



HM Inspectorate
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Child Criminal Exploitation

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Foreword

HM Inspectorate of Probation is committed to reviewing, developing and promoting the evidence base for high-quality probation and youth justice services. *Academic Insights* are aimed at all those with an interest in the evidence base. We commission leading academics to present their views on specific topics, assisting with informed debate and aiding understanding of what helps and what hinders probation and youth justice services.

This report was kindly produced by Dr Nina Maxwell, examining service responses to child criminal exploitation. While this form of exploitation can affect any young person, there are heightened risks for specific groups and at critical transitional points. The barriers and facilitators to an effective approach are considered, with the former including the difficulties of identification, service thresholds, binary victim/perpetrator definitions, and stereotypical notions of victimhood. As child criminal exploitation is a complex, cross-cutting issue, agencies must work together through a shared language, an understanding of each other's roles and responsibilities, and systems that enable collaborative working. Practitioners need access to specialised training and a range of safeguarding tools, and they need to exercise professional curiosity, looking beyond the visible evidence and questioning why a young person is behaving in concerning ways. Adopting a strengths-based, child-centred, child rights approach is particularly important given that exploitation removes the young person's control over their own life. As is further highlighted, this places the onus on professionals to work with young people to establish trust and to create safe spaces for them to share their experiences.



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The views expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect the policy position of HM Inspectorate of Probation

1. Introduction

Child criminal exploitation is a national priority in the UK. According to Home Office (2024) figures, there were 3,123 referrals to the National Referral Mechanism (NRM) for child criminal exploitation in the year ending December 2023. These figures exclude young people who have not been identified as victims and therefore, the actual number of young people affected by criminal exploitation is likely to be much higher.

Safeguarding young people from exploitation falls within the roles and responsibilities of youth justice services, while also recognising that child criminal exploitation is a complex, cross-cutting issue. In practice, many children receive a criminal justice rather than a child protection response. The Jay Review, *Shattered Lives. Stolen Futures* (2024), highlighted variations across agencies in their responses to criminally exploited young people, adding that this is due to the lack of a universal definition of child criminal exploitation in the UK and that there is a need for improvements to service responses. With no statutory definition, many professionals adopt the UK Government's definition which states that 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 into any criminal activity (a) in exchange for something the victim needs or wants, and/or (b) for the financial or other advantage of the perpetrator or facilitator and/or (c) through violence or the threat of violence. 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' (HM Government, 2018)

However, this definition lacks clarity. For example, The Children's Society (2019) found that frontline workers focused on tangible forms of 'exchange' rather than subtler forms where young people were enticed into relationships through a sense of belonging or protection. Consideration of exchange should be extended to include the prevention of something negative such as threats or actual violence to the young person or their family.

In a study of child criminal exploitation in Wales, Maxwell and Wallace (2021) found that inconsistencies in service responses were exacerbated by the challenges in identifying child criminal exploitation; there is rarely a single piece of evidence or concern that signifies that a young person is being exploited. Young people may be found with visible evidence of their criminal behaviour and the way child criminal exploitation manifests varies according to the local context, service responses, and actors (Harding, 2020).

In an English study, Harding (2020) described how a London-based group moved from a commuting model, commonly known as county lines (see [Academic Insights paper 2021/01](#) by Pitts), to the implementation of satellite hubs so they could retain control over additional geographical areas. In Wales, Maxwell and Wallace (2021) found three forms of child criminal exploitation:

- County Lines exploitation
- Blurred Lines exploitation
- Intra-familial exploitation.

Their interview findings with 56 professionals across statutory and third sector agencies revealed a tendency to associate child criminal exploitation with County Lines exploitation where young people were trafficked into Wales from England. Professionals seldom associated child criminal exploitation with young people affected by Blurred Lines, where young people were exploited and trafficked across Wales by local groups who mimic strategies adopted by county lines groups, or young people exploited by family members or other adults within the local community. Rather, Blurred Lines and exploitation from family members tended to be perceived as the young person's 'lifestyle choice' and, as such, they were deemed culpable for their actions.

Young people cannot consent to being forced into criminality or to be abused or trafficked (Home Office, 2023). Safeguarding them from child criminal exploitation requires both an understanding of how young people are affected and the extent to which community and service level factors protect them from exploitation and re-exploitation. Drawing largely on Maxwell's studies of child criminal exploitation over the last four years, this paper considers the barriers and facilitators to an effective approach.

