



Children's MARS Guidance

Child Criminal Exploitation Vulnerabilities and Risk Indicators Guide

August 2023

Introduction

This guide includes information from the [County Lines Violence, Exploitation and Drug Supply 2017 National Crime Agency report](#)

This guide sets out who is vulnerable to child criminal exploitation (CCE), vulnerabilities as examples of the types of things children can experience that might make them more susceptible to CCE and potential indicators of risk as children rarely self-report CCE so it is important that practitioners are aware of these.

This document will not necessarily be completed in a standalone format to be included on a child's case file. It will be used as guidance to consider and recognise/identify children who are vulnerable to, at risk of, or who are already being criminally exploited as part of the risk analysis and information considered and gathered for an assessment.

This document should inform decision making on the next steps to be taken e.g. Early Help Assessment or referral to Children's Services.

Child Criminal Exploitation

The signs and indicators of all forms of abuse can be difficult to detect and CCE is no exception. A variety of factors can make it difficult to accurately assess how prevalent CCE is. Many children who are criminally exploited may have been victims of other forms of abuse; the grooming methods that may be used can mean that children who are criminally exploited do not always recognise they are being abused, which can also affect detection rates. All practitioners should work on the basis that it is happening in their area.

Who is vulnerable to child criminal exploitation?

Working Together makes clear the requirements for holistic assessment. CCE is often linked to other issues in the life of a child or young person, or in the wider community context. Practitioners should be alert to the fact that exploitation is complex and rarely presents in isolation of other needs and risks of harm (although this may not always be the case, particularly in relation to online abuse). CCE may be linked to other crimes and practitioners should be mindful that a child who may present as being involved in criminal activity is actually being exploited.

Practitioners should not rely on 'checklists' alone but should make a holistic assessment of vulnerability, examining risk and protective factors as set out in the statutory guidance Working Together.

Child criminal exploitation can also occur without any of these vulnerabilities being present.

The national picture on child criminal exploitation continues to develop but there are recorded cases of:

- children as young as 12 years old being exploited by gangs to courier drugs out of their local area; 15-16 years is the most common age range
- both males and females being exploited
- White British children being targeted because gangs perceive they are more likely to evade police detection
- the use of social media to make initial contact with children and young people
- class A drug users being targeted so that gangs can take over their homes (known as cuckooing)

Gangs or groups are known to target vulnerable children and adults, some factors that heighten a person's vulnerability include:

- having prior experience of neglect, physical and/or sexual abuse
- lack of a safe/stable home environment now or in the past (domestic abuse or parental substance misuse, mental health issues or criminality for example)
- social isolation or social difficulties
- economic vulnerability
- homelessness or insecure accommodation status
- connections with other people involved in gangs
- having a physical or learning disability
- having mental health or substance misuse issues
- being in care (particularly those in residential care and those with interrupted care histories)

Risk indicators

A young person's involvement in CCE activity often leaves signs. A young person might exhibit these signs, either as a member or an associate of a gang or group dealing drugs. Any sudden changes in a young person's lifestyle should be discussed with them.

Some indicators are:

- persistently going missing from school or home and/or being found out of area
- unexplained acquisition of money, clothes or mobile phones
- excessive receipt of texts/phone calls
- relationships with controlling/ older individuals or groups
- leaving home/care without explanation
- suspicion of physical assault/unexplained injuries
- parental concerns
- carrying weapons
- significant decline in school results/performance
- gang association or isolation from peers or social networks
- self harm or significant changes in emotional wellbeing

Practitioners should also remain open to the fact that CCE can occur without any of these risk indicators being obviously present. Practitioners should also be alert to the fact that some risk

assessments have been constructed around indicators of face-to-face perpetration by adults and may not adequately capture online or peer-perpetrated forms of harm. It is also important to remember that risk assessments only capture risk at the point of assessment and that levels of risk vary over time, and that the presence of these indicators may be explained by other forms of vulnerability rather than CCE.

The first step for practitioners is to be alert to the potential signs of abuse and neglect and to understand the procedures set out by the Children's MARS Board. Those working with children and families should access training to support them in identifying vulnerability, risk and harm. This will help practitioners to know what action to take and to develop a shared understanding about what best practice looks like.

Concerns about the possibility of a child or young person being criminally exploited should be discussed with a manager, or a named or designated health professional or a designated member of staff, depending on the setting. If, after discussion, these concerns remain, and it seems that the child would benefit from other services; a decision should be made about whether an Early Help Assessment will be completed, a referral will be made to a specific service or a referral will be made to Children's Services.

Where professionals consider that a child or young person is a child in need due to concerns that their health or welfare may be significantly impaired due to being at risk of child criminal exploitation or at risk of significant harm due to suspected or known criminal exploitation then a referral to Children's Services must be made in accordance with the [Children's MARS Policy and Procedure Assessing Need and Providing Help](#)

Where it is suspected that a crime is being committed against a child, professionals should contact the police on:

- **101** non emergency
- **999** emergencies
- Crimestoppers 0800 555 111