



Exploited and Criminalised

What can the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill do to ensure that children who are criminally exploited receive the care and support they need?

By Emma James
October 2021

**Believe in
children**
 **Barnardo's**

About Barnardo's

Barnardo's is the UK's largest national children's charity. In 2020-21 we supported 382,872 children, young people, parents and carers, through more than 791 services and partnerships.

During the pandemic Barnardo's led a unique and innovative Covid-19 response programme called See, Hear, Respond (SHR). Commissioned by the Department for Education (DfE) and collaboratively designed by Barnardo's and the DfE, **the programme was delivered by 87 national and local charities and community-based organisations and supported over 100,000 vulnerable children who were struggling as a result of Covid-19 but did not access statutory support.** SHR aimed to intervene and support children early, preventing additional harm and ensuring that needs that were triggered or exacerbated by Covid-19 did not become entrenched. Need for support with mental health and wellbeing was the most common reason for referral.¹

Barnardo's work on serious youth violence and child criminal exploitation

Barnardo's has a long history of supporting children who have been abused and/or exploited. Many of our services support children who have been criminally exploited or impacted by serious youth violence. We also have a number of specific services that work with criminally exploited children including:

- The National Counter Trafficking Service (NCTS) supports children to cope with the practical and emotional traumas of being trafficked and help them to understand/navigate social care services, the police and immigration. Barnardo's runs the specialist Independent Child Trafficking Guardianship Service (ICTGS) – defined in Section 48 of the Modern Slavery Act 2015 and commissioned by the Home

Office – in Cymru, East Midlands, West Midlands Combined Authorities, Bedfordshire, Gloucestershire (including Bristol), Warwickshire, all London boroughs, Hampshire and the Isle of Wight, Kent, Surrey, Essex, Greater Manchester, North and West Yorkshire, Lancashire and Merseyside.

- Separate to this, Barnardo's is commissioned by the Northern Ireland Health and Social Care Board to deliver the Independent Guardian Service in Northern Ireland. This service provides guardians for 121 young people who are unaccompanied or separated from a legal guardian, and who are at risk of human trafficking. The role of an Independent Guardian is defined in Article 21 of the Human Trafficking and Exploitation (Criminal Justice and Support for Victims) Act (Northern Ireland) 2015. Independent Guardians are required to undertake their role "in the best interests of the child" and so have a responsibility to listen to, and represent, the voices of children with regard to all aspects of their lives.
- ROUTES works with 8-18-year-olds at high risk of committing or being victims of serious violence. Most of the work is in Bristol, working with children affected by gangs. Some staff are based in Somerset working with children affected by 'county lines'. Staff provide one-to-one intervention, relationship-building and a specialist response to trauma. There are also targeted group work sessions and preventative sessions for inner-city schools and pupil referral units.

Thank you to RedThread, Safer London, the National Working Group on Exploitation (NWG), Together for Children, We Are With You and the amazing Barnardo's exploitation and trafficking services for their invaluable contributions to this report.

¹ <https://www.barnardos.org.uk/see-hear-respond-impact>

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1. Executive Summary

Week after week, we see newspaper headlines about children being victims of knife crime, often due to gang involvement and/or criminal exploitation. What we do not know is how many opportunities there have been to protect and safeguard that child from serious harm. Behind every news headline, there is a child who may have suffered untold trauma in their lives and whose vulnerability has been exploited by dangerous criminals. In 2019, the then Children's Commissioner for England estimated that there were 27,000 children at high risk of gang exploitation.²

Despite the improvement in our mutual understanding of child criminal exploitation, agencies are still seeing some exploited children as criminals. Children are continuing to be punished for the abuse they are receiving. It is crucial that when children come to the notice of law enforcement or any statutory agency, questions around the possibility of them having been exploited are asked. If criminal gangs continue to feel secure in the fact that children will not be safeguarded or supported to disclose their abuse, they will carry on targeting them to commit criminal acts on their behalf. If children do not feel reassured that they will receive support and protection if they do disclose, their abuse will continue.

The Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill, currently moving through Parliament, is a unique opportunity to ensure that all professionals who support children understand child criminal exploitation (CCE) and work to better prevent, identify and support children who experience this growing harm. As it stands however, the Bill does not go far enough. Using new findings, this report outlines the growing

problem of organised gangs exploiting and coercing children into criminality and how the Bill can be amended to make a real difference to children by:

- **Creating a statutory definition of child criminal exploitation; and**
- **Placing a requirement on local areas to specifically tackle CCE and serious youth violence.**

We are also calling on the Government to allocate specific funding for youth services, as part of a wider package of early intervention support in every community.

Key findings include:

- **a lack of accessible data collection on CCE by police forces**
- **no clear understanding or consistency from relevant professionals such as those from police, social care and health of what CCE is**
- **little understanding of what crimes could be counted as CCE.**

The lack of a legal definition is a contributing factor. The majority of respondents were unable to fulfil a request for data on the incidences of CCE over time with most citing the prohibitive costs as the data was not routinely collected.

CCE is a form of child abuse that often inflicts serious harm on children and young people, destroys families, ruins childhoods and can set up a vulnerable child for a life in and out of the criminal justice system. Children who are victims of CCE and gang violence are not being identified in time to save their lives and other children's lives, despite frequent opportunities to do so. As a previous 2019 report on gangs and CCE found, only **24%**

² Office of the Children's Commissioner, Keeping kids safe – Improving safeguarding responses to gang violence and criminal exploitation February 2019

of children involved in gang violence are known to children's services³. The new proposed Serious Violence Duty must ensure that there are clear pathways to support children when they present to any statutory agency with signs of being criminally exploited. Children cannot be protected from further harm if safeguarding procedures are not put into place at the earliest opportunity.

However, even more worryingly, when children and young people are known to authorities, they are still not always being safeguarded and supported. A number of Serious Case Reviews, established where a child has died or come to serious harm, have illustrated that children who experience CCE, knife crime and/or gangs are often passed from service to service without meaningful engagement. The Serious Case Review into the fatal stabbing of a 15-year-old boy known as 'Archie'⁴ in Sheffield in 2018 contains a list of failings by authorities to protect him from harm. Agencies were too slow to act; information was not shared; youth engagement was abruptly ended and the list goes on.⁵ 'Archie' is just one of many children not being seen as victims and not being protected from further harm or harming others.

Conceptualising CCE as a public health problem might be helpful in terms of assisting practitioners, leaders, policy makers and strategists, with a framework to address the challenge.

This report includes new evidence gathered by Barnardo's including:

- Freedom of Information request to police forces on child criminal exploitation
- A survey of Barnardo's frontline practitioners
- Interviews with Barnardo's children's services managers
- A survey of grassroots organisations who work with victims of child criminal exploitation

What is clear across all this new evidence is that the pandemic has had a profound impact on CCE, which shows little sign of abating. In fact, what specialist services tell us is that children have become increasingly vulnerable to exploitation in the aftermath of more time spent online and away from trusted adults. The exploitation that started online can continue into the offline world. Now more than ever, safeguards must be put into place to protect children from child criminal exploitation. Investing in training and support to professionals to identify the risk factors and what effective early intervention looks like is crucial when tackling CCE. The Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill gives us an opportunity to do just that.

“The project workers are often the only person advocating and championing for a young person as a victim of child exploitation.”

Barnardo's CCE Service Manager

³ [CCO-Gangs.pdf \(childrenscommissioner.gov.uk\)](#)

⁴ [archie_learning_brief_final.pdf \(safeguardingsheffieldchildren.org\)](#)

⁵ Recommendations from the Review included calling on Sheffield Safeguarding Children Board and the Community Safety Partnership to ensure there are structures in place to assess, refer and intervene with vulnerable people who may be exploited by gangs and Organised Crime Groups operating in the city.

List of recommendations

Recommendation 1:

A statutory definition of CCE would guide relevant professionals who support children at risk in their understanding of what constitutes exploitation and help create more consistent practice.

Part 1, Section 3 of the Modern Slavery Act to be amended, through the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill, to introduce the following statutory definition of 'child criminal exploitation':

'Child criminal exploitation is when another person or persons manipulate, deceive, coerce or control the person to undertake activity which constitutes a criminal offence where the person is under the age of 18.'

Recommendation 2:

There should be a specific requirement on local areas to tackle child criminal exploitation and serious youth violence.

The Serious Violence Duty in the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill (Chapter 1 of Part 2) will require local authorities, the police, fire and rescue authorities, specified criminal justice agencies and health authorities to work together to formulate an evidence-based analysis of the problems associated with serious violence in a local area, and then produce and implement a strategy detailing how they will respond to those particular issues. However, as currently drafted the duty does not refer specifically to child criminal exploitation. We recommend that the Serious Violence Duty is amended by:

- a. **Prioritising the safeguarding of children at risk of CCE and involved in serious violence** through including measures in the Serious Violence Duty to identify and safeguard children who are involved in serious violence and/or being criminally exploited in the local area.