2. Safeguarding young people

2.1 Risk factors

Any young person can be criminally exploited. Even when young people are loved and cared for in stable family homes, they may be vulnerable to exploitation in the community. Yet when young people are unknown to services or they are not stereotypically at risk, parents encounter challenges in obtaining support:

“If the kid isn’t from a single-parent or a deprived background, services simply don’t recognise the danger. People said things like ‘he’ll grow out of it’, ‘he’s just testing his boundaries’” (parent cited in Jay Review, 2024)

This creates a paradox as children less likely to come to the attention of services are those most at risk. So while males with an average of age of just under 16 are most commonly targeted, there has been an upsurge in the number of younger children (Jay Review, 2024), females (Children’s Commissioner, 2019) and university students (Cullen et al., 2020). These groups are less likely to attract professional surveillance.

Although any child can be criminally exploited, certain groups continue to be at an enhanced risk. This includes young people who have been subject to neglect or abuse, those with additional learning needs, those excluded from school, or those in care or who are care experienced (National Crime Agency, 2017; Staples and Staines, 2024). Young people from chaotic homes may also seek a sense of belonging from older peers or adults in their local communities. These family factors include young people living in homes with parental substance misuse, mental health issues, involvement in crime, or domestic abuse. Enhanced risk is also associated with transient vulnerabilities which occur at critical periods in a young person’s life where they may feel unsettled, unsure and underconfident. Examples include parental separation, the movement between different education establishments, or aging out of services (Maxwell and Wallace, 2021). The transition from primary to secondary school, secondary school to further education, or leaving the secure estate all denote periods when young people experience significant change. During these periods, young people are actively seeking new peer groups. Those who are quieter, struggle socially, or have reduced social capital may be more open to the attention of older peers or adults. In these circumstances, exploitation can go unnoticed as changes in the young person’s peer groups or behaviour is attributed to the transition or the age at which young people are targeted, and this may be deemed as normal teenage development (Maxwell and Wallace, 2021).

In relation to aging out of services, young people aged 18 and over experience a drastic reduction in service support as they move to adult services. Reduced professional oversight limits opportunities for young people to seek help or for the signs of exploitation to be noticed. This highlights a need for Transitional Safeguarding (see [Academic Insights paper 2022/03](#) by Holmes and Smith). Embedding Transitional Safeguarding into statutory services would address two main issues:

- (i) young people excluded from school at a young age remain cognitively immature; this highlights the need for a developmental approach to service provision so that young people from the age of 18 continue to receive an enhanced level of support (Maxwell et al., 2023)

- (ii) criminally exploited young people are unable to protect themselves from persistent abuse, the manipulative techniques used by the people exploiting them, and re-exploitation.

2.2 Identification

The manipulative techniques used to exploit young people ensure they are unaware of the exploiters' true motives:

“Once someone’s, you know, giving you certain things and telling you you’re good when you’ve been told you’re shit at school and you’re no good, it’s easy to build that sort of, yes, that feeling of being part of something and feeling important and respected by an adult” (parent cited in Maxwell and Wallace, 2021:29)

Young people report being drawn into what they perceived to be a relationship with someone they thought they could trust (Maxwell and Wallace, 2021). They may be taken out for food or days out to establish the relationship and the notion that the exploiter is looking out for the young person (Maxwell and Wallace, 2021). These types of exchange trick young people into thinking these individuals are their friends. Consequently, young people may not see the relationship as unhealthy, making the early signs of criminal exploitation challenging to identify (Maxwell et al., 2023).

