

Stoke-on-Trent and Staffordshire Safeguarding Children Boards Briefing:

This briefing has been prepared by the Stoke-on-Trent SCB and the Staffordshire SCB on behalf of a wide range of partnership agencies. Their job is to coordinate what is done locally to protect and promote the welfare of all children and young people and adults with care and support needs.

What do we mean by Vulnerability, Violence and Exploitation (VVE)?

Violence, Vulnerability and Exploitation (**VVE**) describes what happens when **County lines** drug dealers, who are **gangs** involved in **organised crime**, use children and other vulnerable people through **Criminal Exploitation, Sexual Exploitation**. The children or vulnerable adults may be from the same area as the gang, or could be local, and may be exploited to carry out criminal acts to reduce the gang members' risk of getting caught.

They are often moved around locally or nationally for this purpose – this is a form of **Modern Slavery & Trafficking**. The risks to them are significant. **Serious violent crime** is a significant feature of county lines activity. People caught up in county lines may not see the risks of their involvement, or may feel trapped in the situation if they try and back out, and they can go from uninvolved (and not seen as an at risk child) to being exploited very quickly and without apparent warning.

This briefing explains some of these safeguarding issues in a little more detail, describes the risks, tells you what to look for and critically, advises what to do if you think you see it happening.

County Lines, 'going country' and criminal exploitation



County Lines take the form of urban gangs supplying drugs to suburban areas and coastal towns using dedicated mobile phone lines or 'deal lines'. It involves criminal exploitation as gangs use children and vulnerable individuals to move drugs primarily heroin and crack cocaine, although cannabis is also supplied by runners (1) as a secondary drug as an independent side-line to generate extra income. It almost exclusively involves violence, intimidation and the offer of money or drugs. 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**'.

Areas/towns also have local groups, to whom young people or vulnerable adults both respect and at times fear. These groups will also use vulnerable adults and young people to run drugs across their area and sell them.

Children and young people are also expected to support the recruitment of other young people into the gang/group. These individuals are at serious risk of criminalisation, sexual exploitation and exposure to violence. Criminal exploitation, like other forms of abuse and exploitation, is a safeguarding concern and constitutes abuse even if the person appears to have readily become involved.

⁽¹⁾Someone that illegally transports drugs around

Gangs / Groups

Groups of children often gather together in public places to socialise, and peer association is an essential feature of most children's transition to adulthood. Groups of children can be disorderly and/or anti-social without engaging in criminal activity.

Professionals are advised to avoid applying definitions of a gang too rigorously; if a child or others think s/he is involved with or affected by 'a gang', then professionals should act accordingly.

Children rarely use the term 'gang'; instead they used terms such as 'family', 'breddrin', 'crews', 'cuz' (cousins), 'my boys' or 'the people I grew up with'.

Organised Crime

An organised criminal group is a group of individuals normally led by adults for whom involvement in crime is for personal gain (financial or otherwise). This involves serious and organised criminality by a core of violent gang members who exploit vulnerable young people and adults.

The **statutory definition** of a gang is:

"A relatively durable, predominantly street-based group of young people who:

- See themselves (and are seen by others) as a discernible group, and
- Engage in a range of criminal activity and violence

They may also have any or all of the following factors:

- Identify with or lay claim over territory
- Have some form of identifying structural feature
- Are in conflict with other similar gangs"

HM Government: Ending Gang & Youth Violence Report 2012

Sexual Exploitation

Sexual exploitation is a type of sexual abuse. People in exploitative situations and relationships receive things such as gifts, money or affection as a result of performing sexual activities or others performing sexual activities on them.

People may be tricked into believing they're in a loving, consensual relationship. They might be invited to parties and given drugs and alcohol. They may also be groomed and exploited online.