- b. **Establishing a National Serious Violence Oversight Board.**

Serious violence and child criminal exploitation inevitably cross boundaries and are not confined to one local area. A National Serious Violence Oversight Board will enable analysis on national trends and real scrutiny of what is and is not working at a national level.

- c. **Publishing a strategy to provide training on child criminal exploitation.**

Professionals who have been trained in understanding CCE are crucial to identifying and safeguarding children at risk of CCE. The partnership should publish a strategy for providing specialist training on child criminal exploitation and serious youth violence for all specified authorities to which Chapter 1 of Part 2 of this Act applies. The importance of training on the identification of CCE and on effective interventions cannot be underestimated. Our Centre of Expertise on Child Sexual Abuse is undertaking important work to improve awareness and understanding of CSA and learning from this work can inform a similar approach for CCE.

Recommendation 3:

We recommend that the Government commits to allocate funding to increase the provision of youth services as part of an early intervention package of support in every community.

2. Background to child criminal exploitation

2.1 What is child criminal exploitation?

Children are being criminally exploited as young as nine years old. The exploitation can take several forms, but generally involves an individual or group taking advantage of an imbalance of power to coerce and control a child into committing a criminal act.

Children can be threatened and blackmailed, subjected to physical, emotional or sexual abuse, and are often at risk of serious violence. The most recognised form of child criminal exploitation is ‘county lines’ where young people are coerced to carry drugs and weapons from one area to another to service complex drug supply chains. However, child criminal exploitation can take other forms.⁶ For example, children can be exploited through a range of organised criminal activity from forced begging⁷ to cannabis cultivation to stealing cars or alcohol to order.

A child from any background can be coerced into CCE, however gangs often target particular groups who are more vulnerable, such as those in care, with additional mental health needs and children who live in a household with domestic abuse. A report by Crest Advisory in December 2020 found that looked after children are disproportionately represented in ‘county lines’ networks, but they were not being systematically identified by

police or local authorities.⁸ Data on children who are reported missing shows that children placed in residential care homes and unregulated settings were at a higher risk of going missing. However, the police are not consistently using ‘county lines’ and CCE flags to identify heightened risk leading to a gap between data and operational understanding.

The experience of being exploited is traumatising for children and it is unlikely they will be able to recover from abusive experiences without significant professional support. This support needs to come in the form of a multi-agency response which puts the child at the centre, and which understands the complex and dangerous nature of the abuse they have suffered.

2.2. The criminalisation of exploited children

Victims of CCE are often still criminalised or blamed for their ‘risky’ actions rather than safeguarded. Catch 22’s research in 2016 found that *‘Patterns of grooming of children for criminal exploitation are very similar to those of sexual exploitation. In the past, child sexual exploitation was often perceived amongst professionals as the victim’s fault, or due to their risky behaviour. We believe that in some areas of the UK a similar culture currently exists around criminal exploitation by gangs.’*⁹ Although understanding has improved since then, recent Serious Case Reviews illustrate how children are still not being safeguarded early enough.

6 <https://www.nationalcrimeagency.gov.uk/what-we-do/crime-threats/drug-trafficking/county-lines>

7 Forced begging means to enforce a person to beg for money through threats, deceit, or other forms of coercion.

8 County Lines and Looked After Children, Joe Caluori, Dr. Molly Corlett and James Stott, Crest Advisory Group, December 2020 [Link to report](#).

9 [Child Criminal Exploitation \(CCE\) – Catch22 \(catch-22.org.uk\)](#)

Findings from the Croydon Serious Case Review of Child Q entitled *Where were you when I was six?*¹⁰ detailed how risks to him were identified early but went unaddressed and were not appropriately prioritised until Child Q started offending. The case further illustrated the need for interventions when a child becomes a victim of violent crime. ‘Child Q informed his family (long after the incident) that he had been a victim of a similar offence to his first serious conviction, and he was the victim of a knife point robbery and had been stabbed. This suggests a need for an effective preventative response to include work with young people who have been the victims of violence to help them overcome the experience without recourse to violence.’¹¹

Intervening at critical moments is vital. The Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel’s report *It was hard to escape – safeguarding children at risk from criminal exploitation*,¹² which reviewed a number of cases involving children who have died or been seriously harmed where criminal exploitation was a factor, detailed the importance of not missing opportunities to safeguard. They highlight presenting at accident and emergency, attending youth court and being excluded from school as prime times for a multi-agency safeguarding intervention. These opportunities are often missed however.

Children who have been criminally exploited will come to the attention of authorities in a variety of ways. Often it will be through an arrest for a crime. In 2019/20 nearly 7,000 children were arrested for drug offences.¹³ A further 2,063 were charged with weapon offences. Possession of weapon offences committed by first time offenders have increased by 16% over the last ten years.¹⁴

However, there is still a lack of awareness from agencies that a proportion of these children have been exploited to commit these crimes or are in fear of their own and their family’s safety. According to The Children’s Society report *Counting Lives ‘where children are being criminally exploited, safeguarding responses are largely reactive. Professionals reported that many children come to attention of statutory agencies when exploitation is already present in their lives and criminal groups are controlling them to deliver drugs. Typically, in these instances professionals report that law enforcement takes precedence over safeguarding responses’*.¹⁵

This year, Barnardo’s frontline workers say that it is still often the case that criminalisation is the key response and not safeguarding. One practitioner told us that:

“Often the first response of authorities is criminalisation and there is little thought as to whether the child has been exploited to commit crimes even when the signs are there.”

Although the provisions in the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill apply only in England and Wales, trafficking, ‘county lines’ networks and all forms of CCE are spread across all nations of the United Kingdom (and internationally as well). Like England and Wales, CCE often goes unrecognised in Scotland. In 2020 the Scottish Government admitted that ‘children are more likely to be prosecuted for offending behaviour, rather than being recognised as victims of exploitation’.¹⁶ In a recent blog, Daljeet Dagon, the National Programme Manager for Child Sexual Exploitation at Barnardo’s Scotland said that in her vast experience:

10 [Child-Q-SCR-SUMMARY-PUBLISHED-May-2019.pdf \(croydonlcsb.org.uk\)](#)

11 Ibid using ‘Teenagers at risk. The safeguarding needs of young people in gangs and violent peer groups. NSPCC 2009.

12 [The Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel – It was hard to escape – report \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](#)

13 [youth-justice-statistics-2019-2020.pdf \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](#)

14 Ibid

15 [counting-lives-report.pdf \(childrenssociety.org.uk\)](#)

16 [National guidance for child protection in Scotland 2021 – gov.scot \(www.gov.scot\)](#)

“Whilst our knowledge and awareness about how we can pro-actively intervene in the recruitment, grooming and widespread violence and criminal exploitation that our children and young people face is limited, they often get missed or assessed out of the system at early stages – only later identified after numerous exploitative incidences resulting in trauma responses and physical injury. Often when they are identified they are treated through a youth justice lens problem with agencies finding it difficult to hold a child protection perspective for a child who may be “viewed” as harming others or committing crimes.”¹⁷

The cross-nation nature of CCE means information must be shared between agencies from all UK nations. There are also agencies that operate across borders. For example, as many criminal gangs use public transport to facilitate their exploitation and coercion of children, therefore the British Transport Police who cover all UK nations are crucial in the identification and prevention of CCE.

