

CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE TRAFFICKED FOR THE PURPOSE OF CRIMINAL EXPLOITATION IN RELATION TO COUNTY LINES

A TOOLKIT FOR PROFESSIONALS

In collaboration with

The
Children's
Society

No child
should feel
alone

VS VICTIM
SUPPORT

 **NPCC**
National Police Chiefs' Council

TABLE OF CONTENTS

About child criminal exploitation and county lines	3
Vulnerabilities and indicators	11
Barriers to engagement	14
Recommendations	16
Language	17
Services	19
Resources	21
Research	21
References	22

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PLEASE NOTE: This toolkit is based on our current understanding and the evidence picture of criminal exploitation as we see it. Therefore this document will remain a living document and is subject to change.

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In collaboration with



ABOUT CHILD CRIMINAL EXPLOITATION AND COUNTY LINES

The term county lines is becoming widely recognised and used to describe situations where children or young people may be internally trafficked for the purpose of criminal exploitation. What is often less understood are the experiences a child or young person faces, and the potential for them to be harmed through various forms of abuse and exploitation as a result. This toolkit hopes to address some gaps in knowledge and offer suggestions for supporting young people who are being, or at risk of being, trafficked for the purpose of criminal exploitation.

There is currently no legal definition of county lines or criminal exploitation, and very little guidance. Currently, the criminal exploitation of children and young people is often not fully understood by services working with them, which can impact on the response that a child or young person receives. Trafficking and criminal exploitation are forms of abuse and therefore should be afforded a safeguarding response. Often the visible symptoms of this abuse are responded to, meaning that many children and young people receive a criminal justice response, while their safeguarding needs are overlooked.

According to the recent National Crime Agency briefing on County Lines Violence, Exploitation and Drug Supply, 2 in 3 police forces reported that the exploitation of children and young people was identified in relation to county lines activity. One in four police forces reported that children and young people involved in county lines were experiencing sexual abuse. However the latest report also acknowledged that, although the exploitation of children and young people continues to be reported, the true scale of abuse remains an intelligence gap in many parts of the country.¹

Criminal exploitation interlinks with a number of multiple vulnerabilities and offences, including the child or young person being exposed to, and/or being victim of, physical and emotional violence, neglect, sexual abuse and exploitation, modern day slavery and human trafficking, domestic abuse and missing episodes.

The risk to a child or young person, and their family and friends, as a result of experiencing criminal exploitation can include, but is not limited to:

- Physical injuries, including risk of serious violence and death.
- Emotional and psychological trauma.
- Sexual violence, including sexual assault, rape, internally inserting drugs, indecent images being taken and shared as part of initiation, revenge, or punishment.
- Debt bondage, where a child or young person and their families are 'in debt' to the exploiters, which is then used to control the young person.
- Neglect, and the child or young person's basic needs not being met.
- Living in unclean, dangerous and/or unhygienic environments.
- Tiredness and sleep deprivation, where the child or young person is expected to carry out criminal activities over long periods and through the night.
- Poor attendance and/or attainment at school/college/university.

Knowsley Safeguarding Children's Board uses a definition of criminal exploitation that has been adapted from the commonly used definition of child sexual exploitation, which helpfully demonstrates how young people can be trafficked for the purpose of criminal exploitation:

'Criminal exploitation involves exploitative situations, contexts and relationships where young people (or a third person or persons) receive something (eg food, accommodation, drugs, alcohol, cigarettes, affection, gifts, money) as a result of them completing a task on behalf of another individual or group of individuals; this is often of a criminal nature. Child criminal exploitation often occurs without the child's immediate recognition, with the child believing that they are in control of the situation. In all cases, those exploiting the child or young person have power over them by virtue of their age, gender, intellect, physical strength and/or economic or other resources. Violence, coercion and intimidation are common, involvement in exploitative relationships being characterised in the main by the child or young person's limited availability of choice resulting from their social/ economic and/or emotional vulnerability.'ⁱⁱ

Criminal exploitation often happens within the context of county lines activity. The Home Office defines county lines as:

'The police term for urban gangs supplying drugs to suburban areas and market and coastal towns using dedicated mobile phone lines or "deal lines". It involves child criminal exploitation (CCE) as gangs use children and vulnerable people to move drugs and money. Gangs establish a base in the market location, typically by taking over the homes of local vulnerable adults by force or coercion in a practice referred to as "cuckooing".' ⁱⁱⁱ

