

CHILD CRIMINAL EXPLOITATION AND SERIOUS VIOLENCE



WITH DR SANDRA WISEMAN

What do I need to know about it?

Child criminal exploitation is a form of abuse where a child is coerced, manipulated or deceived into criminal activity. It's often linked with serious violence, such as knife or gun crime. The exploitation could be:

- in exchange for something the child needs or wants (like money)
- for the financial gain of the perpetrator(s)
- through violence or the threat of violence, to children or their families

Criminal exploitation often also involves physical and sexual abuse, and victims can be sexually exploited too. While the activity might seem consensual, it's important to remember these children are still victims.

Some forms of child criminal exploitation include:

- transporting drugs through 'county lines'
- working in cannabis factories
- shoplifting or pickpocketing
- vehicle crime, such as theft of - or from - vehicles
- committing serious violence or threatening it towards others
- money laundering

What is a gang?

The word 'gang' means different things in different contexts, the government in their paper 'Safeguarding children and young people who may be affected by gang activity' distinguishes between peer groups, street gangs and organised criminal gangs.

Peer group

A relatively small and transient social grouping which may or may not describe themselves as a gang depending on the context.

Street gang

"Groups of young people who see themselves (and are seen by others) as a discernible group for whom crime and violence is integral to the group's identity."

Organised criminal gangs

"A group of individuals for whom involvement in crime is for personal gain (financial or otherwise). For most crime is their 'occupation.'" It's not illegal for a young person to be in a gang - there are different types of 'gang' and not every 'gang' is criminal or dangerous. However, gang membership can be linked to illegal activity, particularly organised criminal gangs involved in trafficking, drug dealing and violent crime.

Who's more at risk?

A child or young person might be recruited into a gang because of where they live or because of who their family is. They might join because they don't see another option or because they feel like they need protection. Children and young people may become involved in gangs for many reasons, including:

- peer pressure and wanting to fit in with their friends
- they feel respected and important
- they want to feel protected from other gangs, or bullies
- they want to make money, and are promised rewards
- they want to gain status, and feel powerful
- they've been excluded from school and don't feel they have a future

Organised criminal gangs groom children and young people because they're less suspicious and are given lighter sentences than adults.

What should I look for?

- Missing school, including single lessons

- Changes in friendships, or spending time with older individuals or groups
- Doing less well at school
- Signs of self-harm or a significant change in wellbeing
- Signs of assault or unexplained injuries, and refusing to get medical help
- Unexplained gifts or new possessions
- Using new slang words
- Associating with other children involved in exploitation
- Misusing drugs or alcohol
- Going missing or regularly coming home late
- Being isolated or withdrawn
- Becoming aggressive, angry or violent

The indicators might be different for girls who are criminally exploited, and they might have different experiences to boys. But remember - girls can be victims too, so if something doesn't seem right with any pupil, act on it.

Children may not feel ready or know how to tell you that they're being exploited - or they may not recognise their experiences as harmful. This shouldn't stop you from raising concerns.

Dangers of criminal exploitation

It's important to be aware of the risks of criminal exploitation or being involved with a criminal gang. They can use different tactics to recruit and exploit children and young people, including bribing them with rewards, befriending them, and threatening them, or coercing them.

Dangers of criminal exploitation include:

- being subject to threats, blackmail and violence
- being exploited and forced to commit crimes
- being arrested, including for crimes committed by the gang that they have not directly committed under the law of joint enterprise
- not being able to leave or cut off ties with the gang
- having their safety or the safety of friends and family threatened
- risk of physical harm, rape and sexual abuse
- risk of emotional abuse
- risk of severe injury or being killed
- abusing drugs, alcohol and other substances
- long term impact on education and employment options

Remember you should always follow up your concerns, however small

- Report your concerns to the designated safeguarding lead (or deputy), and make a written record, as soon as possible
- Always challenge inappropriate behaviour
- If you think the child is in immediate danger, make a referral to the local authority's children's social care team, and the police if appropriate. Don't delay to wait for the DSL, but let them know as soon as possible too

Further reading

KCSIE

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/keeping-children-safe-in-education--2>

NSPCC

<https://www.nspcc.org.uk/what-is-child-abuse/types-of-abuse/gangs-criminal-exploitation/#crimalexploitation>

Want to make it more interactive?

Use these sorts of questions to start a discussion at a staff meeting:

- How would you define child criminal exploitation and serious violenceor ask them how common they think it is.
- Which pupils are more at risk of becoming victims of child criminal exploitation and serious violence in our school?
- What support should we put into place for victims of child criminal exploitation and serious violence?
- How does child criminal exploitation and serious violence overlap with other specific safeguarding issues?

Next:

Follow up a week or two later with a safeguarding scenario about child criminal exploitation and serious violence. Use it to check whether staff spot potential signs of abuse, and their knowledge of your policies and procedures.