

Understanding County Lines and Child Criminal Exploitation: a resource for parents and carers

Why have you received this leaflet?

The purpose of this resource is to raise awareness of the issue of child criminal exploitation - in particular something known as 'county lines' - in order to help protect more children from harm.

You may have received this leaflet because police are concerned that your child may be at risk of criminal exploitation..

This does not necessarily mean that your child is involved in criminal activity, or that your child has been criminally exploited. However unfortunately any child can be targeted by criminals seeking to groom and exploit them and in order to protect more young people, it is important that parents and carers are aware of the signs and indicators that this may be happening and how to get help, should they need it.

What is Child Criminal Exploitation?

Child Criminal Exploitation involves exploitative situations and relationships where individuals or organised criminal groups get children to carry out criminal activity for their benefit. They often build relationships with children through the promise of something the child wants or needs and then use this hook to take advantage of them.

As with all child exploitation, this involves an imbalance of power between the young person and those controlling them (e.g. due to age, status or a position of trust).

What is County Lines?

'County Lines' is a form of criminal exploitation. It is a term used to describe organised criminal networks involved in moving illegal drugs to different areas within the UK, using mobile phone 'lines'.

County Lines is an issue of real concern. **Exploiters target children and vulnerable adults to move (and store) the drugs and money while they avoid being detected.** They often use threats, violence (including sexual violence) and other forms of intimidation as tools of manipulation and control.

The act of travelling to different parts of the country to move drugs is sometimes called '*going country*', '*going cunch*' or '*going OT*' (particularly for children travelling from a city to a more rural location). Young people may be away for days at a time.

County Lines activity can involve children being transported over long distances – to a different town or city.

However, it can also include travel over short distances – within the same town, neighbourhood or even street.

Any time a child is transported from A to B by another person to commit crime which is of benefit to the other person or organised criminal group, this is exploitation and child trafficking.

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A process called 'grooming' is used to manipulate a child into carrying out criminal acts. This may include promises of something the child needs or wants including physical things such as money, clothes and shoes or emotional things such a friendship, status, a sense of belonging or feeling protected.

This can take place in the real world but also online including through social media and online gaming. It is important to be aware of your child's privacy settings and to have conversations with them about their online lives so that you can spot if something seems different or wrong.

It may take a long time before the relationship turns threatening or violent by which time children can feel trapped with no way out which is why it is so important we spot the signs early and get them the help they need.

Children often wont realise they are being exploited and may think they are 'choosing' their actions. This is exactly what their abuser wants them to believe and plays right into their hands. It is therefore important that you recognise them as a victim of abuse no matter what they say while still listening to them and taking what they say seriously.

Could this happen to your child?

Any child can be a victim of exploitation. Children of all ages and backgrounds can be targeted and unfortunately this exploitation is taking place all across the UK and no place is immune to it.

You may have received this because your child came into contact with police in a location that is known for county lines/drugs activity. Or perhaps your child was found in the company of individuals who are known by the police because of drug activity or other similar crimes. In these circumstances, it is worth thinking about the risks your child may be facing in these locations or through these people.

You may want to have a conversation with your child about these risks and to come up with an agreed plan between you. However it is important to remember that Child Criminal Exploitation is a form of child abuse and **child victims are not to blame for their exploitation – the blame lies with the person or people exploiting them.** It is also important to remember that you are not alone in this process, and that support is available for you and your child.

What to do if you have concerns

It is important to know that you are not alone and not to blame. There are many parents and carers in similar situations and there are things you can do to help protect your child:

If your child is picked up in a car, or has train or bus tickets, keep a record of this information to give to the police or social worker.

There may be other evidence that your child is being exploited, such as interactions on social media, unexplained money, clothing or gifts, change in behaviour; where possible try to keep a record of this.

Report your concerns to Children's Social Care. A social worker can help you take steps to protect your child. They will make an assessment based on your concern that your child is at risk of harm from outside of the family.

If you would like more support, go to other professionals who can help such as your child's school, a charity (see below), the police or a youth worker as well as your GP regarding how this impacts on your health and wellbeing.

You can report your concerns to the police and say 'I suspect my child is being trafficked for criminal exploitation'.


If your child isn't where they are supposed to be, report them missing straight away on 101. **You do not have to wait 24 hours.**

County Lines Indicators

The following are some indicators you can keep an eye out for:

- Changes in behaviour e.g. becoming more angry and aggressive or quiet and withdrawn. Or changes in appearance such as new expensive clothes or appearing dishevelled and poorly kempt. Your child may also show expressions of not caring what happens to them and/or feeling they are invincible.
- Having expensive and new unusual items such as unexplained money, clothes, jewellery, phones, or unexplained credit in online games.
- Receiving excessive texts and/or phone calls which your child is anxious about needing to pick up or respond to urgently.
- Suddenly spending significantly more time online
- Signs of physical assault or unexplained injuries.
- Carrying weapons or increasingly violent or disruptive behaviour.
- Loss of interest in school and/or a significant decline in performance
- Absences/missing periods from school or home.
- New friends or relationships with controlling or older individuals or groups).
- Becoming isolated from friends, peers or social networks.
- Using sexual, drug-related or violent language you wouldn't expect them to know.
- Increase in drug/alcohol use or possession of illegal drugs.
- Self-harm or significant changes to mental well-being.

If you are concerned that your child might be being criminally exploited, then be assured that you can speak to the police about this – their job is to protect your child.



- Speak to your child about your worries.
- Let them know they aren't in trouble – and that you're worried.
- Make space to listen to whatever they share.
- Your child may believe that they are protecting you from harm by their exploiters. Let your child know that it is not their responsibility to protect you.

Where can I go for support?



If you are concerned that your child is at risk of harm, please call your local social care team, which can be found at <https://www.gov.uk/find-local-council> and the **police on 101**. Call **999 in an emergency**.

You can receive support from PACE (Parents Against Child Exploitation) at <https://paceuk.info/>

To get help, report a suspicion or seek advice you can call the Modern Slavery Helpline number on **08000 121 700**.

If your child doesn't want to talk to you about their situation, let them know that they can always call ChildLine on **0800 1111**.

The NSPCC helpline is staffed by trained professionals who can provide expert advice and support if you're concerned about a child. Call their helpline on **0808 800 5000**, email help@nspcc.org.uk or use their [online reporting tool](#).

For more information and resources visit The Children's Society website: www.childrenssociety.org.uk