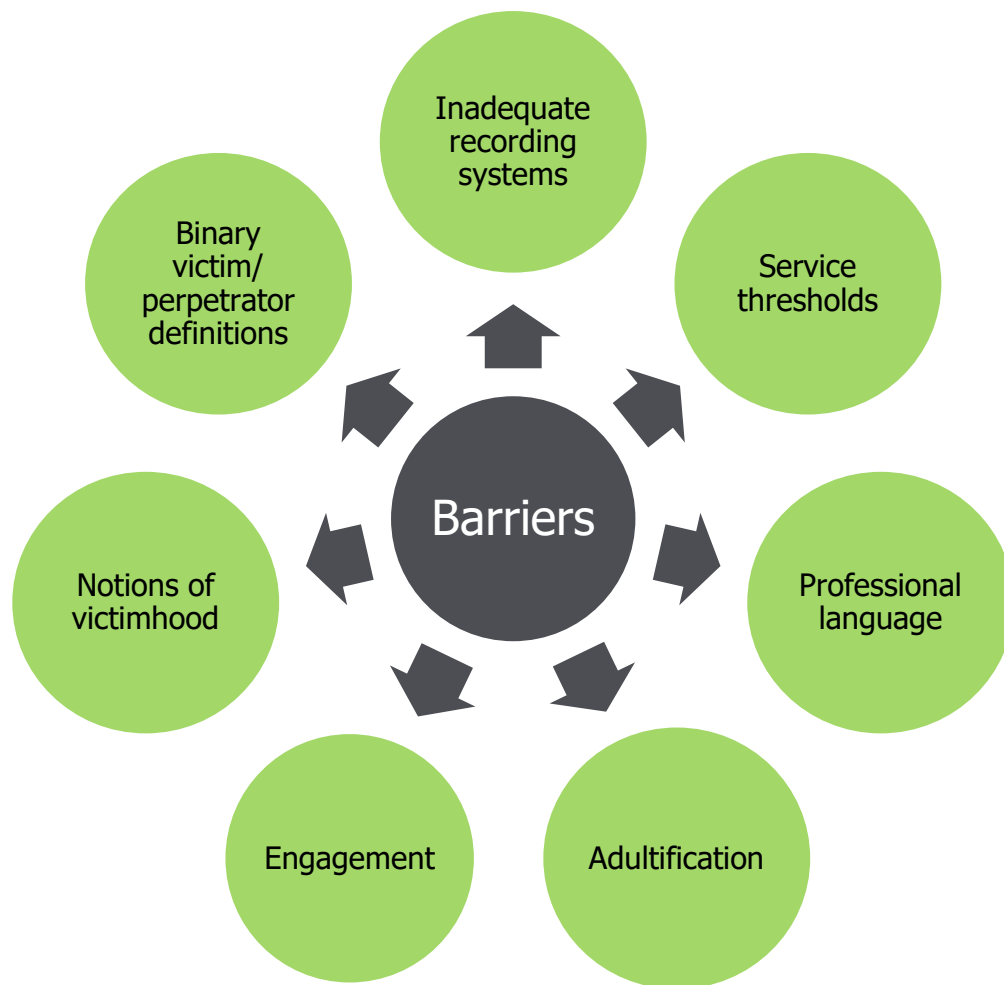
The methods used to establish the relationships are then used to coerce or force young people into embarking upon criminal behaviours. In Maxwell and Wallace’s (2021) study, young people spoke of how quickly these relationships became controlling. The most common form of control cited was debt bondage, where young people unwittingly fell into debt to the exploiter through three main routes:

- i. as part of the initial relationship building stage, they were given drugs, and as the relationship developed, it was suggested they should do something in return to repay this debt
- ii. young people were ‘mugged’ by the exploiter and found themselves responsible for replacing the lost money
- iii. when police confiscate drugs, young people must work off this debt.

Irrespective of how the debt occurred, high rates of tax were applied so that the young people were unable to repay the money they owed. This left them trapped within the exploitative relationship, leading to feelings of hopelessness and desperation as they were forced into a world where ‘victimisation, violence and competition for distinction is normal’ (Reid, 2023:176).

2.3 Service responses

Current service responses to child criminal exploitation are hindered by structural and systemic factors. This is partly because statutory services were not designed to address extrafamilial harm, and as a result, criminally exploited young people are more likely to be criminalised rather than protected (Jay Review, 2024). At the service level, there are seven main barriers to protecting criminally exploited young people:



Inadequate recording systems: the lack of visible indicators renders criminal exploitation difficult to identify. Young people may become known to services on the basis of unspecified concerns about their behaviour, but these behaviours often disappear when services are involved as exploiters step back from the young person so they can evade detection. With no ongoing concerns, no further action is taken by the service. In practice, this means the young person is returned to the people exploiting them (Maxwell and Wallace, 2021).

