



# “ALL OF US WERE BROKEN”

**An exploratory study  
into family experiences  
of child criminal  
exploitation**

**A lifeline when someone disappears**

**missing  
people**

Registered charity in England and Wales (1020419)  
and in Scotland (SC047419)

Report by Jane Hunter, Jenny Dickson and Josie Allan

© Missing People, July 2019

Missing People is a lifeline for anyone affected by missing. We are here for missing people and their families 24 hours a day, 365 days a year to provide free and confidential support by phone, text or email. Understanding the reasons why people go missing and the impact on families left behind enables Missing People and our partners to provide better support and services. Missing People's research team conducts research and evaluation projects on a range of topics:

[www.missingpeople.org.uk/research](http://www.missingpeople.org.uk/research).

We are indebted to the families who took part in this research and chose to share their experiences in such detail and so honestly. Their main driver for doing so was to try and ensure that children who are victims of CCE and their families are better supported in the future and do not have to face the isolation, fear, judgement and sense of helplessness which define their experiences.



---

## CONTENTS

Executive Summary .....	3
Introduction.....	8
Research findings .....	12
Missing .....	16
Escalation of exploitation .....	24
Impact on family.....	31
What do families want?.....	33
Recommendations.....	40
Topic guide .....	43
Bibliography .....	44

# Executive Summary

This report explores the experiences of family members whose children have been criminally exploited, including through county lines, and as a result have been frequently missing.

Child criminal exploitation (CCE) involves a child being exploited and receiving something in return for completing a, often criminal, task for someone else.<sup>1</sup> It involves:

- Pull factors: children receiving something, for example money, drugs, status, or a sense of safety, as a result of completing tasks
- Advantage, financial or otherwise, to the groomer
- Control: grooming and threatening the child

There are strong links between CCE and county lines. County lines is a term used to describe gangs and organised criminal networks involved in exporting illegal drugs into one or more importing areas within the UK, using dedicated mobile phone lines or other forms of 'deal line.'<sup>2</sup>

CCE is growing in prominence and understanding of the issue is developing. However, the support needs of families whose children are being exploited and missing from home is a relatively unexplored area. Missing People carried out exploratory qualitative research with parents of children who had been criminally exploited to start to address this gap in knowledge.

The main aims of this research were:

1. To gain a deeper understanding of the experiences of families whose children have been exploited criminally, including through county lines
2. To understand the role of and response to missing within criminal exploitation
3. To understand more about the support services available both to the children and the families

4. To highlight family perceptions of where interventions may have been helpful, and any examples of successful interventions

The main body of the report provides detailed and harrowing accounts of the experiences of the children and their families and highlights a lack of effective support services to address the exploitation. This summary provides an overview of the main issues and recommendations that can be identified from the families' experiences.

## FINDINGS

### Early signs of CCE

Families describe their lives as having been split into two stark phases: 'before' and 'after' their children were groomed and exploited by criminals.

Common to all families were sudden and significant changes in their child's behaviour and personality. The speed and severity of the changes were shocking and included manipulative, evasive and aggressive behaviour, with extreme anger and mood swings, disengagement from activities outside of school and intense use of their phones and social media. In most cases, these sudden changes were mirrored at school with children becoming disruptive, disengaged and exhibiting escalating challenging behaviour.

Parents say they knew intuitively that the changes were an indication of something being very seriously wrong: they desperately searched for causes, considering things like mental health issues and bullying. Parents tried to do anything they could to stop their child's behaviour deteriorating further, however they did not know what was wrong, or where to go to get help. With hindsight families recognise these changes as early signs of CCE. They expressed feelings of anger, guilt and frustration that they and others did not identify this earlier and consequently opportunities for early intervention were missed.

<sup>1</sup> Home Office, *Child Exploitation Disruption Toolkit: Disruption Tactics*, April 2019.

<sup>2</sup> Home Office, *Criminal Exploitation of Children and Vulnerable Adults: County Lines Guidance*, 2018.

## The links between CCE and missing

CCE can be both a cause and a consequence of going missing. Children will regularly go missing whilst they are involved in CCE activity; they may be groomed to become involved in CCE whilst missing from home or care; or may run away to escape the consequences of exploitation. The links between CCE and missing are strongly evident in these research findings.

