was the frustration of parents who had asked for help which was refused. When they had recognised warning signs – their child having new things, staying out after school or even going missing – agencies had dismissed their concerns (Children's Commissioner, 2019:12).

While the Children's Commissioner (2019) details the case of 'Chris' (Newham Local Safeguarding Board (2018), the case of 'W' (Wigmore, 2018) presents a similar picture where a parent's constant calls for help were not acted upon. In both cases multiple agencies were involved. In the case of 'W', despite receiving multiple crisis assessments there was no clear plan and a lack of coordination between services. Rather, the case study notes that the main approach was to advise 'W' to avoid his friends. Consequently, Wigmore's (2018) recommendations reiterate the need to develop the knowledge of professionals across safeguarding partners and relevant agencies to inform their work with criminally exploited children and families. Indeed, under the Working Together to Safeguard Children statutory guidance (HM Government, 2018c), local authorities have a responsibility to intervene where a child's needs are greater than the family can support alone (Children's Society, 2019). This suggests that while family-focused interventions aimed at awareness raising and practical guidance for parents can be used as preventative tools, once children have become exploited, families require additional support (Home Office, 2018; Violence and Vulnerability Unit, 2018).

5.10 Community measures

The use of community participation and outreach measures emerged as proactive prevention strategies that could be used in areas where children are at a high risk of criminal exploitation (Williams and Finlay, 2018). Pitts (personal communication, 2019) highlights the need to develop networks of community members so that they

can develop an understanding of the nature of child criminal exploitation in their local area, identify service gaps and develop appropriate services. Such a view acknowledges how county lines models may be adapted locally in response to specific police and safeguarding measures. Additionally, Pitts argues that reductions in resources have removed key professionals in high-risk areas rendering children with limited access to ‘capable guardians’ and, in some cases, children may fear they have little option but to turn to gangs for protection (Children’s Commissioner, 2019). As Pitts explains,

When you get that withdrawal of the state, it sends a very powerful signal to unscrupulous people that they can do whatever they want (personal communication, Pitts)

Indeed, the Violence and Vulnerability Unit’s (2018) review notes the increase in violent interactions between local people and drug networks in public spaces. As well as local policing teams there is a need for street-based youth workers who can befriend children and help develop community-based programmes such as mentoring and sport and create leisure facilities and safe spaces (Hallsworth, 2008). The Home Office (2010) also recommends youth inclusion projects, youth inclusion and support panels, and peer mentoring. The effectiveness of short-term reactionary interventions has been questioned with a call for longer term proactive strategies (Andell and Pitts, 2017).

One promising pilot programme is aimed at delivering targeted interventions for at risk groups of children aged 8 -19 years through eight professional football club community organisations in partnership with local agencies. Funded by BBC Children in Need and The Premier League Charitable Fund, the ‘Breaking the Cycle of Youth Violence’ is currently being evaluated with the final report due in December 2019 (Barter et al, 2019). While not publicly available, interim findings suggest that the programme is engaging children using the brands of the Premier League and clubs and the use of workers independent from statutory agencies. There are promising findings in relation to reductions in risk behaviours, including criminal aspirations, anti-social behaviour and criminal behaviour, and increases in protective factors, including self-regulation and self-esteem. Moreover, children and young

people are being offered practical support to make lifestyle changes and identify education, training and employment opportunities.

6.0 Conclusion

This systematic map and synthesis review highlighted that child criminal exploitation affects vulnerable children across all age and ethnicities. The current lack of reliable data renders it difficult to determine whether child criminal exploitation is increasing or whether the figures represent growing awareness of its existence (National Crime Agency, 2017). While the review found a call for better coordination of services and assessments of risk, there is limited evidence regarding what approaches are effective. However, the review found that three key elements appear to be particularly important.

First, that children are seen as the victims of criminal exploitation rather than the perpetrators of crime. There has been a tendency to perceive child criminality as the voluntary lifestyle choice of adolescents (Children's Commissioner, 2019). Common portrayals of adolescents imply that they are autonomous and resilient at best and violent gang members at worst. This has resulted in omissions in our safeguarding duties to this group of older children. Under the Children Act 1989 children are entitled to protection and the promotion of their well-being until they are 18. Yet professional attitudes have hindered the identification of warning signs where older children have been forced into criminality either by gang members or by their limited social, emotional abilities as well as the poverty, poor housing or deprivation in which they live. The tendency to criminalise vulnerable children has further reduced their already limited opportunities creating a cycle of offending and exploitation (Spencer et al, 2019).

Second, the review has highlighted that children who are at risk of, or who are being criminally exploited require strengths-based, relationship driven approaches.

Children should have access to a trusted adult, whether this is within education, youth work or a professional from a statutory service, but someone who can develop a relationship with the child to foster engagement through the development of a relationship (Dodsworth and Sorenson, 2018; Ofsted, 2018; State of Children's, Rights in England, 2018). Moreover, the trusted adult should stay with the child and understand that non-engagement may be due to their fear about violent repercussions to themselves or their families (Ofsted, 2018).