People can be sexually exploited in many ways. Examples include:

- Rape (which can include rape by a partner)
- Sexual assault
- Being tricked or manipulated into having sex or performing a sexual act
- Being trafficked into, out of, or around the UK for the purpose of sexual exploitation (i.e. prostitution)
- Being forced to take part in or watch pornography
- Being victim to revenge porn (when a previously taken video or photograph, which was taken with or without consent, is shared online)

Girls and women who are exploited along County Lines are particularly at increased risk of sexual exploitation and trafficking. For further information about local and national support, please go to the SCB Website: www.safeguardingchildren.stoke.gov.uk or [Staffs website](#)

Cuckooing

This is the process whereby criminal gangs target the homes of vulnerable people to deal drugs from their premises. Many of the victims are particularly vulnerable and may be drug users themselves. They are often approached by dealers offering them free drugs in exchange for use of their home from which to deal drugs, or are sometimes forced by threats, and intimidation, to deal on their behalf.

Cuckooing means the criminals can operate from a property rather than on the street, making them less easy to identify, and often they move between different properties to cover their activities. The person being cuckooed may be reluctant to raise concerns for fear of repercussions or violence, making the practice even harder to bring to light.

County Lines groups also make use of serviced apartments, holiday lets, budget hotels and caravan parks. County Lines groups prefer to pay cash where possible and often use network associates to arrange these facilities, as a means of distancing themselves from the criminality.



Clean skins'/ 'tinys'

These are young people, usually from middle class backgrounds, who do not have an existing criminal record or have not attracted the attention of the police or security forces, but are vulnerable due to bereavement, domestic discord, etc. These young people are groomed with free drugs, then threatened for money and recruited to gangs to repay this 'debt':

- to transport and sell drugs (children as young as 7 years old who have pedal-bikes)
- to launder money through personal bank accounts
- to be trafficked for sexual exploitation

Children may often be at the periphery of involvement for some time before they become active gang members. Children may also follow older siblings into gang involvement. This may provide opportunities for preventative work to be undertaken with children. 15-16 years is the most common age range.

Modern Slavery & Trafficking

As well as sexual exploitation county lines cuts across a range of threats, including modern slavery and human trafficking. People are being exploited using the county lines model to transport and sell more than drugs. Weapons, sex and money are also being traded in this way. They are victims of trafficking and professionals should report concerns to the [National Referral Mechanism \(NRM\)](#) to ensure victims receive the appropriate support. See also the SCB Child Protection Procedures: Joint Stoke-on-Trent and Staffordshire [SOT F03A and Staffs 4Ka Trafficked Children](#)



Serious Violence

Violence is a way for gang/group members to gain recognition and respect by asserting their power and authority. Violence, serious or otherwise, may be a function of gang/group activity.

Police Forces across England and Wales have reported a significant increase in violent crime connected to county lines. The violence includes; murder, rape, stabbings and kidnapping.

It is likely that much of this violence is underreported. Knives, baseball bats, ammonia/corrosives and other weapons are often used to enforce threats. There is also notable evidence of firearms being seen or used to threaten in connection to county lines activity



'Going Ops', 'Banged' & 'DIY injuries'

Due to the fact drug runners are exploited to be both consumers and runners, young people and vulnerable adults may begin to consume the drugs they are asked to run, which they must either pay back by 'working' or else accumulate debt. The more debt the more control the gang/group has. If the young person/ vulnerable adult appear to be '**going ops**' (going oppositional to the gang/group) then they are made to evidence that they will correct their behaviour quickly e.g. spend more time with the gang or not attend school. If the gang/group become concerned that a young person / vulnerable adult appears to be 'going ops' then there is an explicit threat of being '**banged**'. This can vary from threats to be beaten or in more extreme cases stabbed. There can also be indirect threats to harm family members too.

Knife wounds to the buttocks and 'accidental' puncture wounds with screw-drivers '**DIY Injuries**' are becoming recognisable signs of drug debt enforcer retribution. These incidents are more likely to be reported to A&E but not to police due to intimidation and fear.

