‘Innovation and the Application of Knowledge for More Effective Policing’

N8 Policing Research Partnership

CHILD CRIMINAL EXPLOITATION: BEYOND COUNTY LINES

Child criminal exploitation (CCE) is a major cross-cutting issue for police and partner agencies (HM Government 2016). Frequently associated with CCE is the ‘county lines’ model of illicit drug supply whereby children and young people are transported by organised crime groups from their home area to a different location, usually a market or coastal town, in order to supply drugs (Robinson et al. 2019). Other issues are interrelated with CCE, including increased gang involvement and activity and an escalation in serious youth violence (Densley et al. 2020). Consequently, CCE and particularly county lines has attracted significant attention from the government, academia and the media (HM Government 2018; Moyle 2019; Marano 2020). A range of responses to CCE have emerged at a national and local level. This report highlights the key findings from a systematic mapping review of formal documentation relating to CCE, including practice guidelines, strategy documents and inspection reports, as well as seven interviews with key stakeholders working to mitigate CCE in Leeds to better understand what works, and what doesn’t, in responding to the challenges presented by CCE for police and partner agencies.

KEY FINDINGS:

- CCE in Leeds encompasses a diverse range of exploitative activities, including money laundering, burglary and high value shop theft in addition to county lines type of offending. Money laundering can facilitate recruitment into further offending through processes of debt enslavement.
- Vulnerability to CCE is dynamic and can affect any young person in the right conditions. There are however identifiable factors that can increase a young person’s vulnerability to CCE. Familial risk factors including poverty, neglect, drug use and a history of criminality play a role in increasing vulnerability, though exclusion from school emerged as perhaps a key determinant of vulnerability to CCE.
- Technology has expanded the reach of CCE to children that would not ordinarily be affected. Accordingly, the effective utilisation of technology and social media may be an effective way to disseminate support and advice to young people regarding CCE.
- Once a situation of CCE develops, it does not always just affect the child. Parents and siblings can also be vulnerable to perceived and real threats, as well as financial and housing difficulties.
- Intelligence-led information sharing and partnership working between police and other agencies and organisations are vital in providing an effective response to CCE.
- There is significant demand for specialist CCE services in Leeds. The appropriate resourcing of police and agencies tasked with responding to CCE presented major concerns given pressures resulting from a decade of austerity and the impacts of Covid-19.
- The utilisation of third sector knowledge and expertise to reach vulnerable young people who would not normally engage with the police or other statutory agencies is an important component of CCE mitigation, through intimate understanding of local communities and intelligence gathering.

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INTRODUCTION:

CCE by organised criminal groups has emerged as focus for politicians, police and partner agencies over the last five years (Robinson et al. 2019). Perhaps the most widely recognised manifestation of CCE is known as 'county lines', whereby children are exploited to sell illicit drugs, often in localities far away from home (Spicer 2019). Given the serious harms associated with county lines offending, it is unsurprising that the media has covered more sensational aspects of CCE. Academic interest has begun to develop, with several studies appearing in recent years (e.g. Windle and Briggs 2015; Moyle 2019; Holligan et al. 2020). In addition, every police force in England reported the presence of county lines offending (NCA 2018). Consequently, varying models of responding to CCE have been implemented across the UK by a range of national and local organisations. This research was developed in partnership with Safer Leeds to map and synthesise the proliferation of information and practice guidelines to identify key learnings and innovations that could strengthen the city's response to CCE. The research also explored the local Leeds context through interviews with practitioners identify key lessons and innovations.

MAIN FINDINGS:

Diversity of CCE

The recent attention afforded to CCE has focused almost exclusively on county lines (Coomber & Moyle 2018; Windle et al. 2020). This was similarly the case with the systematic mapping review; almost every document analysed equated CCE with county lines. Importantly, however, the interview data found that in the Leeds context of CCE is more diversified, encompassing a range of exploitative activities in addition to county lines. A form of money laundering, known as 'squaring', appeared to present a significant local challenge. Squaring is the practice of depositing illegally obtained money into a child's bank account with the intention of laundering it in exchange for a small sum as a 'gift'. Squaring also functioned as (i) a mechanism of grooming a child for further criminal acts and (ii) to create the perception of debt bondage, where a child becomes coerced into criminality through an imaginary debt. In addition, different types of exploitation were identified by interviewees, including some groups coercing younger children into carrying out burglary in the recognition that legal consequences for children are less severe than for adults. Further, some groups of children have been targeted to carry out high value shop theft in areas far from home through the coercion of adults, often being found hundreds of miles from Leeds with no recognisable means of travelling such a distance.

Vulnerability

The protection of vulnerable children from CCE is a top priority for the National Crime Agency (2020). This research indicates that CCE could affect any child in the right circumstances, though several risk factors appear influential for a child's risk of criminal exploitation. The perception of making 'easy money' and boosting social status acted as 'pull' factors towards exploitation. 'Push' factors, such as a history of criminality, drug use and mental illness, as well as poverty, neglect and violence in the home were also apparent. However, being excluded from school emerged as potentially the key risk factor for a young person to become affected by exploitation and accelerate the seriousness of CCE. The project also found a dichotomy between vulnerability and criminality. Children affected by CCE may not see themselves as victims, instead seeing an exploitative relationship as beneficial. Police were found to on occasion treat victims of CCE as criminal, potentially worsening the situation.