Lambeth Safeguarding Children's Board's definition expands on this definition:

'Gangs typically recruit and exploit children and vulnerable young people to courier drugs and cash. Typically, users ask for drugs via a mobile phone line used by the gang. Couriers travel between the gang's urban base and the county or coastal locations on a regular basis to collect cash and deliver drugs. Gangs recruit children and young people through deception, intimidation, violence, debt bondage and/or grooming. Gangs also use local property as a base for their activities, and this often involves taking over the home of a vulnerable adult who is unable to challenge them.' ^{iv}

The Children's Society's youth experts describe county lines as:

'Invisible borders that separate a person's hometown from where they are sent to "work" (selling drugs, sex, firearms etc) for older members of a gang or crew. Young people are usually sent in twos or threes for intimidation purposes and "backup". A young person will typically spend less than two weeks away from home, keeping in regular contact with their 'elders' via burner phones.'

For more information, please see the Criminal Exploitation of Children and Vulnerable Adults: County Line Guidance produced by the Home Office, July 2017.^v

It is important to remember that young people being exploited in this way are likely to be being trafficked, as they are having their travel arranged or facilitated for the purpose of them being exploited. It is helpful to draw on the definition of human trafficking in the Modern Slavery Act 2015 to understand this:

- A person commits an offence if the person arranges or facilitates the travel of another person (“V”) with a view to V being exploited.
- It is irrelevant whether V consents to the travel (whether V is an adult or a child).
- A person may in particular arrange or facilitate V’s travel by recruiting V, transporting or transferring V, harbouring or receiving V, or transferring or exchanging control over V.
- A person arranges or facilitates V’s travel with a view to V being exploited only if – the person intends to exploit V (in any part of the world) during or after the travel, or the person knows or ought to know that another person is likely to exploit V (in any part of the world) during or after the travel.
- ‘Travel’ means arriving in, or entering any country, departing from any country, or travelling within any country.

In cases of criminal exploitation, we know that powerful, adult gang members recruit and arrange or facilitate the travel of children (and vulnerable adults) for the purpose of them selling drugs, firearms or sex on their behalf. This is exploitation and can fall under the Modern Slavery Act’s definitions of exploitation as:

- Sexual exploitation.
- Securing services by force, threats or deception.
- Securing services from children and vulnerable persons.

Where there are reasonable grounds to suspect a child or young person to be a victim of trafficking, the following steps should be taken:

- This should be reported to the police in order for them to investigate the offences committed (ie modern slavery and trafficking offences).
- A referral should be made to Children’s Social Care, as trafficking and exploitation means a child could be experiencing, or at risk of, significant harm and Child Protection processes need to be followed.
- A referral should be made to the National Referral Mechanism (NRM) directly. The police and children’s services are first responders, who are able to make this referral; however other agencies can and should support this referral to ensure it provides a full picture of the child or young person’s experience to help the assessment.
- Following this, a strategy meeting should be convened in order assess the information known, identify gaps and discuss a plan for the child or young person. This should not solely focus around intervention for the child or young person and their family. Contextual safeguarding is a key approach to understanding and responding to young people’s experiences of significant harm beyond their families.
- It is important to consider disruption of the exploitation, and important that practitioners and police work together to identify the perpetrators, locations and networks associated to the exploitation and develop plans to disrupt these.

This process of reporting and referring children and young people is often not followed. It can also be considered contentious to some professionals, who may view the children and young people as willing participants in the exploitation and in need of criminal justice responses. This is a view that was previously held in relation to children and young people who experienced sexual exploitation, and recent Serious Case Reviews have demonstrated the need to intervene and protect children and young people from exploitation. Until there is clear guidance to suggest otherwise, we recommend that the steps suggested above should be followed in order to initiate appropriate investigations and safeguarding processes. We also recommend support is provided for young people who are suspected to have been trafficked for the purpose of criminal exploitation. Whilst it can be argued that not all children and young people involved in crime relating to county lines are being trafficked or exploited, it is imperative to consider the information known with the responsible statutory agencies. It is also vital that the multi-agency network around that child or young person make a decision informed by known facts and risks.

This process can also be considered contentious because the Modern Slavery Act 2015 provides a statutory defense for victims of child trafficking and slavery accused of certain offences. This reflects the international principle of non-prosecution of trafficked children arising in a number of international instruments, and the UK's obligations under the Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings 2005 and the EU Directive on Trafficking.