Section 45 of the Modern Slavery Act 2015 provides for a statutory defence for adult and child victims who have been forced, threatened or deceived into committing certain crimes by their exploiters. It is through this law that children can be understood to be victims and not criminals. The organisation Just for Kids Law however, says this law is underused and not well known enough to practitioners. They suggest that the further investigation needed to ascertain why a child may be carrying weapons or drugs is just not undertaken by police forces: *‘the problem here is that too often the policing strategy stops at arresting a child dealing on the street, with no resources going into investigating how that child got there and who is pulling the strings behind them’*.¹⁸

Barnardo’s Freedom of Information request to police forces

As The Children’s Society’s *Counting Lives* report suggests, for criminally exploited children to receive a safeguarding response, they need to be identified and known to agencies. Specific vulnerabilities such as being in care and on a child protection plan need to be recorded. Yet when we made a Freedom of Information (FOI) request to police forces asking them to share the number of victims of CCE in their areas and whether they knew how many of the victims were or had been in local authority care, their responses in the main were that this information was either not recorded or not easily accessible. CCE continues to not be routinely flagged as a potential issue that needs further investigation by the police when they apprehend children even if the signs of exploitation may be there. Many police forces even asked us to define which offences we wanted to count as child criminal exploitation. They also do not routinely record the number of children referred through the National Referral Mechanism, which is the process for children suspected of being trafficked. If police forces are not routinely identifying and recording CCE and resources are not being committed to investigate how or why a child has been coerced into criminal activity, it is inevitable that children will continue to be criminalised rather than safeguarded. **Further detailed analysis of the FOI results can be found in Section 3.**

¹⁷ [Criminal exploitation of children is never the fault of the child | Barnardo’s \(barnardos.org.uk\)](#)

¹⁸ [Essential but underused: The Modern Slavery Act and child criminal exploitation | Just For Kids Law](#)

Case study 1: Barnardo's Independent Child Trafficking Guardian Service

Jamie aged 17, had been approached by an unknown adult on Snapchat. The adult reportedly contacted him several times with the offer of work. Jamie initially refused but eventually took up the offer of work due to boredom and isolation during the pandemic. He provided his phone number to the adult. Jamie was contacted on his phone and instructed to meet with a second adult. He was provided with a bike by this individual and directed to a third adult who provided him with a package containing drugs. Jamie said he was afraid of the people he had become involved with and feared refusing instructions. He was subsequently instructed via phone calls to meet numerous individuals at different locations to deliver drugs. Jamie was searched by the police and arrested between deliveries. He was held in custody overnight without an offer of a phone call to his parents and interviewed the next morning. He was released under investigation for Possession with Intent to Supply. After over 6 months, Jamie and his family did not receive any communication from the Police or Children's Services about any support or whether he would be charged. Jamie's parents moved house during this period as an effort to protect him. Approximately 10 months after the incident, Jamie was involved in a traffic incident whilst riding his bike. Police at the scene discovered that he was in possession of illegal drugs. Jamie told his parents that he had been located by his initial traffickers who told him he had accrued a 'drug debt'. He was told to pay a considerable sum of money upfront or work for them in delivering substances as before. There seemed to be no consideration that he may have been trafficked or exploited and no referral to the National Referral Mechanism (NRM). Had a referral been submitted for assessment, it would have found that he was being exploited much earlier. A referral was finally made several months after Jamie's initial arrest. He is now being supported by Barnardo's.

Barnardo's **Independent Child Trafficking Guardians Service** supports many young people who are not identified as potential victims by statutory services at the earliest opportunity, and are instead viewed as offenders following long-standing, escalating criminal exploitation. Case study 1 illustrates the missed opportunity to safeguard Jamie earlier and the further significant risks Jamie faced before his eventual referral for appropriate support. The initial focus of the police appeared to be only on his arrest for possession of drugs and no further investigation was made into why he was carrying these drugs or whether he had been exploited. Luckily Jamie he did not come to severe physical harm in the intervening period, although he and his family will have suffered trauma from the events they have faced.

2.3 What is the extent of child criminal exploitation in the UK?

Given the hidden nature of this phenomenon it is difficult to get an accurate picture of the extent of CCE that is taking place in the UK. However, there continue to be indications that this is a growing problem. In 2019, the Children's Commissioner for England estimated that there were 27,000 children at high risk of gang exploitation.¹⁹ National Crime Agency statistics estimated that there are over 100 networks bringing crack cocaine and heroin into Welsh towns.²⁰ Our frontline practitioners in Scotland say there has been a marked increase in the number of children they are seeing being criminally exploited.

¹⁹ [CCO-Gangs.pdf \(childrenscommissioner.gov.uk\)](#)

²⁰ [County lines: a co-ordinated Welsh community response to child criminal exploitation | Health Care Research Wales \(healthandcarereseearchwales.org\)](#)

There is also a concern that the pandemic and resulting lockdowns have increased the risk for many children and young people to exploitation. Based on a survey of over 1,000 Barnardo's frontline workers in April 2020 who work across a range of support services from children's hubs to mental health support, **one in four (24%) said they had supported a child or young person they thought was being coerced, deceived or manipulated into criminal activity.**²¹

As mentioned earlier, in 2020, the Child Safeguarding Review Panel, who are responsible for identifying and overseeing the review of serious child safeguarding cases, published a review into cases of children coming to serious harm after becoming victims of CCE. The report states 'since we began our work in June 2018, we have seen a worrying number of cases involving children who have died or been seriously harmed where criminal exploitation was a factor'.²²

The review focused on 21 children from 17 local areas who died or experienced serious harm after being victims of CCE. It found that in many cases the children were not known to children's services and there is little consistency in effective practice across the country, poor communication between agencies and that professionals were not intervening at the 'critical moments' in children's lives. These 'critical moments' can sometimes mean the difference between life and death.

2.4 What has been the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on child criminal exploitation?

“ The biggest impact that the lockdown had was the sudden tug of the rug from underneath young people of the rest of their support network. Young people had education, social care, us and other pieces of support in place and then all of a sudden they went from that to having nothing.”

Barnardo's Youth Worker, Bristol

The Covid-19 pandemic and the lockdowns have changed the way criminal gangs exploit children. The national crisis has not meant that gangs have suspended their operations, however it has meant that they have had to change, adapting their model of exploitation to take advantage of the current crisis to reach new children and young people.

“ I feel and have identified that there has been more emphasis on online exploitation whilst everyone was in full lockdown. I have also noticed, that since the restrictions have lifted there has been a significant increase in extra-familial harm and child criminal exploitation and child criminal exploitation as the majority of young people seem to be out their house now.”

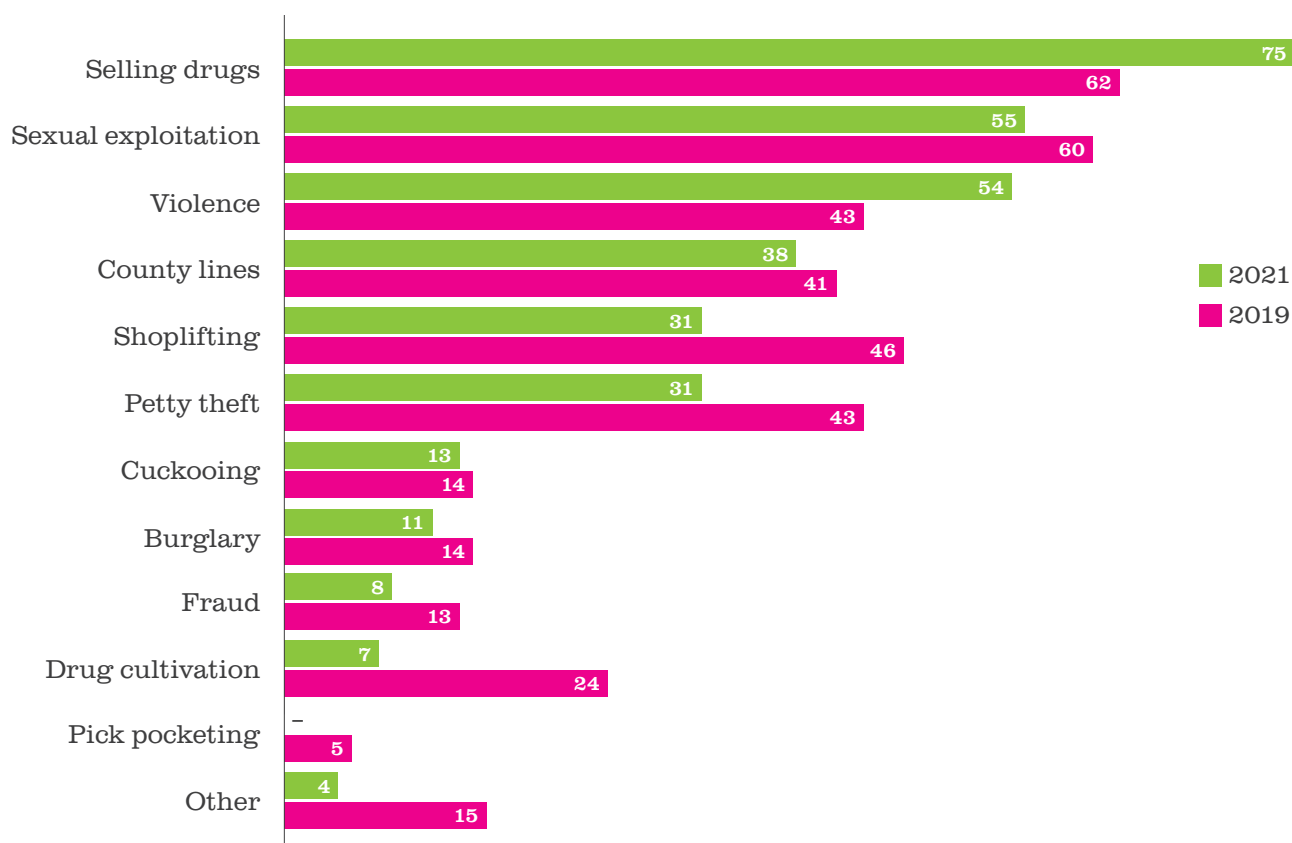
A Safer London practitioner responding to a Barnardo's survey²³

21 <https://www.barnardos.org.uk/news/generation-lockdown-third-children-and-young-people-experience-increased-mental-health> Barnardo's conducts a survey of its front line workers every quarter to capture emerging issues and impacts on children and families directly from Barnardo's practitioners. The survey was open to all staff who work directly with children, young people, parents and/or carers.