Service thresholds: where there are visible indicators of criminal exploitation, these signs may not meet service thresholds or be construed as a risk of harm. For example, parents stated that missing episodes were a key indicator of exploitation. However, professionals did not always record or respond to missing episodes, especially where a young person has multiple episodes of less than 24 hours or when the young people told professionals they were safe and staying with 'friends' (Cserző et al., unpublished). Parents also reported that plugging, where drugs are concealed in the gastro-intestinal tract, was not considered to be a form of abuse that warranted a safeguarding response:

“Part of criminal exploitation is sexual exploitation when they’re made to insert into their back passage or you get things like spooning where they actually physically take it out. It’s horrendous. But people lose sight of that kind of aspect ... we’ll call them drug dealers, they’re dealing. They’re not dealing. They’re being exploited.” (professional cited in Maxwell and Wallace, 2021:21)

Professional language: the above quote also highlights the third barrier, that of language use. The terminology used and the way in which professionals talk about young people can obscure their vulnerability and hold them accountable for their exploitation:

“[they] use language like ‘putting themselves at risk’ and like, ‘making choices’, and the ‘choices they make’ and ‘their behaviours’ and I feel like I’m the one that’s always saying, ‘yeah, but they’ve been exploited’... ‘They don’t have a choice in that, they’re doing that out of fear’, ... so continually hammering that home, please think about the language that you’re using and please think about the young people as well” (professional cited in Maxwell et al., 2023:21)

Adultification: research findings have shown that certain groups of young people are more likely to be perceived culpable for their actions. This includes Black young people, those in care and those who are reluctant to engage with services. Termed ‘adultification’, Davis and Marsh (2020) have raised awareness that Black young people are more likely to be perceived by professionals as more mature than their years and more culpable than their peers for their actions (see also [Academic Insights paper 2022/06](#) by Davis). Maxwell and Wallace (2021) extended this observation to include the adultification of children in care. This reiterates the increased risk to young people with reduced adult oversight, including those in children’s homes, foster homes and those who have been adopted (Whittaker et al., 2018).

Engagement: non-engagement with professionals can be perceived as unwillingness to seek help or a sign of guilt, and as such, the ‘perennial non-engagers’ (Menezes and Whyte, 2016) are more likely to be criminalised. Criminally exploited young people may be reluctant to engage with professionals due to a culture of professional distrust, negative experiences with professionals, or the young person may be frightened that they will be taken into local authority care, arrested or be seriously harmed by the people exploiting them for snitching. This means young people may accept responsibility for the crime to avoid a child protection response or to prevent themselves or their families from being harmed.

Notions of victimhood: the sixth barrier at the service level is based around stereotypical notions of victimhood. Criminally exploited young people may not perceive their actions as unlawful. This is because the individuals exploiting them often conceal or minimise the nature of the actions they are manipulated into doing. For example, young people may be asked to drop something off for a friend or they may be told they are helping drug addicts by giving them ‘food’ (Maxwell et al., 2022). Young people may also be told that it is a victimless crime:

“When they’re recruiting the young people, they’re minimising things, like, ‘All I want you to do is take this to there’, you know, they’re not saying I want you to go and tax this guy from this thousands of pounds worth of drugs with this knife are they, because no young person in their right mind would say ‘yes, I’ll sign up for that’” (Professional cited in Maxwell and Wallace, 2021:37)

Binary definitions of victim and perpetrator: these binary definitions can obfuscate professional responses to young people who may be both victim and perpetrator. For example, Marshall’s (2023) study of youth justice services in one English county found that professionals engaged in subjective assessments of the nature and level of exploitation before determining whether a young person was a victim of criminal exploitation. Marshall concluded that

professionals rely upon personal judgements of whether a young person has been 'exploited enough' to constitute victimhood.

2.4 Complex Safeguarding

As child criminal exploitation is a cross-cutting issue, agencies must work together to address this complex issue. For multi-agency working to be effective, there must be:

- a shared language
- understanding of each other's roles and responsibilities
- systems that enable collaborative working.

According to the Manchester Safeguarding Partnership, this requires the adoption of 'Complex Safeguarding' which is defined as:

'Criminal activity (often organised), or behaviour associated to criminality, involving vulnerable children/young people, where there is exploitation and/or a clear or implied safeguarding concern'.

Complex Safeguarding addresses risk from peers, partners, or other adults that occurs in community spaces or online through social media. It requires a shared mission to develop and target services' responses to extrafamilial harm, the ability to work with fluctuating levels of risk to the young person, and the ability to develop interventions and approaches that are nonlinear or not time limited.

Drawing on this approach and their research findings, Maxwell et al. (2022) co-produced the Complex Safeguarding Wales toolkit with young people, parents and professionals who had direct experience of child criminal exploitation. The toolkit is underpinned by the following principles:

Principles for a child protection approach

- Adoption of a Child First, safeguarding approach.
- Child-focused so that the young person's needs are identified and addressed.
- Delivered in the community to young people and their families.
- Aimed at prevention, early intervention, and diversion.
- Able to include parents as a resource rather than a risk, where safe to do so.