Contrary to some understanding, this does not mean children and young people should be simply 'let off' of any crimes that they commit, but that the impact of the trafficking and exploitation be taken into consideration when making criminal justice decisions. In some cases, it may be appropriate not to pursue criminal proceedings, but this should be assessed on an individual basis.

For further guidance on the NRM please see:

<https://www.ecpat.org.uk/the-national-referral-mechanism>

'Everything kind of started to go wrong for me. I felt the need to just isolate myself from everyone.'

Young female

CONTEXT OF CRIMINAL EXPLOITATION

County lines are illegal business models managed and operated by gangs – ranging from urban street gangs to serious organised crime gangs. These gangs use their power and position to groom, recruit and exploit children and young people for the purpose of criminal gain. This often involves high levels of violence, threat and force – and it is important to understand the grooming process, as this is evident within the recruitment of young people for criminal exploitation.

Grooming is when someone builds an emotional connection with a child to gain their trust for the purposes of exploitation or trafficking. Children and young people can be groomed online or face to face, by a stranger or by someone they know (for example a family member, friend or professional). Groomers may be male or female. They could be any age. Many children and young people don't understand that they have been groomed, or that what has happened is abuse.^{vi}

For further information on how county lines are established, including site selection, establishing an operating base and marketing, please see the [National Crime Agency report](#).

Some key facts to remember with regards to criminal exploitation include:

- Both males and females can be exploited.^{vii}
- Children and young people are targeted and groomed for criminal exploitation in major cities and trafficked into county areas. Children and young people are also targeted in the county authority.
- Boys aged 14 to 17 are the most often targeted, however girls and children as young as often 10 are targeted too.^{viii}
- Children and young people can be shown how, or made, to internally insert and carry drugs in their rectum or vagina.
- Children and young people can often store wrapped drugs in their cheeks, which can then be more easily swallowed if approached by police.
- The children and young people will be sent to 'trap' houses, or 'bandos' where they will be made to sell drugs for anything from a few days to six weeks or more. These established bases can often involve exploitation of vulnerable adults. For further information on this please see the [National Crime Agency report](#).

- Children and young people can receive money, mobile phones, credit, expensive clothing, jewellery, new haircuts or other items and gifts in exchange for their activities.
- Children and young people can be vulnerable to targeting at pupil referral units, alternative education provisions, special education needs provisions and care homes/placements.
- Children and young people are often given targets to sell drugs to, given modes of transport such as bikes or train tickets, weapons to protect themselves, and a phone with drug users' contacts on it.
- Children and young people receive a small cut of money/clothes/status or are 'looked after' by 'elders', ie taken to visit barbers and/or given items of clothing/footwear.
- The phone lines can be worth thousands of pounds. There is monetary value in the selling of drugs and weapons, and also sexual exploitation related to this type of trafficking. This creates a place where perpetrators can have financial gain through the victimhood of children and vulnerable adults. Organised crimes groups have been known to set up children and young people in robberies, meaning that the child or young person believes they are in debt to the perpetrators. This is known as 'debt bondage', where the child or young person believes they have to work for free to pay off the debt. This can also apply if the child or young person is actually robbed, or if they are arrested and have drugs, money or the phone confiscated by police.
- Children and young people may be at risk of harm from the vulnerable adults who may also be being exploited by the gangs, eg using their homes as a trap house. Those adults often have their own needs such as learning disabilities, substance misuse or mental health issues, and there have been instances of harm to children and young people perpetrated by those individuals.

VULNERABILITIES AND INDICATORS

There are some factors that can increase the vulnerability that a child or young person will be exploited by others. In order to understand these, it is helpful to draw on the contextual safeguarding circles shown below, helping to picture the child or young person's individual factors, home, peers, school and neighbourhood.^{ix}

Figure 1: Contexts of Adolescent Safety and Vulnerability (Firmin 2013:47)