22 The Child Safeguarding Review Panel – It was hard to escape – Safeguarding children at risk from criminal exploitation, June 2020. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/870035/Safeguarding_children_at_risk_from_criminal_exploitation_review.pdf

23 Safer London supports young Londoners, their families, peers and communities affected by violence and exploitation [Home Page – Safer London](#)

Ways in which children and young people are being criminally exploited (%)



We asked Barnardo’s practitioners who said they support children being criminally exploited, what form that criminal exploitation took.. Base: 2021 : 276; 2019: 182

Professionals working with victims of CCE have talked of a tendency for ‘county lines’ to be run more locally during the pandemic, with more use of local children rather than moving young people around the country. There has also been a shift in ‘victim type’ with a greater reliance on girls. This is thought to be linked to an increasing tendency for gangs to target young people online using apps such as Snapchat and TikTok where young people have spent a lot of time during lockdown.²⁴ Ofcom brought together research that showed that a huge **97%** of 5-15-year-olds used video sharing platforms in 2020 and the length of time children spent on these sites increased over lockdown with TikTok

being the preferred platform of choice.²⁵ School disruptions and lack of face-to-face contact with professionals generally meant that it was easier for children to fly under the radar, although an increase in parents working from home did mean that our practitioners noticed an increase in referrals from concerned parents.

Barnardo’s trafficking support workers reflected that there was an increased prevalence in online targeting of children and young people. Although this was present before, this has become more pronounced without other means for exploiters to connect with children and young people. Increased periods at home have also meant children and young people have spent increased time online,

²⁴ https://www.ofcom.org.uk/data/assets/pdf_file/0025/217825/children-and-parents-media-use-and-attitudes-report-2020-21.pdf

²⁵ Ibid.

and parents/carers may have also been stretched in their capacity to supervise.

The restrictions have meant it has been harder for young people to use public transport without being noticed, but gangs have adapted. Youth workers and child criminal exploitation practitioners reported young people wearing delivery driver uniforms or high viz jackets allowing them to hide under the disguise of legitimate Covid-19 related activity. Gangs have also moved activity into busier public places such as supermarket car parks where it is easier to conduct activity during lockdown without arousing suspicion.

“ I’ve noticed a significant increase in the complexity of situations that young people are experiencing since lockdown began, and has continued during the easing of lockdown. More and more children appeared to be linked within peer networks of vulnerability, and we suspect facilitation into exploitation but struggle to evidence this.”

Co-ordinator from Together for Children responding to a Barnardo’s survey²⁶

Barnardo’s CCE service practitioners told a meeting of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Knife Crime and Violence Reduction²⁷ in May 2020 that the pandemic has meant criminal gangs have continued to develop models of criminal exploitation beyond the ‘county lines’ model (possibly partly as a response to a declined demand for recreational drugs). There is believed to have been a growth in exploitation in relation to non-drug related crimes, such as car theft and the theft of

high-end alcohol. In the longer term there is a concern that one of the impacts of the pandemic and its lockdown is that it has created a greater pool of vulnerable young people which gangs will be able to exploit to expand their criminal activity.

A survey of Barnardo’s practitioners²⁸ revealed that a majority believed there had been an increase in CCE during lockdown and identified key factors driving CCE with every respondent indicating that poverty was a key driver of CCE. As a Barnardo’s youth worker from Nottingham said:

“Social deprivation and poverty has a clear and lasting effect on children and young people. We cannot ignore that it has a role to play in leaving children feeling hopeless, isolated and therefore more vulnerable to CCE/serious youth violence.”²⁹

Many families are struggling to pay bills or put food on the table – vulnerabilities gangs can prey on when targeting young people who are desperate to find ‘easy’ ways to make money. One practitioner from Birmingham said:

“Young people are striving to fulfil an image presented on social media platforms whilst living in poverty ... this has a huge impact on serious youth violence/CCE”,

and a youth worker from London highlighted:

“Some don’t have money to eat, most can’t access mental health support and plenty are homeless.”

Practitioners also cited the impact of the restrictions increasing volatile family and housing situations for some young

26 [Home | Together for Children](#) – Together for Children works with Sunderland City Council and partner organisations to ensure that children’s services across Sunderland are delivered by a suitably qualified and experienced workforce and deliver optimum value for money.

27 Barnardo’s and Redthread provide the Secretariat to this APPG: <http://www.preventknifecrime.co.uk/>

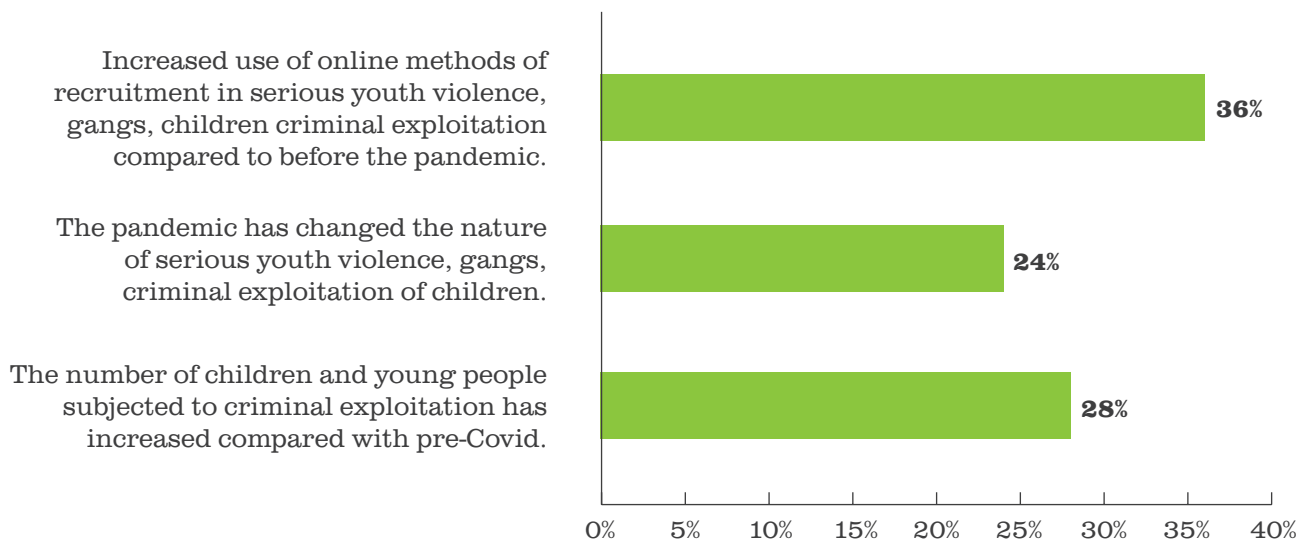
28 [A third of children experience increased mental health difficulties during lockdown | Barnardo’s \(barnardos.org.uk\)](#)

29 Barnardo’s conducts a survey of its front line workers every quarter to capture emerging issues and impacts on children and families directly from Barnardo’s practitioners. The survey was open to all staff who work directly with children, young people, parents and/or carers. Fieldwork was undertaken 6–21 April 2020 and more than 1,000 workers from Barnardo’s front line services responded, the biggest ever response in the survey’s history. Data analysis was undertaken by Barnardo’s Strategic Impact Team.

people, leading to more unstable housing and breakdown in family relationships due to the pressures of lockdown. However, like child sexual exploitation, CCE can affect children from other backgrounds too as a practitioner based in a London hospital identified:

“Some of the [young people] are in poverty but there are also others whose families have good jobs and incomes who are still affected by these issues. There are a variety of push and pull factors for CCE.”

Pandemic-related changes identified by Barnardo’s practitioners. Please note that this question was asked to workers from a range of Barnardo’s services, many of whom do not work with victims of CCE. (n=276)



Case study 2: Barnardo’s ROUTES service in Bristol

A boy supported by our Routes service in Bristol was forced to leave a stable home with his grandparents over lockdown due to him finding lockdown restrictions hard, which led to a breakdown in the relationship with his grandparents. This placement breakdown led to him moving in to live with his father who is a recovering drug user. This led to him being out of view of trusted adults, being criminally exploited and subsequently being found with large amounts of heroin. The practitioner believed that the change in his housing situation directly led to this happening.