Adopting a strengths-based, child-centred, child rights approach is particularly important given that exploitation removes the young person's control over their own life. The manipulation and coercion they experience can undermine the positive relationships in their lives and make them distrustful of professionals. Therefore, young people may be unwilling to engage due to fear of being taken into care, of being arrested, or seen as a snitch with potentially violent consequences from the people exploiting them. This places the onus on professionals to work

with young people to establish trust and to create safe spaces for them to share their experiences. Professionals also need to stay with young people and understand that safely moving away from exploitative relationships may take time, especially where young people are losing their only friendship group.

In response to the risks posed in the community, many local authorities across the UK have adopted the Contextual Safeguarding framework for addressing extra-familial harm tailored to the local context. Contextual safeguarding aligns with youth justice practice (Firmin et al., 2023) as it addresses risks in community spaces, such as towns or other public open spaces. It also enables the consideration of local norms and youth culture and their impact on young people. This is facilitated by a child-centred assessment to ascertain the young person's unmet needs, key relationships in their lives, and the places they feel safe or at risk. Once these risks have been identified, the young person can be supported to prepare safety plans, such as safe routes to school or leisure activities.

One example of this approach is Action for Children's Serious Organised Crime Early Intervention Service. In their three-year evaluation of this service, Maxwell et al. (2023) highlighted the impact of providing young people with a tailored package of support designed to address their unmet needs which was delivered by specialised staff and aimed at facilitating their transition onto positive pathways. This included matching young people's interests with volunteering opportunities, helping them to access social activities, supporting healthy relationship development and the re-engagement with education and training, underpinned by increasing their feelings of self-worth and confidence. Moreover, rather than removing the risk from the young person, the service strengthened young people's protective factors and resilience to safeguard them within their local community. Young people were encouraged to consider their relationships and make their own decision to move away from exploitative relationships and were given the protection and support to do so.

In evidence given to the *All-Party Parliamentary Group for Child Criminal Exploitation and Knife Crime* (March 2023), Maxwell recommended the creation of a Child Criminal Exploitation Prevention Order akin to a Domestic Violence Prevention order which prevents perpetrators being in or near a victim's home for 28 days. This would give professionals the time to develop trust with young people and their families and the time to deliver a specialised package of support.

3. Conclusion

Child criminal exploitation can affect any young person regardless of family background. However, certain groups of young people are at a heightened risk, including those with enduring vulnerabilities such as instability in the home environment, additional learning needs, and those in care. Young people are also more susceptible to exploitation at critical periods in their lives, heightening the likelihood of becoming associated with negative peer groups. In some cases, young people begin drug dealing or other forms of criminality in their desire to sustain these friendships. However, these friendships quickly become controlling with techniques such as debt bondage used to maintain continued compliance.

Current service responses can hinder child protection as services were designed to address harm perpetrated by family members rather than the risks posed to people in the wider community or online. The nature of criminal exploitation hinders identification as it can be perpetrated by peers, adults or strangers either in person or online. There is no single indicator that a young person is being criminally exploited. Rather, identification relies upon the exercising of professional curiosity, looking beyond the visible evidence, and questioning why a young person is behaving in concerning ways. This also requires looking beyond their criminality. The Ministry of Justice (2019) guidance states that when young people have been criminally exploited, they should be seen as 'exploited victims and not perpetrators'. This means services must safeguard young people from criminal exploitation and determine 'how and why' they became criminally exploited so they can be diverted and protected from re-exploitation. Youth justice services are ideally placed to do this.

Youth justice professionals have the expertise in working with adolescents who have been involved in criminal behaviours and supporting them away from future criminality (Maxwell et al., 2023). To tackle criminal exploitation, they need access to specialised training and a range of safeguarding tools, such as peer and context mapping, so they can identify unhealthy relationships and places where the young person is at an increased risk of continued or re-exploitation:

"I think he's still got concerns of I think maybe bumping into any of these people again and being sucked back in, because he doesn't want to go places ... It's like he just doesn't want to be seen in case someone approaches him, I'm not sure if it's because of fear or he doesn't want to be looking weak and saying, no, I'm not interested, I've moved on" (parent cited in Maxwell and Wallace, 2021:47)

The prevention of re-exploitation includes ensuring that the young person's unmet needs are addressed. This encompasses addressing the wider impacts of poverty, building social capital, and accessing education, training or employment, to help ensure they are not 'sucked back in' with the promise of easy money.

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