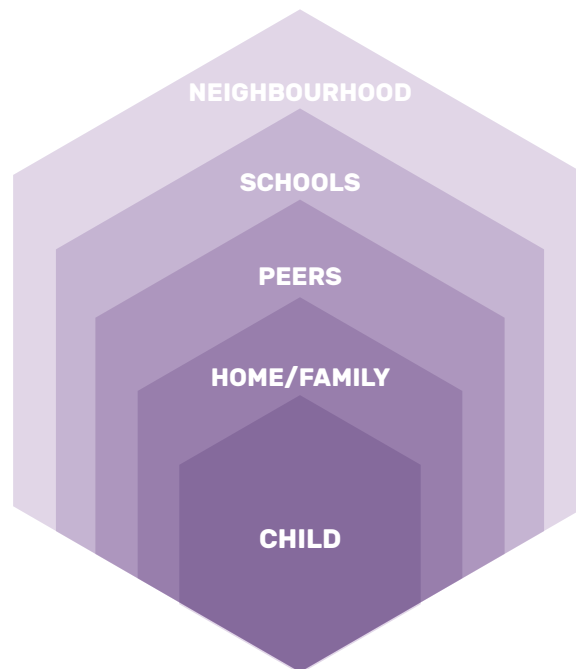


Illustration provided by the University of Bedfordshire, Contextual Safeguarding team

The following vulnerabilities do not mean that a child or young person will be exploited, but they are factors that could increase the vulnerability that they could be exploited by someone.

CHILD/INDIVIDUAL: If a child or young person is looked after, has learning disabilities, substance misuse issues, or mental health problems.

HOME/FAMILY: If there is neglect/abuse, exposure to or experience of violence, parental substance misuse, mental health and domestic abuse, poverty, lack of a positive relationship with a protective and nurturing adult, homelessness or insecure accommodation status.^x

PEERS: If the child or young person is exposed to other children and young people who are known to be exploited, or exposed to or experiencing peer on peer abuse.

SCHOOLS: If the child or young person has been excluded from school and is not in education, training or employment, or is exposed to or has experienced violent crime.

NEIGHBOURHOODS: If the child or young person has been exposed to or has experienced violent crime, or lived in a deprived neighbourhood.

WARNING INDICATORS

There are a number of indicators listed in the following table that could alert professionals to a child or young person being criminally exploited.

INDICATORS

- Frequent missing episodes and being found out of area.
- Found with large quantities of drugs or weapons.
- Found with drugs inside rectum or vagina.
- Unexplained amounts of money, mobile phones, credit, clothing, jewellery, new haircuts or other items and gifts.
- Been found out of area when missing, or being arrested out of area – especially for drug related offences.
- Multiple referrals for incidents in the same location.
- Returned from missing episodes with injuries, or dishevelled appearance.
- Change in behaviour, ie more secretive, withdrawn, or isolated from peers, or not mixing with usual friends.
- Unexplained absences from, or not engaged in school, college, training, or work.
- Increasingly disruptive, hostile or physically aggressive at home or school, including the use of sexualised language and language in relation to drug dealing and/or violence.
- Expressions around invincibility or not caring about what happens to them.
- Increased interest in making money.
- Reports of being taken to parties, people's houses, unknown areas, hotels, nightclubs, takeaways or out of area by unknown adults.
- Increasing use of drugs or alcohol.
- Fear of reprisal from gang members or violence from young people or adults.

INDICATORS CONT.

- Having multiple mobile phones, sim cards or use of a phone that causes concern eg multiple callers or more texts/pings than usual.
- Possession of hotel keys/cards, or keys to unknown premises.
- Disclosure of a sexual or physical assault, followed by withdrawal of the allegation.
- Abduction or forced imprisonment.
- Entering or leaving vehicles/cars with unknown adults.
- Receiving rewards of money or goods for introducing peers.
- Self harm or significant changes in emotional well-being.
- Agencies unable to engage with the child or young person.
- New peer groups and/or relationships.
- Relationships with controlling or older individuals or groups.^{xi}
- Parental concerns.^{xii}
- Repeated STIs and/or pregnancy (can indicate CSAE being a feature of the exploitation).
- Increase of referrals to agencies for other known peers.

‘When I think about that time, even now I feel very scared. It was a very hard time. I felt I had no choices.’

Young male

BARRIERS TO ENGAGEMENT

There are many factors that could influence how a child or young person engages with interventions and networks who may become aware of the risk of criminal exploitation. A few barriers to consider include:

- Child criminal exploitation is not being recognised and responded to as a safeguarding concern.
- Professionals may view criminal exploitation as a lifestyle choice, which can make a child or young person feel blamed for their exploitation, or reinforce a feeling of an untrue identity, eg of autonomous drug dealer.
- Services are not being consistent or persistent in their approach, and closing due to 'non engagement'.
- Children or young people are fearful of repercussions towards themselves, friends or family if they are seen to be engaging with professionals.
- The child or young person may still be being controlled by exploiters and have no ability or power to exit.
- Even if the police are involved, the child or young person still may not feel safe or protected from repercussions.
- The child or young person may have distrust in services, such as police and social care.
- The child or young person may be fearful of getting into trouble with the police, or be in breach of a court order.
- Children or young people who have experienced previous abuse, fractured attachments and trauma can often hold a deep mistrust of adults and services.
- The child or young person may be made to feel that they are in 'debt' to perpetrators and/or reliant on the 'exchange' ie money/substances. This is often referred to as 'debt bondage'.
- The child or young person can become withdrawn from their support network due to the grooming process, and unable to access services.
- Structural inequalities related to race, gender, ethnicity, class, culture, education.