Families of victims of CCE were also found to be vulnerable, with a range of impacts on parents and siblings. These impacts include increased financial pressures through paying off debts, feeling (and being) threatened as well as the loss of supportive friendships. The harms for parents and siblings may be under-recognised, with the focus of police and partner agencies understandably falling on the affected child. This finding points to a need to include families and siblings when considering supportive and preventative measures.

Partnerships and resourcing

Effective partnership working between police and partner agencies strongly emerged as the preferred way of working to combat CCE. Moreover, the importance of positive relationships with the third sector was a key theme in the data. Grassroots organisations and charities were able to pick up on issues where the police and statutory sector would otherwise be slow. The third sector also have intimate, hyper-local community knowledge and the capability to engage with young people who would be reticent to engage with police. Hence, the continued funding and engagement of grassroots partnerships has an important ongoing role to play in responding to CCE. Beyond partnership working with organisations in the youth work and community development space, the data suggests a continued need for police and partner agencies to proactively engage with private sector organisations relevant to CCE, such as hotels and taxi operators, with a view to raising awareness of and developing responses to CCE. In terms of partnership arrangements and information sharing amongst police and other statutory agencies, current arrangements were felt to be working well. There was however an indication that continued review of existing arrangements, including the Front Door model may be beneficial in order to ensure that the balance of services and funding are at optimal levels and that the arrangement is operating at its full potential. CCE-specific support services were found to be in high demand, though questions were raised of how police and other agencies would be able to adequately resource ongoing specific service provision following a decade of austerity and expected future financial challenges resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic. As well as specific services to support children affected directly by CCE, training and development of police and partner agency staff also presented a challenge with a relatively new and rapidly transforming form of offending.

CONCLUSION:

The diversity of CCE activities in Leeds points to a need for specialised responses, in particular around money laundering through 'squaring'. The focus on county lines offending found through the systematic mapping review may have drawn attention away from other forms of exploitation or forced adaptations to the county lines model. Technology has widened the reach of CCE but can also be part of the solution in the form of an effective digital media strategy to allow the dissemination of education and safety messages quickly and cheaply. The importance of grassroots, volunteer and third sector organisations in support the statutory sector emerged as a major finding. The engagement with and understanding of the communities these organisations sit in is a critical strength in recognising and responding to CCE. The space they occupy as a minimally authoritarian and trustworthy community presence but with links to formal systems of support appears to provide a critical conduit for assisting vulnerable children and young people. Related to this, timely information sharing processes, a streamlining of multi-agency meetings and mechanisms to ensure all relevant agencies participate in the care and support planning for CCE-affected children emerged as important for potential practice improvement.

The demand for specialist CCE support services also arose as a major issue. Questions of how to continue to resource services of this nature following the Covid-19 pandemic will become more pressing. Given these points, there is something of a discrepancy between national guidance and what is happening in local communities in terms of CCE. Nevertheless, the attention that arose through county lines has been accompanied by additional funding and as such, there may be an enhanced ability to explore continued partnership working innovations that tackle associated elements of CCE.

METHODOLOGY:

This research project explored what is effective in mitigating CCE as well as drew out key lessons that can be applied in the local context to improve local policing and safeguarding responses. In order to achieve these aims, two complementary qualitative research approaches were taken. First, a systematic mapping review of national and local practice guidelines, scoping reports, inspections, practice reviews and strategies brought together consensus areas of best practice and highlighted innovative approaches to CCE mitigation. Second, seven interviews were conducted with key professionals working to combat CCE in Leeds, including representatives from West Yorkshire Police, Safer Leeds, the NHS and Children's Services. The research was conducted within the University of Leeds' ethical guidelines and was completed in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the researcher's Msc Criminal Justice and Criminology degree. It was supported by a bursary from the N8 PRP. While the study drew on a significant repository of sources, with more time and resources it could have benefited from a wider range of interview participants to elicit a wider range of data from which to draw conclusions.

IMPLICATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH:

Further research on the diversity of CCE methods is required. Attention has understandably focused on county lines up to this stage, but it there is a need to deepen understanding of other forms of CCE, such as the utilisation of children for money laundering purposes. It was also evident that a major accelerator of involvement in CCE is exclusion from school. Further exploration of how best to support schools to retain vulnerable students is a clear avenue for further research. Given the strong evidence from this project that partnership working appears to be the most effective way to respond CCE, research into how the police and statutory agencies can continue to improve partnerships with a greater range of organisations (such as hotel operators or technology companies) through development and integration of contextual safeguarding principles has significant promise as a future direction of study. In addition, how to best utilise the benefits that grass roots organisations and NGO's can provide also appears an important avenue for research, especially given that CCE is a somewhat hidden phenomenon. There is also scope for further research into the impacts Covid-19 on CCE. While it has been widely expected that the pandemic will have worsened some children's vulnerability to CCE (see for example Children's Commissioner 2020), there were some indications from data in this project that the reverse has in fact been happening, with some vulnerable children reporting improved relationships with caregivers and reductions in approaches from would-be exploiters.

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