



Covid-19, Vulnerability and the Safeguarding of Criminally Exploited Children

Third research briefing, June 2021¹

This is the third briefing from [research investigating the impacts of Covid-19 on child criminal exploitation and County Lines](#). Findings indicate that restrictions introduced in response to the pandemic have hindered the ability of youth workers to safeguard vulnerable young people and increased difficulties in identifying and responding to victims of County Lines exploitation.

Key Findings

As the UK transitions out of lockdown and Covid-19 restrictions are lifted, ongoing concerns include:

- **Reduced identification of exploitation** – Diminished face-to-face contact between youth workers and children continues to challenge professionals' ability to identify signs of exploitation. While remote engagement has remained high, there is concern that many children remain in dangerous and exploitative situations both within and away from their homes.
- **Online exploitation and grooming** – As young people continue to spend more time online and on social media platforms, there is an increased risk of online grooming for both criminal and sexual exploitation.
- **Vulnerability** – The overall level of County Lines activity was mostly unchanged during the pandemic, and the widespread exploitation of children persisted. Mental health has deteriorated among already vulnerable children and there are indications that substance misuse and self-harm are on the rise.

Why is this important?

Lockdown restrictions introduced in response to Covid-19 have caused concern among child-protection professionals regarding the increased exploitation risk posed to young people. These restrictions have changed working patterns, inhibited the usual services professionals are able to provide, and limited opportunities for face-to-face safeguarding and risk assessment. The ongoing effects of the pandemic continue to fuel concerns over exposure to online harms and grooming while young people are confined to their homes. When reflecting on the impact to children and young people who they work with, professionals expressed frustration, and

in some cases helplessness and sorrow. Ongoing lockdown restrictions have meant that, with the exception of some high-risk young people, their interaction moved to remote methods, including via telephone, WhatsApp, and teleconferencing software.

Professionals that once relied upon their ability to visually observe behaviour changes, body language and physical appearance, in order to identify signs of exploitation, reported missed opportunities. Findings from this study indicate that while remote engagement was maintained with most young people, breaches of statutory orders (such as youth offending orders) were reduced, causing concern that remote methods were less effective at monitoring behaviour. Practitioners were keen to stress that a reduction in recorded breaches did not necessarily mean that criminality or exploitation weren't taking place: children could be complying with both their statutory orders and the orders of their perpetrators.

Professionals also indicated that Covid-19 restrictions resulted in some benefits. Home-working afforded greater flexibility and increased some aspects of engagement by making meetings, in principle, more accessible to more people. Some areas also reported improvements to partnership work as organisations were more able to engage remotely, resulting in greater intelligence sharing.

As the UK gradually transitions out of lockdown and restrictions continue to ease, children will be anticipating a return to their pre-pandemic lives. It is paramount that organisations remain vigilant to the signs of vulnerability, exploitation and harm and maintain a professional curiosity when faced with challenging behaviour.

Recommendations

1. **Face-to-face meetings with young people should resume** as soon as possible.
2. **Independent return home interviews should be completed in person** within 48 hours, providing opportunity for people to be listened to, in order to understand why they went missing, and what harm they experienced.
3. **Statutory services should incorporate diversionary schemes** to reduce court backlogs and keep young people out of the criminal justice system.
4. All **A&E departments in the UK should have youth workers in place to offer support to children and young people** attending hospital with violence related injuries.
5. **Criminal exploitation and County Lines training should be made a national requirement** for those working with children, young people and vulnerable adults.

¹ This report was prepared by Dr Grace Robinson, Dr Ben Brewster, Vicky Brotherton, Prof. Sir Bernard Silverman from the University of Nottingham's Rights Lab, and Prof. Dave Walsh from the De Montfort

Research overview

Previous briefings published as part of this research project considered [the impact of Covid-19 on County Lines](#) during March to October 2020. The focus of this briefing is on identifying trends that professionals have witnessed more recently, and as a result of longer-term lockdown measures. Thirteen interviews were undertaken with practitioners working in care and safeguarding roles in both statutory and non-statutory organisations, and a security manager of a leading car rental company. These were supplemented by 29 interviews with practitioners from law enforcement, local authorities and NGO's which were conducted during the first two quarters of the project. Participants were asked to reflect on their personal experiences of working during the pandemic, its effect on their ability to safeguard young people criminally exploited through County Lines, and wider impacts they observed related to the County Lines model.