2.5 How are children who have been criminally exploited currently identified?

How children are identified when they have been exploited, trafficked and/or coerced into criminal activity is important to ensure they receive the right support. There are a number of ways in which these children can come to the attention of children’s services.

- **The National Referral Mechanism**

The National Referral Mechanism (NRM) is a framework for identifying victims of human trafficking³⁰ and ensuring they receive protection and support. If professionals (trained as trafficking first responders) believe there is evidence of trafficking they refer the child to the Home Office where a team assess whether they agree that the child has been

³⁰ Human trafficking is the process of trapping people through the use of violence, deception or coercion and exploiting them for financial or personal gain (Anti-Slavery International).

trafficked. If they do agree, the child is said to have had a positive NRM. Having a positive NRM decision can lead to a variety of support being provided including medical care and counselling.

There are a growing number of children who are being referred to the NRM due to suspected trafficking from one part of the UK to another. In 2019 there were 4,450 children referred to the NRM and children comprised nearly half (**43%**) of the total number of suspected trafficking victims, nearly 50% more than the previous year. Of children referred in 2019, most had been trafficked from one part of the UK to another (**52%**). In March 2021, the latest data showed the number of referrals that were children remained at 43%. Criminal exploitation was the most commonly reported type of exploitation for child potential victims (**52%**). The proportion of positive conclusive grounds decisions for child potential victims was **95%** so almost all children referred were agreed by the NRM to have been trafficked and in need of further support³¹.

- **Through Section 17 of the Children Act 1989**

Children who have been criminally exploited may be referred for support under Section 17 of the Children Act 1989. Section 17 imposes a general duty on local authorities to safeguard and promote the welfare of ‘children in need’ in their area³². Under section 17, local authorities have responsibility for determining what services should be provided to a child in need. This does not necessarily require local authorities themselves to be the provider of such services³³. The number of ‘children in need’ assessments that identified gangs as a factor increased by **34%** in 2020 compared to 2019 (10,960 in 2019 compared to 14,700 in 2020)³⁴.

Case study 3: Barnardo’s See, Hear, Respond programme (see page 2 of the report)

See, Hear, Respond, supported a 16-year-old boy and his mother who, when referred to the programme before Christmas, were highly distressed having been placed into a bed and breakfast. The boy had just left a gang who were criminally exploiting him and was fearful for his own safety. They were both anxious, had little money and had struggled to communicate with statutory agencies. Youth workers from the programme worked with them to help make them safe from harm, secure emergency funding and they worked alongside other services to develop a plan for them to be placed in safe accommodation.

- **Violence Reduction Units**

In March 2019, the then Home Secretary announced a £100 million Serious Violence Fund to help tackle serious violence. Of this, £63.4 million was allocated to 18 police force areas worst affected by serious violence to pay for ‘surge operational activity’, such as increased patrols. £1.6 million was deployed to help improve the quality of data on serious violence, particularly knife crime, to support planning and operations³⁵. The remaining £35 million of the Serious Violence Fund was invested in Violence Reduction Units (VRUs) in the same 18 areas to tackle the root causes of serious violence. The development of VRUs have contributed to tackling exploitation and serious youth violence. The local teams bring together partners from police, probation, education, health, the voluntary sector and local authorities together with young

31 [Modern Slavery: National Referral Mechanism and Duty to Notify Statistics UK, Quarter 4 2020 – October to December – GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#)

32 [Children Act 1989 \(legislation.gov.uk\)](#)

33 Working Together to Safeguard Children, DfE, 2018.

34 [Characteristics of children in need, Reporting Year 2020 – Explore education statistics – GOV.UK \(explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk\)](#)

35 [Violence Reduction Unit interim guidance \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](#)

people and communities to develop a joined-up approach to preventing and tackling serious violence with a public health approach. The majority of VRUs have commissioned a diverse range of interventions that were working with children, young people and adults to address serious violence. For example, the West Midlands VRU has employed a specific child exploitation worker who is responsible for helping to co-ordinate and improve local responses.

In February 2021, the then Children's Commissioner released the report *Still not safe – the public health response to youth violence*³⁶. The report reveals how a lack of coordination between different agencies responsible for helping to keep vulnerable children safe is failing to prevent thousands of children from falling through gaps in the education, health, justice and care systems, leaving them vulnerable to exploitation

and grooming from ruthless criminal organisations or others who seek to abuse them. The report praises the Government's allocation of large sums of money to combat serious violence – £35 million for violence reduction units (VRUs), £200 million to the Youth Endowment Fund over 10 years, and £500 million over 5 years to the Youth Investment Fund, and its commitment to using a public health approach to gang violence. VRUs in particular are doing important work to deal with serious violence in the 18 areas they have been established. However, the report says insufficient attention has been paid to the need for agencies in other areas to adopt both a safeguarding and public health response across the country, working in partnership with local police forces.³⁷

The following recommendations seek to bring together all agencies that work to safeguard children from harm.



³⁶ [cco-still-not-safe.pdf \(childrenscommissioner.gov.uk\)](#)

³⁷ [Children will keep dying on our streets until there is a joined up public health response to gangs | Children's Commissioner for England \(childrenscommissioner.gov.uk\)](#)

3. Report Recommendations

Recommendations that will prevent and better identify and support victims of Child Criminal Exploitation (CCE)

1. Introduce a Statutory Definition of CCE	2. Improve the multi-agency response to CCE	3. Invest in youth services
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Recommendation 1: Introduce a statutory definition of child criminal exploration

3.1 A statutory definition of child criminal exploitation

Children who have been criminally exploited are victims of child abuse. To better protect children from criminal exploitation we need to focus our response on safeguarding, rather than criminalisation.

There is no definition of CCE for criminal law purposes. Perpetrators who are exploiting children criminally, for example through ‘county lines’, may be prosecuted under the Modern Slavery Act 2015 for slavery, servitude and forced and compulsory labour offences and trafficking for the purposes of exploitation offence. However, this is not happening in practice. Instead, perpetrators are often prosecuted for drug or weapon offences but not the exploitation of children. Although ‘Working Together’ guidance references criminal exploitation, there is no definition of it included in the guidance. The Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill provides an opportunity to introduce a **statutory definition of ‘child criminal exploitation’** to better help professionals identify victims and make sure they are supported appropriately.

3.2 Why is a statutory definition needed?

- There are strong parallels in how children who had been sexually abused

and exploited in previous decades were seen as ‘criminals’, ‘child prostitutes’ and ‘rent boys’. Barnardo’s started working with victims of child sexual exploitation in 1992 and campaigned for many years to show these children were and are victims of abuse. Children are thankfully no longer referred to as ‘child prostitutes’, they are recognised as children who have been raped and abused. The same applies for children who have been criminally exploited yet language and behaviours continue to be victim blaming for this type of abuse. The Serious Crime Act 2015 replaced references to child prostitution and child pornography in the Sexual Offences Act 2003. Following a Government consultation in 2016 a legal definition of child sexual exploitation was established to ensure that all professionals could better support, identify and safeguard children affected. The revised definition is included in the ‘Working Together’ statutory guidance³⁸ and the Criminal Prosecution Services guidance.³⁹

- Children who have been criminally exploited often go unidentified and unsupported by services until they are caught by the police or arrive at A&E, at which point they are often viewed as perpetrators. A definition would raise awareness of the problem amongst

38 Working Together to Safeguard Children 2018 (publishing.service.gov.uk)

39 Rape and Sexual Offences – Chapter 7: Key Legislation and Offences | The Crown Prosecution Service (cps.gov.uk)

professionals and ensure the effective identification of children at risk with the implementation of timely and appropriate support.

- Children who have been or are at risk of criminal exploitation are victims in need of safeguarding. Safeguarding responses to these children vary significantly between different local authorities and police forces. Some have effective pathways to protect children from sexual exploitation – many have not. The same is true for child criminal exploitation. By creating a statutory definition, it will help to create greater consistency in understanding of the risk of CCE and the support needed for children affected by it.
- As our Freedom of Information request (set out below) starkly shows, data on CCE is not being consistently and accurately recorded. A definition used by all public authorities would help to improve how agencies understand CCE and how to record it.
- More needs to be done to ensure there is always effective and consistent support in place for children and young people at risk, yet according to our frontline services, definitions and thresholds differ significantly across the country and between different agencies in the same area.