Third, this is a complex social problem and therefore it requires interventions at national, community, family and child level. At the national level, the National County Lines Coordination Centre is aimed at developing a national intelligence picture that should determine the scale and scope of child criminal exploitation. Moreover, the Centre aims to provide coordination for the police so they can monitor and target disruptive strategies accordingly. This could involve the allocation of vulnerability flags for those children deemed to be at risk or who are found to be a long way from home. Further, the consistent use of return interviews for missing episodes and the clear delineation of agency roles might contribute to national intelligence and also help in the early identification of vulnerable children.

At the community level, the review highlighted that community participation and outreach measures may be useful tools in the proactive prevention of child criminal exploitation. Such preventative work is vital in creating an exit strategy for children who are gang involved and an alternative path for children who are at risk of being exploited. The review found promising initial evidence of several innovative interventions that have sought to engage children, develop their skills and divert them from gang-involvement (Barter et al, 2019; Dodsworth and Sorenson, 2018).

At the family level, the serious violence and abuse associated with child criminal exploitation renders it difficult for parents to address these behaviours alone. Where children have stayed out late or presented with risky behaviours, parents are often charged with the task of setting boundaries and taking full responsibility for curtailing these problem behaviours. Indeed, services were not designed for child exploitation and as such, they often focus on familial abuse and poor parenting rather than wider contextual safeguarding risks (Firmin, 2019). Furthermore, wider environmental factors such as reductions in resources for the police, statutory and voluntary services, increases in the number of families reliant on food banks and the clustering of offenders with vulnerable children have created the ideal conditions where child criminal exploitation has flourished (Andell and Pitts, 2017). Hence, unscrupulous individuals have exploited professional perceptions, high service thresholds and gaps in knowledge and understanding to befriend or intimidate children into committing crimes on their behalf.

Finally, at the individual level the review has revealed that exploiters capitalise on children who have limited social, economic and or emotional capital (Knowsley Safeguarding Board, 2018). Education has an important role in the identification, protection and prevention of child criminal exploitation. Schools can be used to teach children about child criminal exploitation, healthy relationships and to protect them from involvement. For those children who have been exploited there is a need for therapeutic interventions that seek to engage children and promote alternative pathways. There also needs to be shared protocols across agencies to ensure that children are not continually assessed but that an effective plan is put in place for the child (Wigmore, 2018).

With child criminal exploitation described as a national priority (Children's Commissioner, 2019), there is a need for effective approaches and strategies to protect children who are vulnerable to exploitation. This is particularly pertinent as the evidence shows that exploiters are quick to adapt in order to evade detection. Moreover, the middle level of drug networks remain hidden, using children as collateral damage while they move on to new targets to exploit. Therefore, it is important that evidence-informed strategies and approaches are developed. In order to do this, there is a need for research, policy and preparedness across agencies to try new ways of responding to children and families. Where possible, young people should be involved in shaping this response.

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Appendix A: Search terms

Ovid MEDLINE(R) ALL <1946 to April 24, 2019>

- 1 (preteen* or teen or teens or teenage*).tw.
 - 2 (adolesc* or preadolesc* or pre-adolesc* or juvenil*).tw.
 - 3 (youth or youths or youngster*).tw.
 - 4 ((young adj (person* or persons or people)) or early adult*).tw.
 - 5 (student or students or schoolchild*).tw.
 - 6 exp infant/
 - 7 exp Child/
 - 8 Young adult/
 - 9 adolescent/
 - 10 (boy* or girl* or child or children or infant or infants or kid or kids or baby or babies or toddler* or pre-school* or preschool).tw.
 - 11 (pediatri* or paediatric*).tw.
 - 12 (pubescen* or puberty).tw.
 - 13 orphan*.tw.
 - 14 (adopt* adj5 (child or children)).tw.
 - 15 Child, Orphaned/
 - 16 or/1-15
 - 17 "criminal exploit*".tw.
 - 18 (Commercial adj2 exploit*).tw.
 - 19 "Sexual exploit*".tw.
 - 20 "transaction* sex".tw.
 - 21 "survival sex".tw.
 - 22 "county lines".tw.
 - 23 ((gang or gangs) adj5 (forc* or exploit* or coerc* or deception or deceiv* or debt* or owe* or groom* or recruit*)).tw.
 - 24 (drug* adj5 (mule* or runner*)).tw.
 - 25 "organiz?ed crim*".tw.
 - 26 ("criminal network*" or "criminal street gang*").tw.
 - 27 ("forced criminality" or "forced criminal activit*").tw.
 - 28 ((holidaying or commuting or cuckoo* or "trap house" or traphouse or "safe house" or "crash pad" or "gone country" or bando* or "going cunch" or "going OT" or "going out there") and (drug* adj3 (sell* or suppl* or distribut* or deal* or market*))).tw.
 - 29 (("debt bondage" or "debt slavery" or "debt enslavement") and drug*).tw.
 - 30 or/17-29
 - 31 16 and 30
 - 32 "Child prostitut*".tw.
 - 33 "child sex work*".tw.
 - 34 or/31-33
 - 35 limit 34 to english language
 - 36 limit 35 to yr="2000 -Current"
-

Appendix B: PRISMA diagram