Scope and Scale



The true scale of County Lines activity is difficult to determine with accuracy as its nature is fluid and the intelligence surrounding the threat is not always clear, nor is it recorded consistently.

There are an estimated **720 lines across England** and Wales, the actual number may be considerably higher, as many of these areas are likely to have more than one line and county lines networks are increasingly operating from more than one phone number.

What are the risks?

People affected by County Lines activity are at risk of criminal and or sexual exploitation, serious violence as well as risk of significant harm through physical, sexual and emotional abuse.

The specific risks for males and females may be quite different. In some areas and settings, there is a higher risk of sexual abuse for females and they are more likely to have been coerced into involvement with a gang through peer pressure than their male counterparts.

There is national evidence of a high incidence of rape of girls who are involved with gangs. Some senior gang members pass their girlfriends around to lower ranking members and sometimes to the whole group at the same time. Very few rapes by gang members are reported.

Perceived Positives

Gangs are highly organised and professional; they send members to university to study marketing (as well as to establish new supply lines for drug-trafficking). They also recruit professional producers to make marketing videos for YouTube to attract young recruits.

Practitioners at the Brighton & Hove Youth Offending Service have considered the perceived positives of engaging in criminal activity. They suggest that being part of a gang can bring money, status and a sense of safety.

- Some forms of criminal activity can offer a way out of poverty and exclusion by providing opportunities to quickly earn **easy money**
- It can offer a **collective identity**, expressed through group, gang or brand identity (within the context of exploitation, and alongside belonging, the construction of identity may be a mechanism that can be manipulated as part of a grooming process)
- It may offer a **sense of security** for those young people who feel let down by all adults in their life

Who is vulnerable to exploitation?

Exploitation can:

- Affect any child or young person under the age of 18 years
- Affect any vulnerable adult over the age of 18 years
- Still be exploitation even if the activity appears consensual

- Involve force and/or enticement-based methods of compliance and is often accompanied by violence or threats of violence
- Be perpetrated by individuals or groups, males or females, and young people or adults and is typified by some form of power imbalance in favour of those perpetrating the exploitation



One of the key factors found in most cases of county lines exploitation is the presence of some form of exchange (e.g. carrying drugs in return for something). Where it is the victim who is offered, promised or given something they need or want, the exchange can include both tangible (such as money, drugs or clothes) and intangible rewards (such as status, protection or perceived friendship or affection). The fact that the victim is in receipt of something does not make them any less of a victim.

Certain vulnerabilities may increase the chance that a person will be exploited by others. Whilst these factors do not mean that a person will be exploited it is important to recognise the increased vulnerability that some people face.

An individual's vulnerability may be exacerbated by the following factors:

- Violence in the family
- Involvement of family members or friends in gang related activity
- Poor educational attainment
- Mental ill health problems
- Dependent drug users
- Having a physical or learning disability
- Homelessness or insecure accommodation
- Social isolation or social difficulties
- The cuckooing of vulnerable adults brings increased risk of exploitation to young people. Young people becoming involved in county lines may be related to adults who had been cuckooed.

The factors which influence a propensity to initiate violence include:

- Parenting which is cold / uncaring, non-nurturing and neglectful
- Parenting which includes harsh disciplining
- Maltreatment, such as physical or sexual abuse in childhood (abuse by adults and peers within and outside of the family); and/or
- Trauma such as domestic violence or involvement in or witnessing conflict violence

Additional vulnerabilities to exploitation include:



Looked after children are particularly vulnerable to being affected by gangs and serious youth violence as they may have low self-esteem, low resilience, attachment issues as well as they are often isolated from family and friends. Young people who have been placed in local authority care out of area are particularly vulnerable.



Girls and young women may be groomed at school using drugs and alcohol, which act as disinhibitors and create dependency, and encourage / coerce them to recruit other girls through school / social networks.



Locations – schools, pupil referral units and residential children's care homes are targeted. There are also known cases where gang members have been waiting outside schools to meet children. The gang members take the child away to participate in criminal activities and return them in time to avoid them being reported missing or raising suspicion.