3.3 Proposed amendment to create a statutory definition of child criminal exploitation

Barnardo's, alongside the Children's Society, is calling for Part 1, Section 3 of the Modern Slavery Act to be amended through the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill to introduce a statutory definition of 'child criminal exploitation'.

Our proposed statutory definition is:

“Child criminal exploitation is when another person or persons manipulate,

deceive, coerce or control the person to undertake activity which constitutes a criminal offence where the person is under the age of 18.”

This statutory definition is also supported by organisations including Centrepoint, St Giles, NSPCC, RedThread, JustforKids Law, Children's Right Alliance England, Alliance for Youth Justice and the New Horizons Youth Centre.

The current Home Office working definition of CCE (which does not have standing in law) is 'Child Criminal Exploitation... occurs 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. The victim may have been criminally exploited even if the activity appears consensual. Child Criminal Exploitation does not always involve physical contact; it can also occur through the use of technology. Criminal exploitation of children... includes for instance children forced to work on cannabis farms or to commit theft'.⁴⁰

Our suggested definition is intentionally simplified so as not to date over time as new forms of CCE emerge. Whilst the content of the Home Office's definition above is satisfactory, having a definition in legislation will help to ensure better consistency and multi-agency understanding of CCE. In the same way as the definition of CSE did and more recently for domestic abuse in the Domestic Abuse Act, it will then trickle down into guidance and training across public authorities, safeguarding procedures and frontline work with children.

3.4 Freedom of Information evidence

Barnardo's made a Freedom of Information request in July 2021 to police forces across the United Kingdom (questions attached in appendix 1). Questions were asked on the

⁴⁰ Criminal exploitation of children and vulnerable adults', Home Office, 2018; www.gov.uk/government/publications/criminal-exploitation-of-children-and-vulnerable-adults-countyines

number of recorded incidents of CCE, CSE, referrals to the NRM and the percentage of CSE and CCE incidences recorded for ‘Looked after Children’ and children on a ‘Child Protection Plan’.

Although the majority of relevant police forces (30 out of 47) replied to the FOI request, only one police force was able to provide any data on CCE. The majority of police forces indicated it would require a prohibitively expensive manual search of arrest reports and many asked questions about how CCE is defined. Without a statutory definition, it is difficult for forces to identify and record child criminal exploitation properly let alone consider improvements in referrals and support for those who are victims of CCE.

What the Barnardo’s FOI request did reveal was how cases of CSE have increased during the pandemic. The average number of CSE cases reported by police forces that responded (30 out of 47) increased from 129 in the two years before the pandemic to 208 in the two years covering the pandemic period. Barnardo’s services report that CCE and CSE are often related and NSPCC cite the risk of sexual abuse as a characteristic of CCE⁴¹, however, we are unable to review similar figures for CCE because the data is not being recorded. This is in part due to there being a lack of understanding across police forces on what constitutes CCE.

Joe Caluori, Head of Research and Policy at Crest Advisory, who wrote a report on ‘county lines’ in December 2020 found: “the failure to establish a robust national response to ‘county lines’ suggests that we are failing to learn the lessons of the child sexual exploitation grooming scandals in our response to CCE. Despite five years of coverage in the media and heightened awareness among professionals we still lack a joined up national strategy to tackle ‘county lines’, and the resulting patchwork

of local responses leaves vulnerable children at greater risk of exploitation.’

The lack of data held by police forces and lack of understanding and consistent recording of CCE strongly shows the need for a statutory definition. When CSE was defined in the Modern Slavery Act 2015 we saw a significant increase in the number of crimes of ‘abuse of children through sexual exploitation’⁴² reported each year by police forces in England and Wales (Table 1). Creating a statutory definition has clearly led to an increased understanding and better identification of CSE, and so we urgently need the same for CCE.

Table 1 – Number of CSE cases reported in England and Wales from the Police Forces who responded to the FOI (30 out of 47)

Year	Number of CSE cases reported in England & Wales[2]
2014/15	368
2015/16	566
2016/17	633
2017/18	1197
2018/19	1032
2019/20	1008
2020/21	1067

“ There is the urgent need for a more robust definition of child criminal exploitation and a Child Criminal and Sexual Exploitation National Strategy with clear links to a public health drugs strategy, as responses remain a postcode lottery. Data collection needs to be more robust as many areas do not record or track child criminal exploitation and only have strategic plans for CSE.”

A practitioner from the charity We Are With You responding to a Barnardo’s survey⁴³

41 [Criminal exploitation and gangs | NSPCC](#)

42 https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1004905/prc-pfa-mar2013-onwards-tables-220721.ods

43 We Are With You is a charity providing free, confidential support to people experiencing issues with drugs, alcohol or mental health [Home – With You \(wearewithyou.org.uk\)](https://www.wearewithyou.org.uk)

Recommendation 2: Improving the multi-agency response to CCE

There should be a specific requirement on local areas to tackle CCE and serious youth violence. This can be achieved through amendments to the draft Serious Violence Duty contained in Part 2, Chapter 1 of the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Court Bill.

3.5 Amend the new duty to support multi-agency action on serious violence in local areas

The Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill is a unique opportunity to change the way we respond to children who are most at risk of knife crime and criminal exploitation. We know that no single agency can tackle serious violence alone. Barnardo's welcomes Part 2, Chapter 1, which will introduce new duties on chief officers of police, specified health authorities, local authorities, probation service providers, youth offending teams and fire and rescue services to plan, prevent and reduce serious violence.

The Children's Commissioner's February 2021 *Still not Safe* report⁴⁴ shows 'that the vast majority of Local Authorities do not have a sufficient grip on the drivers for youth violence in their areas, nor do they have a cogent strategy to reduce risk factors in vulnerable cohorts.'

This new proposed duty cannot just be a tick box exercise. These strategies must ensure that there are clear pathways to support for children when they present to these agencies with signs of being criminally exploited. To ensure this approach works in practice and effectively safeguards children from serious violence and exploitation, we recommend that the new duties are strengthened to include:

- A requirement to ensure each local strategy to plan, prevent and reduce serious violence includes **the prevention, identification and safeguarding of children involved in serious violence and criminal activity due to coercion, exploitation and/or trafficking.**
- Establish a **National Serious Violence Oversight Board**, chaired by the Home Secretary, to review local strategies and data to provide a national picture and issue recommendations nationally and locally. This board must produce a report to Parliament every two years on the effectiveness of the Duty in reducing serious violence and child criminal exploitation. This will enable trends on child criminal exploitation to be recorded and analysed.
- Require all relevant professionals within the specified authorities to undergo specialist training on the prevention, identification and safeguarding of children involved in criminal activity and serious violence due to coercion, exploitation and/or trafficking.

3.6 Amendments to Part 2, Chapter 1 – duties to collaborate and plan to prevent and reduce serious violence

A) Amend Part 2, Chapter 1, s7 (3) insert new subsection (c) under Duties to collaborate and plan to prevent and reduce serious violence. In particular, the specified authorities for a local government area must: 'include the prevention, identification and safeguarding of children involved in criminal activity and serious violence due to coercion, exploitation and/or

⁴⁴ [cco-still-not-safe.pdf](https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/cco-still-not-safe.pdf) (childrenscommissioner.gov.uk)

trafficking'. Particular attention within this new subsection must be on improving pathways for support for children.

B) Amend to insert a new clause that establishes a National Serious Violence Oversight Board chaired by the Home Secretary. The Board will review local strategies and data. This board must produce a report to Parliament every two years on the progress of the duty.

C) As part of these duties, all relevant people within the specified authorities must undergo training on the prevention, identification and safeguarding of children involved in criminal activity and serious violence due to coercion, exploitation and/or trafficking.

3.7 How can we prevent exploitation and support children who have been criminally exploited?

Despite growing recognition of this crime, there are still concerns that many children involved in exploitation are not being identified or sufficiently supported. Too often these children only come to the attention of the authorities when they are picked up by the police when caught in the possession of drugs or weapons or through involvement in a violent assault. In these cases, the primary response is a youth justice based response, with safeguarding a secondary concern if it is recognised at all.

“ What is needed is an understanding that young people are VICTIMS of CCE/CSE and should not be treated as perpetrators.”

A practitioner from Safer London responding to a Barnardo's survey⁴⁵

Effective responses to child exploitation are hampered by the fact that it is a form of abuse that takes places across the

boundaries of 40 different police forces and 343 local authorities in England. This creates inevitable fragmentation. While the County Lines Coordination Centre has helped to deliver a more joined up approach between police forces on child exploitation, the same joined up approach is not found between the police and other agencies or between different local authority areas.