County Lines activity

It was consistently reported that Covid-19 had little impact on the supply of, or demand for, class A drugs (heroin and crack cocaine). There was no apparent reduction in the exploitation of vulnerable populations for participation in County Lines. While our earlier findings reported adaptations to the supply and distribution of drugs, our most recent interviews suggested no changes. However, one community worker described a notable shift in County Lines actors and their motives for becoming involved:

“Adults are more willing to get involved in drug dealing because they're not getting enough furlough money or any furlough money, and the bills still have to be paid.”

The extent to which adults are becoming involved in County Lines is unknown. However, as this participant indicated, the economic impact of lockdown may have placed some families into poverty and insecure situations and tempted them into illicit activity.

Transport

In our second [Policy Briefing](#) it was reported by law enforcement that there had been some movement away from trains - to transport drugs and children - towards the use of the roads, particularly through private hire and rental vehicles. A Security and Audit Manager of a leading rental company confirmed that hire vehicles had become a favoured mode of transport for organised crime groups over the course of the pandemic. He said:

“We (car rental company) migrated to what we call a flexi-agreement, a 28-day rolling rental, you do it all online. From an OCGs perspective, that's great, because it means they're not having to expose themselves by sending people into a branch. What we then also started to clock was ID theft, ID fraud.”

This participant reported an increase in individuals selling their identities online, mainly through social media platforms such as Snapchat and Facebook for between £500 and £4,500. Similar to the traditional County Lines model, those less likely to raise the suspicion of the authorities (i.e. 'clean

skins'²) were deemed more desirable to the network and were offered more money. Once in receipt of the relevant documentation, organised crime groups reportedly began to take out loans, credit cards and car finance agreements in the victim's name, liquidating the assets and using the money for illicit activity. The difficulty in identifying the perpetrators of ID fraud has become a huge issue for law enforcement, while also having serious and long-term consequences for victims.

Mental health and hospital admissions³

The increased movement of drugs on the roads contributed to more young people being exploited through car theft; as well as an increase in the number of injuries treated in A&E as a result of road traffic accidents, police car chases and vehicles being used as weapons by perpetrators.

“We have seen a dramatic change in young people being injured in police chases, where cars have then been stopped or detained. We would believe that is because young people are not using public transport routes”. (A&E Youth Worker)

Professionals also described an increase in the incidence of violence, as well as shifts in the types of injuries and their severity. One participant reported an increase in the number of young males (aged 21 and under) attending A&E in the south of the country who had been the victim of rape by heterosexual males in a gang context. One youth worker remarked:

“Fingernails pulled off, hair pulled out, even the stabbings... whereas [before Covid-19] you may have seen one or two injuries on a young person, [now] they will be repeatedly stabbed. So we're talking five, six times is kind of an average amount of stab wounds”.

Participants also observed an increase in self-harm and suicide attempts among children and young people admitted into hospital. While a general increase was reported across all genders, one youth worker specifically noted seeing rising cases of young males aged 17 to 19.

“We've continued to see incredibly high levels of suicide attempts. What has increased with that is the reason for those suicide attempts being online exploitation and males and females being asked to send explicit photos”.

This, it was asserted, had become more common in some County Lines, where the harbouring of indecent images was being used by the network as part of their coercive repertoire to exert control over young people.

As well as online grooming and harm, perpetration-induced trauma⁴ and the feeling of being trapped in their exploitation were increasingly reported by young people in A&E as a reason for their deteriorating mental health. Another participant also identified suicide attempts linked with the occurrence of sexual violence within a gang context:

“One person who I met in A&E, he had been quite heavily involved in County Lines and he was in the hospital that night for trying to drink a litre of bleach. He said: 'I just wanted to get out of it because this particular day, they was gang raping someone' [...] When he refused to get involved they beat him

² The term 'clean skin' refers to those without criminal records or, in this case, those with full clean driving licenses who are less likely to arouse the suspicion of the authorities.

³ These findings are drawn from participants working in A&E departments in the South of England. Caution must be taken in generalising these findings to the rest of the country.