What signs / indicators should I be looking out for?

- Person seems to **withdraw** from family life;
- Sudden **loss of interest in school** or change in behaviour. Decline in attendance or academic achievement (although it should be noted that some young people will maintain a good attendance record to avoid coming to notice);
- Being **emotionally 'switched off'**, but also containing frustration / rage;
- Starting to use **new or unknown slang** words;
- Having **unexplained money or possessions**;
- **Staying out unusually late** without reason, or breaking parental rules consistently;
- Sudden **change in appearance** – dressing in a particular style or 'uniform' similar to that of other young people they hang around with, including a particular colour;
- **Dropping out** of positive activities;
- **New nickname**;
- **Unexplained physical injuries**, and/or refusal to seek/receive medical treatment for injuries;
- Graffiti style **'tags'** on possessions, school books, walls;
- Constantly talking about another person who seems to have a lot of **influence over them**;
- Breaking off with old friends and hanging around with **one group** of people;
- Associating with known or suspected **gang members**, closeness to siblings or adults in the family who are gang members;
- Starting to adopt certain **codes of group behaviour** e.g. ways of talking and hand signs;
- **Going missing** and being found many **miles from home** with no explanation;
- Expressing **aggressive or intimidating views towards other groups** of young people, some of whom may have been friends in the past;
- Being **scared** when entering certain areas;
- Concerned by the presence of **unknown youths** in their neighbourhoods
- Repeat **sexually-transmitted infections**, pregnancy and terminations
- **Disclosures made then withdrawn**
- **Self-harm** or thoughts of/ or attempts at suicide

Cuckooing Signs

- It usually takes place in a multi-occupancy or social housing property
- There may be an increase in the number of comings and goings, including people you haven't seen before, throughout the day and night, often visiting for only short periods of time
- There might be new vehicles outside the property, including taxis or hire cars
- There may be bags of clothing or bedding around the property
- There may be a possible increase in crime and anti-social behaviour in and around the property reported to services, including the accumulation and storage of stolen pedal cycles
- There may be evidence of drug use such as deal bags, discarded syringes, weighing scales, foil and cling film, in and around the property.



Victims of cuckooing may disengage with support services, and be unwilling to discuss what is happening at their property when the subject is raised with them.

What should I do if I am concerned?

If you are worried that someone is at immediate risk of harm contact 999.



If you are worried about a **child in Stoke-on-Trent** contact the Safeguarding Referral Team on: 01782 235100 or out of hours 01782 234234

If you are worried about a **child in Staffordshire** contact First Response on: 0800 1313 126 (Monday to Thursday, 8:30am-5:00pm and Friday 8:30am-4:30pm)

In an emergency outside office hours, please phone 0345 6042 886 (0345 6042 889)

If you are worried about an **adult** contact the Police on **101**



You should also refer any young person you suspect of being a potential victim of **trafficking** to the [National Referral Mechanism](#) (NRM). In the case of children their consent is not required. Adults must sign the permission form (capacity allowing). To download an adult or child referral form go to the [gov.uk website](#).



Some additional advice about hearing and reporting concerns



- Take what the child, young person or adult with care and support needs tells you seriously.
- Assess the information together with presenting behaviours in the context of whatever information you know or can gather from them about the risk factors described above.
- Potentially someone involved with a gang or with serious violence could be both a victim and a perpetrator.

Learning & Development

The Children's Society and Victims Support have developed a [toolkit for working with children & young people](#) who have been trafficked for the purpose of criminal exploitation in relation to County Lines. The toolkit gives a step-by-step by step guide on what to do if you suspect a child is a victim of trafficking.

For further information about child sexual abuse: child sexual exploitation: gangs etc. please go to the:

- Stoke-on-Trent SCB website: www.safeguardingchildren@stoke.gov.uk,
- Staffordshire SCB website www.staffsscb.org.uk