If collaboration and planning on CCE is a key part of the Serious Violence Duty, it would create further opportunities for inter-agency strategies and innovative solutions such as contextual safeguarding. This is when individual children or young people cannot be referred for support yet, but rather professionals (such as police or children's services) 'refer' a place or space where they are concerned that children were congregating and potentially at risk of harm or exploitation. This can increase the provision of support at the right time and protect more young people from exploitation (Case Study 3).

Case study 4: Detached youth work⁴⁶

Detached youth work supports young people in their communities, for example in parks and recreational areas, local high streets and other areas young people choose to meet. This work is delivered on the streets, in areas where there is an identified need. Delivery is flexible and can be daytime, evenings and weekends dependant on the young people. Detached youth work can disrupt attempts to exploit children because trusted adults are visible in the spaces that perpetrators operate in.

A total of 27,751 children were reached through detached youth work during the Barnardo's-led pandemic response programme See, Hear, Respond.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Safer London is a charity that supports young Londoners, their families and their peers and communities affected by abuse and exploitation [Home Page – Safer London](#)

⁴⁶ Barnardo's Detached Youth Work Evaluation, March 2021.

⁴⁷ Barnardo's Detached Youth Work Evaluation, March 2021 – [SHR-summative-evaluation-FINAL.pdf \(barnardos.org.uk\)](#)

This work successfully helped connect children and young people to additional support. Detached youth work was the most effective strand of the programme at reaching the most vulnerable or 'hidden' children and young people and connecting them into appropriate support.

There were a number of examples of successful multi-agency collaboration, in particular, between local police forces and delivery partners delivering detached youth services. There is also emerging evidence that some providers of detached youth work continue to collaborate and share information with police forces even since the ending of the programme.

Unfortunately, at the moment too little attention is paid to inter-agency working. VRUs have started to do this work in a select group of areas but this needs to be replicated across the country with the support of agencies involved in safeguarding. As the evidence from our FOI requests has shown, most police forces do not regularly collect data relating to CCE, so it stands to reason that their referrals to other agencies for support will be inconsistent too.

This is a missed opportunity to understand failings and gaps in the provision of support for vulnerable children and to make interventions before it is too late. It is difficult to envisage how we will be able to improve provision for those children in care and reduce those being exploited by criminal gangs if this information is not even being recorded let alone shared. We believe that organised crime gangs often target vulnerable children, and we need to see greater inter-agency collaboration to prevent this. As Case Study 4 shows, when services work together interventions have a greater chance of success.

Case Study 5: Child with a history of CCE supported through collaboration between specialist services and education

A 10 year old boy was vulnerable to criminal exploitation because his brother was already identified as a potential victim and the 10 year old was not supposed to have contact with his brother or father.

The child was supported through 15 sessions from See, Hear, Respond, practitioners (see above). During the most recent lockdown, the support worker visited the child's house once a week for nine weeks and delivered an activity pack to the child, to help alongside intensive 1-2-1 support.

The face-to-face sessions helped by enabling the child to talk his challenges through with someone. They were positive because they focussed his attention on something different to do during lockdown in contrast to the rest of his online interaction for the schoolwork.

Integrated approaches between the school and the See, Hear, Respond practitioners produced positive results. In this example, his mother has said how appreciative she is of the work with her child. The school will now continue to support the child and the family and at the end of our support. The school's Deputy Head said *"Thank you for all your hard work and dedication with the child. The service you have provided has been of outstanding quality, as has your communication with us as a school along with your motivation. It is clear the child has really enjoyed his sessions with you and as a school we feel they have really made a difference to his outlook and the way he deals with everyday events."*

Recommendation 3: Need to invest in youth services

3.8 The importance of youth services

Prior to the pandemic, spending on youth services in England and Wales had reduced by **70%** in real terms in less than a decade, with the loss of £1bn of investment resulting in no funding in some areas, according to research from the YMCA.⁴⁸

Research and analysis by the All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Knife Crime and Violence Reduction undertaken by Barnardo's and RedThread in May 2019 used data from council youth service budgets and knife crime data since 2014. The analysis found that areas suffering the largest reduction in spending on young people have seen bigger increases in knife crime. The data showed that the average council had reduced real-terms spending on youth services by **40%** over the past three years. Some local authorities have reduced their spending – which funds services such as youth clubs and youth workers – by **91%**.⁴⁹

Even before the pandemic it was clear that youth services played an invaluable role in reaching young people who are otherwise disengaged with statutory services. In March 2020 Barnardo's produced further work in its capacity as Co-Secretariat of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Knife Crime and Violence Reduction. Our report on the role that youth services could play in tackling serious youth violence *Securing a brighter future, the role of youth services in tackling knife crime* highlighted the role of youth services in supporting young people involved

in serious youth violence, by providing counselling, social activities and careers support and guidance.⁵⁰

Frontline workers tell us that while many of the young people approached were taking part in anti-social behaviour such as playing loud music, destroying property or breaking into cordoned-off spaces, it became clear that many needed support with complex issues such as domestic abuse and bereavement.

Given the important role that youth work can play going forward, both in relation to addressing the impact of the pandemic and deeper seated problems such as serious youth violence and child criminal exploitation, it is important that central Government provides leadership to the sector. In particular we need action to ensure community-based organisations, who are well placed to deliver effective support as they are trusted by their communities, are funded to provide sustainable services.

The Treasury announced a Spring Review of programmes to support youth services as part of the 2020 Spending Review and in February 2021 the Department of Culture, Media and Sport led an internal review into provision which included a youth engagement consultation. The consultation focussed on the DCMS's two aims for its youth support: (i) developing skills for life and work, and (ii) supporting mental and physical wellbeing. Barnardo's responded to this consultation with the following recommendations⁵¹:

48 YMCA, Out of Service, A report examining local authority expenditure on youth services in England & Wales [Out of Service \(ymca.org.uk\)](https://www.ymca.org.uk)

49 APPG Knife Crime and Violence Reduction reports [Home – \(preventknife-crime.co.uk\)](https://www.preventknife-crime.co.uk)

50 <https://www.preventknife-crime.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Securing-a-brighter-future-the-role-of-youth-services-in-tackling-knife-crime-v.2.pdf>

51 Barnardo's response to youth sector engagement exercise consultation, March 2021.

- **Provide funding that enables the involvement of grassroots and the voluntary sector.** An example of a model which worked very well is the See, Hear, Respond partnership referenced above. This model enabled local partners to be empowered to develop appropriate provision, while – as a national charity – Barnardo’s was able to provide the necessary support and infrastructure to enable effective delivery. However, this was always short term, and multi-year funding is vital in order to make a real difference to young people and communities. This is especially important in the context of the new Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill. The proposed new duty on local agencies to work together to prevent serious violence will only be effective if there is well-funded, sufficient youth provision to accompany it.
- **Promote the importance of having a range of youth provision in an area.** This includes detached and outreach projects. The See Hear Respond approach demonstrated the importance of delivering more than one strand of youth work. For example the range of provision enabled us to refer young people from street-based provision, to one-to-one support, to volunteering opportunities depending on different identified needs at a particular time.
- **Increase opportunities for training in the youth and community sector, including apprenticeships.** Youth work has been de-professionalised in recent years and a full workforce strategy would help to address this.

Unfortunately, there appears to have been no further action taken as yet as a result of this consultation and in the meantime, the risks to children from knife crime and CCE continue. What is needed is a much more joined-up approach from Government with relevant departments coming together to tackle this together at the earliest opportunity.

Furthermore, in our FOI request detailed earlier in the report, just nine police forces responded to the question about recording information on cautions and arrests for children carrying a knife and they showed an increase over the period 2017/21. The increase seen in 2019/20 did decrease in 2020/21 primarily due to the extensive lockdowns. However, 2020/21 rates were still above 2017/18 and we may well see the increase accelerate again in 2021/22 as we return to normality. This data from the FOI is matched by ONS data which showed knife crime at a record high before the pandemic and inevitably reduced during the subsequent lockdowns.⁵²⁵³ By introducing duties to collaborate and plan to prevent and reduce serious violence, we would be strengthening the public response but this also needs to be combined with a commitment across Government to allocate specific funding for youth services, as part of a wider package of early intervention support in every community.

We recommend that that the Government commits to allocating funding for an increase in the provision of youth services as part of an early intervention package of support for children at risk of harm. This package of support should enable the involvement of grassroots and voluntary sector providers.

“ In my experience, every time there is a reduction in youth services funding, serious youth violence and child criminal exploitation increases dramatically.”