⁴ Patricia Kerig, Shannon Chaplo and Diana Bennett, "Harm as Harm": Gang Membership, Perpetration Trauma, and Posttraumatic Stress Symptoms Among Youth in the Juvenile System", *Criminal Justice and Behavior* 43(5), October 5, 2015

up and now they was after him because he wouldn't get involved in that gang rape”.

Due to visiting restrictions in hospitals during the pandemic, family and friends were unable to attend A&E wards. Youth workers reported in some circumstances that this privacy contributed to some children disclosing the circumstances of their injuries and experiences of exploitation, as well as highlighting when they were in dangerous situations. One youth worker said:

“Hospitals create such a safe environment that isn't connected to the real world. Particularly in Covid times where family and friends can't come in, they are very safe, which creates that environment of 'actually I can talk safely'.”

While it would obviously be inappropriate to place blanket restrictions on allowing families and friends to accompany and visit patients in A&E once pandemic restrictions are lifted, this is something that should be borne in mind when setting future policy and practice guidance.

Females

Males still represent the majority of A&E admissions in relation to violence, however it was reported that injuries sustained by female victims in relation to County Lines activity were becoming more severe and sexual in nature. In addition, one youth worker referred to the use of 'gift girls', describing the sexual exploitation of females by County Lines actors where victims are sexually exploited and passed around the wider network as a reward.

Online grooming featured consistently among those we spoke to, particularly involving females who were being coerced into taking and sharing explicit images of themselves. While it was unclear whether this was linked to sexual or criminal exploitation, rising cases of self-harm in young females were attributed to this form of online activity.

One youth worker observed the existence of 'pop-up brothels' that were operated by organised crime groups, having not seen them prior to Covid-19. The victims, he said, were usually young British girls.

Substance misuse

There were differing reported effects of Covid-19 on drug use. On the one hand, substance misuse workers suggested that, for many young people, the risk of substance abuse had increased. Lockdown provided enhanced opportunity for substance use where a lack of structure and boredom provided the perfect environment for increased dependence on drugs and for them to be used as a negative coping strategy.

However, some young people trying to address their substance use were able to use lockdown restrictions to their advantage and sever ties with negative peer groups. One youth worker said:

“I had a particular young person, he was ready to make changes, and he took lockdown as an opportunity to change his routine.” (Substance Misuse Worker)

Missing children

There was a reported reduction in cases of missing people. Adults reported missing tended to be identified as high-risk

and of extreme concern due to pre-existing mental health issues, suicidal tendencies and self-harm. However, of the children reported missing, a larger percentage (than before Covid-19) were categorised as low-risk, and it was asserted that many of these cases comprised of looked after children. Indeed, one Missing Persons Lead reported that, within these settings, scaremongering tactics were being used by staff to deter young people from leaving the premises. When young people came home late (or did not come home at all), reduced staffing numbers meant that they were much more likely to call the police rather than look for the child themselves. This suggests that, in most cases, the child was more likely to be breaching Covid-19 rules than genuinely missing from home.

Because of the reliance on telephone contact, those working with missing children reported a reduction in the success of return home interviews:

“They're still offering telephone return interviews. It's difficult to build the relationships up with young people, especially if young people aren't familiar with you.” (Missing People Lead)

Engagement and justice

Practitioners in statutory services spoke of having quiet caseloads due to increasing court delays⁵ and the subsequent lack of court orders in place to be able to work with those who had offended. The concern was that young people were being released under investigation for long periods and were still potentially being criminally exploited and placed in dangerous situations. Indeed, many youth workers reported 'losing' children with whom they had previously built rapport to the influence of perpetrators who were able to replace the intervention, and fulfil unmet needs, with illicit activity. One Youth Offending Team (YOT) worker said:

“Enforcement in our team is at an all-time low. Young people can answer the phone from anywhere. I could have an appointment with somebody but they may not be in the area when I speak to them on the phone. If County Lines is still going ahead, then it's more hidden.”