For all families, going missing was one of the early and serious warning signs of CCE and missing episodes persisted as a feature throughout, however, there were no consistent patterns of missing.

The research findings show that the quality of response to missing episodes was mixed and inconsistent across police forces and local authorities. There were examples where parents felt early missing incidents were not taken seriously enough and written off as ‘normal teenage behaviour’ by the police despite parents emphasising that it was totally out of character. Some felt that police activity was minimal and did not reflect the severity of the situation, particularly as the duration or frequency of missing incidents escalated.

When the children were found or returned from missing there were several signs of potential exploitation including being found with drugs and significant amounts of cash, and being found far from home, in places with which they had no association and with unknown adults. Parents described shock at the physical appearance and condition of their child when they returned, and spoke of their child telling them they had stayed in places with descriptions consistent with trap houses<sup>3</sup>, where weapons, drugs and addicts were present.

## Becoming more embedded in CCE activity

Parents told us consistently that they did not think things could get any worse and at the same time were desperately searching for ways to prevent the situation deteriorating. However, the exploitation continued and families faced shocking, frightening and what had up until then been unthinkable experiences.

In addition to more regular or longer missing episodes, an escalation of the extent and severity of other activity relating to the criminal exploitation was common for all the families including deepening evidence of violence and physical injuries, involvement in offending, erratic behaviour and mood. This was combined with increased isolation from the family and communities, refusal to engage with services and evidence of coercion, control and being under the influence of unknown others. Families reported little recognition of, or support for, the impact on their children’s mental health and the resultant trauma from the situations they were exposed to.

Families felt that a lack of specialist support and failure of services to work together contributed to their children continuing to be exposed to the influences of, and becoming more embedded in, the criminal exploitation. Consequently, the children continued to be subjected to extreme danger: a terrifying experience for the parents who felt they were “banging their heads against a brick wall” trying to find appropriate help. Their experiences illustrate a number of areas for improvement in the support for criminally exploited children and their families.

With the exception of one family, little consideration was given as to whether the children were victims of exploitation. Instead the children were assumed to be making lifestyle choices and viewed as criminals. Families believe that there should be better use of the National Referral Mechanism (NRM)<sup>4</sup> and suggested their experiences demonstrated inadequate

<sup>3</sup> Trap house is a term used to describe a building used to store, buy, sell, produce and use illegal drugs.

<sup>4</sup> The National Referral Mechanism is “a framework for identifying and referring potential victims of modern slavery and ensuring they receive the appropriate support.” Home Office and UK Visas and Immigration, *Modern Slavery Victims: referral and assessment forms*. Those suspected of being victims of modern slavery, including trafficking and exploitation, can be referred into the NRM. If a child is formally identified as a victim of trafficking this should help to ensure the child is appropriately protected and can be used in ensuring a child is not wrongly prosecuted for activity which is linked to this exploitation or trafficking. For more information please see: Youth Justice Legal Centre, *National Referral Mechanism (NRM)*.

levels of knowledge about how and when it should be used. They asserted that failure to use the NRM for their children resulted in them being criminalised and left them exposed to the criminals who continued exploit them further.

A lack of specialist support for children who have been criminally exploited was evident. Family experiences of local authority children's services showed they were ill-equipped for working with children experiencing CCE. This included being unable to modify established work practices focused on problems originating from within the family home. They were not generally able to effectively address the harm initiated by external exploitation using a contextual safeguarding approach.<sup>5</sup>

Refusal to engage with services was common and families felt their children had been groomed to respond in this way to prevent them accessing support. There were a number of examples of where support was withdrawn because of a lack of engagement. It is notable that the two exceptions to this were when professionals with specialist skills in exiting gang activity were involved and the children engaged and made positive progress as a result.

A lack of availability of appropriate housing arrangements or care placements was common across the family experiences when children were unable to return home because they needed to live outside of the area where the CCE activity was operating to escape exploitation, or were taken into local authority care for their own safety. Examples included children being placed with other family members technically outside of the area but in reality very close to their home and exploiters. Children were also placed with other family members or in residential care placements without the specialist expertise to prevent them going missing or having contact with the people exploiting who could then continue to exercise control over them.