- The child or young person may have experienced multiple professionals talking about concerns with them, which again could lead a young person feeling frustrated or unable to engage.
- The child or young person may feel embarrassed or ashamed of their experiences.

It is important to remember that a child or young person might not relate to their experience as being abusive or exploitative:

- They may feel a sense of loyalty and brotherhood to the exploiters, and they may feel emotionally fulfilled in a way they haven't before experienced from parents, carers or professionals.
- The child or young person may feel that they have gained 'friends' or 'family', and that these people care for him or her.
- The child or young person may be receiving money or rewards that they have not had access to previously, or the money may be supporting their family to cover basic needs.
- The child or young person may feel a sense of status and power that they haven't had before. They may see themselves as an autonomous drug dealer, rather than a victim of exploitation at the bottom of a large organised crime structure.

This links in with the process of how an exploiter may target and groom a child or young person, as well as with barriers to engagement and why a young person may not relate to the term 'criminal exploitation'.

'I was scared. I thought if I said anything, it would have all piled back on me.'

Young female

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following list includes a range of practical tips and recommendations for professionals when working with children and young people who have been, or are being, criminally exploited:

- Be interested, professionally curious, listen to what the young person is saying, and hear it from a safeguarding perspective.
- Don't make judgements, especially in relation to their involvement in criminal activities. Remember they may appear to be willing participants, but it is likely that their actions and choices are being controlled by perpetrators with more power than them.
- Advocate for the child or young person, and for the child protection processes to be followed, using the three steps outlined previously: report to police, refer to Children's Social Care and refer to the National Referral Mechanism.
- Challenge professional views which are oppressive, judgmental, or reject the need for a child protection response.
- Explain what is happening and why you might need to share information. Keep the young person updated on any outcomes.
- Ensure the child or young person is given choices. Throughout their experience of being criminally exploited, they will have been working with parameters of little or no choice, and therefore it is important that the child or young person is given the element of choice back.
- As a starting point to explaining exploitation, it can be helpful to talk about the long hours a child or young person is expected to carry out criminal activities as being exploitative in itself. This can open up further discussion about what is going on for them.
- Explore a child or young person's identity and ensure you create a safe space for this.
- Discussing relevant music and music videos can open up conversations around county lines, physical/sexual violence, status, power and control.
- Look to build a child or young person's resilience, looking at their strengths and future plans.
- Be creative in your approach and ask what the child or young person wants and needs.

LANGUAGE

Similarly to sexual exploitation, there is often inappropriate or unhelpful language used to describe young people’s experiences of being criminally exploited. It is important that professionals use the right language in order to influence proper recognition and responses for children and young people.

INAPPROPRIATE TERM	SUGGESTED ALTERNATIVES
<p>Drug running – He/she is drug running</p> <p>This implies that the child or young person is responsible for the exploitation and has the capacity to make a free and informed choice. It does not recognise the abusive or exploitative context.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Child criminal exploitation (CCE). ● The child is being criminally exploited. ● The child is being trafficked for purpose of criminal exploitation.
<p>Recruit/run/work</p> <p>This implies that the child or young person is responsible for the exploitation and has the capacity to make a free and informed choice. It does not recognise the abusive or exploitative context.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● The child is being criminally exploited.
<p>He/she is choosing this lifestyle</p> <p>This implies that the child or young person is responsible for the exploitation and has the capacity to make a free and informed choice. It does not recognise the abusive or exploitative context.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● The child is being criminally exploited. ● The child is being sexually exploited.
<p>Spending time/associating with ‘elders’</p> <p>This implies that the child or young person is responsible for the exploitation and has the capacity to make a free and informed choice. It does not recognise the abusive or exploitative context.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● The young person says that they are friends with a person and there are concerns about that person’s age, the imbalance of power, exploitation, offending. ● The young person has been groomed, exploited, controlled. <p>Note: If the elder is under the age of 18 years old, this will need to be considered using child protection processes.</p>

