

Press release: Criminal exploitation and 'county lines': learn from past mistakes, report finds

Summary:

- lessons must be learned from past sexual exploitation cases
- all children, not just the most vulnerable, are at risk of criminal exploitation
- agencies should not underestimate the risk of criminal exploitation in their areas
- children should be seen as victims, not perpetrators
- awareness-raising is crucial in preventing criminal exploitation

Local agencies must learn lessons from past sexual exploitation cases if they are to effectively respond to 'county lines' drug running and other forms of child criminal exploitation, [a new report finds](#).

The thematic report, from inspectorates Ofsted, HMI Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS), the Care Quality Commission (CQC) and HMI Probation, also calls on agencies not to underestimate the risk of child criminal exploitation in their areas.

[Read 'Protecting children from criminal exploitation, human trafficking and modern slavery'](#) – this is an addendum to the 2016 report 'Time to listen'.

The in-depth inspections scrutinised practice in children's social care, education, health services, the police, youth offending services and probation services across 3 local authority areas.

Today's report illustrates the nationwide scale of criminal exploitation, with all areas – urban, rural, affluent as well as deprived – affected. Child victims come from a wide range of backgrounds. And while the most vulnerable are obvious targets for gangs, there are examples of private school children being groomed too.

Much has been done by many local partnerships across the country to deal with child sexual exploitation in their areas, the report recognises. But this success must be built upon and shared so that other forms of exploitation, like county lines drug running, can be dealt with effectively.

Inspectors found that some partners do not have a grip on the scale of criminal exploitation in their area. Poor intelligence-sharing sometimes hampers wider recognition and understanding of criminal exploitation, and, in turn, the ability to effectively respond to children. This includes missing the risks to some children, or identifying them too late.

The report calls on all agencies to get the basics right. Making sure that there are clear systems in place at the 'front door' of services that first come into contact with children is essential, so that children at risk are identified and receive a prompt and appropriate response.

Ofsted's Chief Inspector, Amanda Spielman, will also raise her concerns about the scale of criminal exploitation at the [National Children and Adults Services conference](#) in Manchester today.

Ms Spielman is expected to say:

Local partners must be quick to learn and quick to act. But not all agencies fully understand the scale of the problem in their area. And regional and national networks of exploitation of children are even less well understood.

It is also a concern that some agencies are still not looking past the behaviour of grooming victims to the root cause. If we have learnt anything from past exploitation cases, it should be to 'see the child, not the problem'.

The inspectorates call for a 'culture shift', so that front line staff both recognise the signs of criminal exploitation, and see children as victims despite their apparent offending behaviour.

Better training for all agencies, but especially the police, is vital, the report argues. In the areas inspected, police had made some progress in recognising the context of criminal exploitation when dealing with children in possession of drugs. However, all police forces admitted that it was still possible that children could be prosecuted, despite clear evidence that they were being exploited.

The report calls for a whole system approach to address the perpetrators, to protect and support victims, as well as preventing exploitation by raising awareness in the community and disrupting criminal activity. In one of the areas visited, inspectors saw examples of innovative work to disrupt criminal exploitation from some agencies.

Agencies and professionals must work together with parents and children to alert them to the signs of grooming, exploitation and county lines. The report shows that children are often being groomed or tricked into working before they recognise the dangers, and often before parents or professionals realise what is happening. Inspectors saw clear efforts to raise awareness in the local community in the areas visited.

Schools and colleges are also essential partners in the whole-system approach. Some schools are working hard to understand, reduce and prevent the risks of county lines. However, this awareness needs to be developed and supported across the country.

Yvette Stanley, Ofsted's National Director for Social Care said:

Tackling child criminal exploitation, including county lines, is a big challenge for agencies and professionals nationally and locally. It can be done, but agencies must make sure that they have the building blocks in place to work quickly and effectively.

Children who are being exploited cannot wait for agencies that are lagging behind or failing to recognise this issue. In responding to this dangerous situation, we must not repeat the mistakes of the past, where some partners were too slow to recognise the risk of child sexual exploitation in their areas, or somehow felt that it 'doesn't happen here'.

Wendy Williams, Her Majesty's Inspector of Constabulary, said:

Criminally exploited children can only get the help they need when they've been recognised as a victim. We've found that when frontline officers handle cases involving children suspected of a criminal offence, they can be too quick to accept what they see at face value. Instead of seeing a vulnerable child in desperate need, they can see a criminal in the making. When officers ask the right questions – is this child being exploited? Are they at risk? – they can take the right steps to keep children safe and bring the real perpetrators to justice.

Professor Ursula Gallagher, Deputy Chief Inspector at the Care Quality Commission and lead for children's health and safeguarding, said:

Healthcare professionals and anyone working with children have a responsibility to look for the signs of exploitation, to use their curiosity and compassion, and not judge a child for their behaviour or the situation they are in.

This is why we work with other regulators to test how well individual parts of a system are working together to protect children and young people and to make clear what we expect of a high-performing area.

But it doesn't stop there. Services and systems as a whole need to consider how they share what they know with people working beyond their own locality, because people exploiting children do not limit their activity by geographical boundaries, and important safeguarding information must be able to follow children in order to protect them.

Dame Glenys Stacey, HM Chief Inspector of Probation, said:

We welcome this important report. The inspection shows that

children of all backgrounds can be forced into criminal and sexual exploitation. What is also clear is that agencies and professionals need to do more to recognise the extent of the problem and intervene early. Youth offending teams are well placed to spot the signs of exploitation and we were pleased to see some good work recognised in this report. However it is clear that more needs to be done to make sure that all agencies are working together to protect children.

The inspectorates' findings are published today [14 November 2018] as an [addendum to the 2016 report: 'Time to listen – a joined up response to child sexual exploitation and missing children'](#).