The frustrations surrounding telephone meetings were echoed across participants. These meetings were reported to be shorter and more fractured and provided young people with the ability to give excuses for having to end the meeting. Practitioners emphasised the benefits of being able to see children in person pre-Covid-19, noting the importance of interpreting non-verbal cues, observing the young person's appearance, body language and demeanour. One YOT Worker said:

“A lot of the way we work with young people is about interpreting the silence. When they happen on the phone you're more eager to fill them, rather than to observe what the young person's face is like, if they're looking down, if they look worried or concerned...If somebody comes into YOT and we suspect that they're being exploited, and they've got a new coat on, or a new pair of trainers or even a new phone. Over the phone, how do I know?”

In the case of high-risk young people, where meetings were conducted face-to-face in the open, it was reported that these children were less comfortable in making disclosures and were concerned over their safety when in open spaces.

⁵Haroon Siddique, "Crown court backlog has reached 'crisis levels', report warns", The Guardian, March 30, 2021

<https://www.theguardian.com/law/2021/mar/30/crown-court-backlog-has-reached-crisis-levels-report-warns>

Prior to Covid-19, meeting rooms, offices and cars had provided many young people with environments where they could trust that they were safe for the duration of their meeting. When meetings were held at the young person's home, children – and sometimes families – were using Covid-19 as an excuse to refuse access to youth workers.

Examples of good practice

One participant discussed the introduction of diversionary schemes that were being rolled out across the country. For example in Merseyside, a scheme provided young people who had been involved in low-level offending with the opportunity to participate in their own safety planning. These young people were also offered support with drugs and alcohol, understanding the law, and harm reduction. In a similar scheme in Kent⁶, it was reported that “83.3% of young people did not re-offend having completed the programme (in the 5 to 12 months that followed)”⁷. While these schemes existed prior to the onset of Covid-19, lockdown restrictions have exacerbated strains on the criminal justice system and urged the need for radical interventions that support young people while in turn alleviating these pressures.

It was clear through our interviews with those working in A&E departments that the hospital environment can present as a safe space and provide ‘reachable moments’ in a child's life, where they feel comfortable to disclose the circumstances of their injuries and exploitation. These youth workers reported supporting young people off the ambulance, at their bedside, during times of resuscitation and through the safety planning of their discharge. They discussed being able to provide a ‘safety net’ in which they could support children emotionally as well as work with partner agencies to physically protect them.

Ongoing concerns as we exit lockdown

As restrictions continue to ease, practitioners echoed concerns over the ability of young people to settle back into a normal educational routine after having so much time away from the school environment.

With delays in the court system and cases awaiting trial dates, practitioners in statutory settings reported concerns over rising caseloads in the future and their ability to cope under shrinking local authority budgets and staffing numbers.

Safeguarding professionals shared fears over the pressures on mental health services and the impact on young people trying to access help as cases of deteriorating mental health continue to proliferate.

Some youth workers expressed fears that the UK National Referral Mechanism (NRM) was being perceived by some young people and their perpetrators as a form of witness protection, leading those with positive Conclusive Grounds decisions (which ‘conclusively’ establishes the person as a victim of modern slavery) to be labelled as ‘snitches’ and ‘grasses’ within their communities – putting them at risk of violence and abuse.

Despite some benefits of lockdown restrictions and the examples of good practice outlined in this report, Covid-19 has caused considerable harm to the capabilities of local authorities, NGO's and criminal justice services. While we have detailed some of the short-term concerns raised by practitioners as we transition out of lockdown, there are significant long-term anxieties across the sector. With increased vulnerability, the potential for large-scale and deteriorating cases of mental health issues, rising cases of online harms and substance misuse, and increasing reliance on technology enabling the proliferation of organised crime, it is essential that organisations encourage a professional curiosity throughout their workforce to identify and respond to the signs of exploitation.

⁶ Kent Police, “Kent youth drug intervention scheme / Medway drug and intervention and support programme policy (O34), <https://www.kent.police.uk/foi-ai/kent-police/Policy/operational-partnerships/kent-youth-drug-intervention-scheme--medway-drug-and-intervention-and-support-programme-policy-o34/>

⁷ Jen Rushworth-Claeys, “We need to divert more young people from the criminal justice system”, We Are With You, April 29, 2021 <https://medium.com/we-are-with-you/we-need-to-divert-more-young-people-from-the-criminal-justice-system-78909c5410c8>