INAPPROPRIATE TERM	SUGGESTED ALTERNATIVES
<p>Offering him/her drugs seemingly in return for sex or to run drugs</p> <p>This implies that the child or young person is responsible for the exploitation and has the capacity to make a free and informed choice. It does not recognise the abusive or exploitative context</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● The child is being sexually/ criminally exploited. ● The child is being criminally exploited through drug debt. ● There are concerns that the child has been raped as they do not have the freedom or capacity to consent. ● Perpetrators are sexually abusing the child. ● The child is being sexually abused. ● The child's vulnerability regarding drug use is being used by others to abuse them. ● The perpetrators have a hold over the child by the fact that they have a drug dependency.

THIS GUIDANCE HAS BEEN GRATEFULLY PRODUCED WITH SUPPORT AND MATERIALS DEVELOPED BY NWG AND LAWRENCE JORDAN, SOCIAL WORKER, MILTON KEYNES.

SERVICES

Criminal exploitation is not a new issue and, like sexual exploitation, is a child protection issue that has existed for a long time. However, what is new is the emerging recognition of the impact and risk of harm to the child as a result of how they are being trafficked and exploited. Unfortunately, there are still very few services directly available to young people or professionals. Those noted below are national services commissioned to support children and young people affected by criminal exploitation.

NAME	AREA	AGE RANGE	WEBSITE	CONTACT
The Children's Society Research/ campaigns and policy work London Criminal Exploitation Service	National Charity London-specific service called Stride. The project accepts referrals from Newham, Camden and Tower Hamlets.	11–18	childrenssociety.org.uk/	Rhiannon.Sawyer@childrenssociety.org.uk
St Giles & Missing People County lines/ Criminal Exploitation Service	Kent OT (London and Kent) offers one-to-one support (only funded until 31 March 2018, however St Giles holds significant expertise in this area). CLiC (South Wales) offers one to one support. Safecall offers nationwide telephone support for child and young people, and their parents (funded until 31 March 2018).	11–25	missingpeople.org.uk/ stgilestrust.org.uk	partner@missingpeople.org.uk info@stgilestrust.org.uk

NAME	AREA	AGE RANGE	WEBSITE	CONTACT
AlterEgo Creative Solutions	UK	Under 18	alteregocreativesolutions.co.uk/productionss/ County Lines - Out in the Counties production. Please see the above link for details.	alteregocreativesolutions.co.uk/contact-us/
Safer London	Criminal Exploitation Hubs in Brent and Lambeth		https://saferlondon.org.uk/	karina.wane@brent.gov.uk

‘I did have a change in my mindset after a while because he the started approaching my friends and talking to my friends. That’s when I thought enough was enough.’

Young male

RESOURCES

As with the limited number of services available around children and young people being criminally exploited, there are also very few resources available – however, the links below may be useful.

ORGANISATION	TITLE	WEBSITE	AREA SPECIFIC
Home Office	Criminal Exploitation of Children and Vulnerable Adults County Lines	gov.uk/government/publications/criminal-exploitation-of-children-and-vulnerable-adults-county-lines	This guidance outlines what county lines and associated criminal exploitation is, including signs to look for in potential victims, and what to do about it.
Trapped	Project Phoenix: It's not Okay	youtube.com/watch?v=pLhGpS1f-F0 itsnotokay.co.uk/professionals/trapped1	A short film clip showing a young person being criminally exploited.
Henry Blake (Filmmaker)	County Lines	countylines.uk	A film presenting the experience of a young person being criminally exploited.

RESEARCH

National Crime Agency

[County Lines: Violence, Exploitation and Drug Supply \(2017\)](#)

[County Lines: Violence, Exploitation and Drug Supply \(2016\)](#)

[County Lines: Gangs and Safeguarding](#)

The Children's Society

Criminal Law & Justice Weekly

Youth Justice Legal Centre

Ending Gang Violence and Exploitation

Preventing the Violent and Sexual Victimisation of Vulnerable Gang-involved and Gang-affected Children and Young People in Ipswich

Catch 22: Running the Risks

REFERENCES

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- iii gov.uk/government/publications/criminal-exploitation-of-children-and-vulnerable-adults-county-lines
- iv lambethscb.org.uk/professionals/gangs
- v gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/626770/6_3505_HO_Child_exploitation_FINAL_web_2.pdf
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- xiii barnardos.org.uk/cse_barnardo_s_model_of_practice.pdf