Child criminal exploitation and serious violence – Factsheet for staff

What is it?

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

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

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

Some forms of child criminal exploitation include:

- Transporting drugs through 'county lines'
- Working in cannabis factories
- Shoplifting or pickpocketing
- Vehicle crime, such as theft of – or from – vehicles
- Committing serious violence or threatening it towards others
- Money laundering

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What should I look for?

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- Being isolated or withdrawn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

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

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Further resources

- What is county lines? – The Children's Society https://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/what-we-do/our-work/child-criminal-exploitation-and-county-lines/what-is-county-lines
- Criminal exploitation of children and vulnerable adults: county lines - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)
- Criminal exploitation and gangs – NSPCC https://www.nspcc.org.uk/what-is-child-abuse/types-of-abuse/gangs-criminal-exploitation/
- National Crime Agency https://nationalcrimeagency.gov.uk
- Gang activity advice & support | LiveSafe

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