Barnardo’s youth worker

Amongst Barnardo’s frontline workers, we have seen a big increase in the number who believe children and young people are carrying knives because it is normal and expected. This has jumped from **14%** in 2019 to **52%** in 2021. This is a dangerous indication that knife crime culture is becoming increasingly embedded and we need to tackle this not always through the

52 [Barnardo’s responds to latest record knife crime figures | Barnardo’s \(barnardos.org.uk\)](#)

53 [Crime in England and Wales – Office for National Statistics \(ons.gov.uk\)](#)

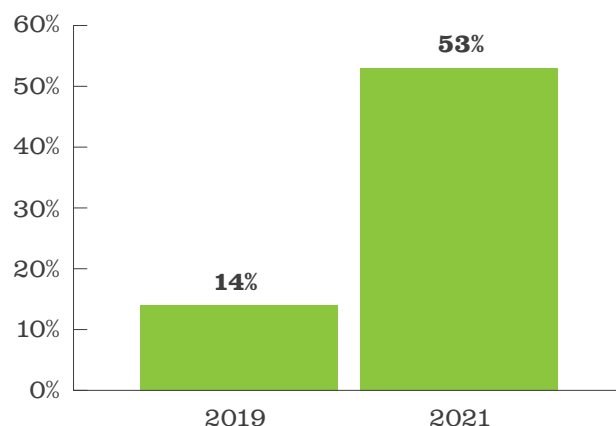
criminal justice system but proactively in communities by investing in youth services. Carrying knives can be an indicator that a child or young person is being criminally exploited or is in fear of organised crime gangs.

We have also seen an increase in the number of practitioners who think that children and young people are being exploited into buying and selling drugs which has increased from **62%** (in 2019) to **75%** (in 2021). This is a dangerous and worrying trend. The Local Government Association has publicly recognised the need to reinvest in youth services.

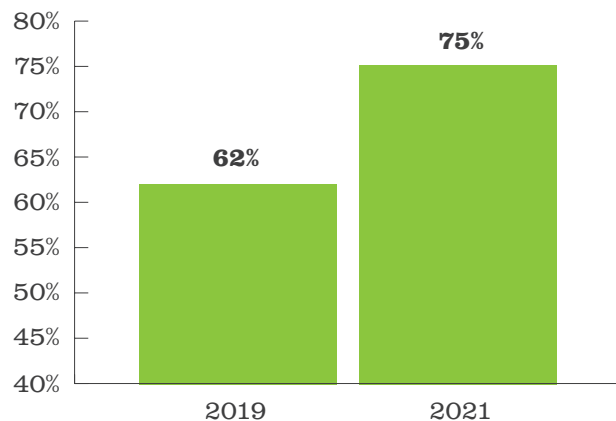
“ Youth services have a vital role to play in providing young people with safe spaces to go and trusted relationships with adults who can help them make positive life choices and avoid being drawn into negative situations during and after the pandemic. However, councils have been forced to cut or scale back important services for thousands of young people in recent years as their budgets have shrunk. The £500 million Youth Investment Fund was announced over a year ago and as we enter a second lockdown this needs to be made available as soon as possible, if we are to help prevent young people from becoming a lost generation.”⁵⁴

Cllr Judith Blake, Chair of the LGA’s Children and Young People Board, November 2020

Barnardo’s practitioners who think children and young people they support are carrying knives because it’s normal or expected (n=276)



Barnardo’s practitioners who think children and young people they support are being exploited into selling drugs (n=276)



The closure of youth services reduces the positive activities and influences for young people at risk of child criminal exploitation. This major reduction in youth services at a local level, at exactly the same time where criminal gangs are increasing the exploitation of children and the pandemic has reduced support for young people is a perfect storm for vulnerable young people.

54 LGA: Devolve National Citizen Service funding to local youth services | Local Government Association

Quotes from Barnardo's practitioner survey on trends in youth violence, gang involvement and forced criminality (July 2021)

- “Increase in knife crime. Increase in severity of exploitation and children being targeted at a younger age.”
- “People exploiting young people are more aware of vulnerabilities and able to target them.”
- “More violence is becoming normal a lot of which is due to the nature of the accessibility of violent games and films where there is no adult monitoring what is being watched.”
- “The children have no routine, no safe spaces to go to and are left to the streets.”
- “It’s sold to them as a family, a family that comes with protection, safety and security for many children their family don’t fulfil.”



4. Conclusion

Child criminal exploitation is a form of child abuse. With the growing risk of grooming and abuse beginning online, and the continued threat from knife crime and ‘county lines’ drugs trafficking, the dangers to children are complex and varied, and it is critical that our laws, policies and practice are fit for the future.

We need to strengthen the protection of our children from exploitation by criminal gangs, yet currently our evidence shows that some police forces do not even record it in a way that is easily accessible making it very difficult to track trends such as the links to children in care. The legal definition of child sexual exploitation introduced in 2016 provides a clear example of how a statutory definition can change attitudes and improve how different agencies understand and safeguard victims. **The Government must take the opportunity of the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill to define child criminal exploitation as the first step in improving the response by agencies at all levels.**

Furthermore, agencies must collaborate better – we welcome the introduction of a statutory duty on local areas to work together to prevent serious violence. But it **must** specify in primary legislation that these duties include preventing and safeguarding children from CCE, if we are to protect our most vulnerable children. Currently, they are being increasingly targeted by criminal gangs who are exposing children to the risk of arrest and violence while they profit.

All new initiatives to reduce serious and violent crime and understand its causes must also seek to address the exploitation and abuse children are suffering. Anything less would be to let down another generation of children and keep the doors open for those who want to exploit, coerce and abuse our children in the future.

Appendix 1: FOI questions to Police Forces

Question 1

- a. How many instances of child criminal exploitation* were detected in the years 17/18, 18/19, 19/20, 20/21?
- b. Please provide the number of victims involved and the nature of the crimes as recorded by the police e.g. county lines etc.
- c. Please provide the number of these victims who had been or were currently ‘Looked after Children’* or on a child protection plan*.

Question 2

- a. How many instances of child sexual exploitation were detected in the years 17/18, 18/19, 19/20, 20/21?
- b. Please provide the number of these victims who had been or were currently ‘Looked after Children’ or on a child protection plan.

Question 3

- a. How many arrests/cautions of children carrying knives were made in the years 17/18, 18/19, 19/20, 20/21?
- b. Please provide the number of arrests there were of children who had been or were currently 'Looked after Children' or on a child protection plan.

Question 4

- a. How many arrests/cautions have there been of children aged 10-17 which have led to a referral to the National Referral Mechanism* in the years 17/18, 18/19, 19/20, 20/21?
- b. Please provide the number of arrests and referrals to the NRM of children who had been or were currently 'Looked after Children' or on a child protection plan.

Explanatory notes

*Child Criminal Exploitation occurs 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. The victim may have been criminally exploited even if the activity appears consensual. Please refer to Home Office guidance – [Criminal Exploitation of children and vulnerable adults: County Lines guidance \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](https://publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/654447/Criminal_Exploitation_of_children_and_vulnerable_adults_County_Lines_guidance.pdf)

*Looked after children are those who have been in the care of their local authority for more than 24 hours. Looked after children are also often referred to as children in care, a term which many children and young people prefer. It was defined in the Children Act 1989.

[Children looked after by local authorities in England: Guide to the SSDA903 collection 1 April 2018 to 31 March 2019 – Version 1.3 \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](https://publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/654447/Children_looked_after_by_local_authorities_in_England_Guide_to_the_SSDA903_collection_1_April_2018_to_31_March_2019_-_Version_1.3.pdf)

* A child protection plan is a plan drawn up by the local authority. It sets out how the child can be kept safe, how things can be made better for the family and what support they will need. [Working Together to Safeguard Children: Statutory framework \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](https://publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/654447/Working_Together_to_Safeguard_Children_Statutory_framework.pdf)

* Child sexual exploitation (CSE) is a type of sexual abuse. When a child or young person is exploited they're given things, like gifts, drugs, money, status and affection, in exchange for performing sexual activities. Children and young people are often tricked into believing they're in a loving and consensual relationship. This is called grooming. They may trust their abuser and not understand that they're being abused.

[Child sexual exploitation: definition and guide for practitioners – GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/654447/Child_sexual_exploitation_definition_and_guide_for_practitioners.pdf)

*The National Referral Mechanism is a framework for identifying and referring potential victims of modern slavery and ensuring they receive the appropriate support. Victims may not be aware that they are being trafficked or exploited, and may have consented to elements of their exploitation, or accepted their situation. If you think that modern slavery has taken place, the case should be referred to the NRM so that the Single Competent Authority (SCA) can fully consider the case. You do not need to be certain that someone is a victim. Child trafficking is child abuse. When an agency comes into contact with a child who may have been trafficked Children's Services and police should be notified immediately. All children, irrespective of their immigration status, are entitled to protection. [National Referral Mechanism: guidance for child first responders \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](https://publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/654447/National_Referral_Mechanism_guidance_for_child_first_responders.pdf)



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