The research provides examples of families whose children were groomed whilst under 18 and have subsequently turned 18 and entered

adult services and criminal justice systems. In these cases, the children are living with the impacts of the exploitation but without any acknowledgement of, or specialist support for, the impact of the exploitative activity they have been subjected to. Importantly, parents' ability to support their child is also limited by the fact that information exchange with services ceases at 18.

## Impact of exploitation on the families

The impact of the CCE on parents was, and in some cases continues to be, significant: it was described as "taking over" their lives. All aspects of family life have been affected including relationships, work, physical and mental health. Family members reported feeling constantly exhausted, stressed, frightened, anxious, unable to sleep, and isolated from family or support networks.

Parents described the anxiety and fear that any of their actions, or inactions, to try and support their child might put them at risk of more danger or even death. At the same time families felt they lacked the knowledge or expertise to know whether they were making correct decisions and had no access to support to help them do so. This further exacerbated the strain and helplessness that parents were already experiencing. One family did receive support from a specialist social worker and found it very beneficial in helping them to understand CCE, county lines and how they could best support their child.

Siblings were also impacted negatively, sometimes subject to the aggression, violence and anger of the exploited child. Some siblings became anxious and nervous about leaving the house; others were angry with the behaviour of their exploited brother or sister and the consequent impact on their parents. The impact on siblings placed additional strain on parents who were anxious to avoid their other children becoming involved or harmed as a result of the exploitation.

<sup>5</sup> Contextual safeguarding is an approach to understanding and responding to young people's experiences of significant harm beyond their families. It recognises that the different relationships young people form in neighbourhoods, at school and online can feature violence and abuse. Parents and carers have little influence over these contexts and it can undermine parent-child relationships. University of Bedfordshire, *What is Contextual Safeguarding*, March 2019.



## RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations identified from this research are detailed below and it is incumbent on all professionals working with children who are being exploited by criminals or at risk of CCE to use the accounts families shared so generously to stimulate change and ensure there is an effective response to CCE for children and their families.

1. Training about CCE should be provided to all professionals working with children and young people, with a particular focus on the police, social workers, youth offending workers, foster carers, residential care workers and school staff. The relevant inspectorates including Ofsted, HMICFRS<sup>6</sup> and HMI Probation should include a check on whether this training is taking place during their inspections. Training should include:
  - Understanding missing as a key warning sign of CCE, as well as familiarisation with all potential risk indicators and their inter-relationships.
  - Sources of support for children and young people being exploited, their families and the professionals who have identified CCE potential warning signs or activity.
  - The importance of acknowledging the concerns and observations of parents and carers to help understand the context of what is happening and then working closely with them from an early stage to best support the child.
  - Strategies for engaging young people who are at risk of, or experiencing, exploitation.
  - The need to be vigilant, curious and join up warning signs identified at different touchpoints to ensure the possibility of CCE is actively considered within the full context of a child's experiences.
  - Recognition that criminal activity may be a result of exploitation and the importance of treating children as potential victims.
2. The Department for Education should develop guidance for families to be shared with and then disseminated by local authorities. This should include information about the risks of grooming, how to recognise the warning signs of criminal exploitation, and how to raise concerns.
3. The Department for Education should ensure that the new mandatory curriculum for Relationships and Sex Education is developed by practitioners to explicitly teach children and young people about the risks of grooming for criminal exploitation alongside the other forms of exploitation and coercion. The Department for Education should use the early adopters programme to work with schools to develop appropriate guidance and resources.<sup>7</sup> Specialist resources should also be developed in a similar way to those available through the National Crime Agency's ThinkUKnow programme.<sup>8</sup>
4. The response to missing from police must be improved to ensure children are safeguarded from CCE. The police should:
  - Consider the possibility of, and concerns about, CCE as part of their risk assessment, particularly in incidence of repeat missing episodes.
  - When a child does go missing repeatedly the police should consider giving the reporting person a unique CAD (Computer Aided Dispatch) number to enable quicker, more effective reporting and better identification of the level of risk of exploitation across multiple incidents.
  - Intelligence from missing person investigations and safe and well checks should be used to map local CCE hotspots and operational models of CCE.
5. Local authorities should improve understanding of, and response to, CCE by reviewing information from Return Home Interviews (RHIs) to identify warning signs, share information to safeguard individuals and map the local, regional and national picture

<sup>6</sup> Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services

<sup>7</sup> Department for Education, *Early Adopters Programme*

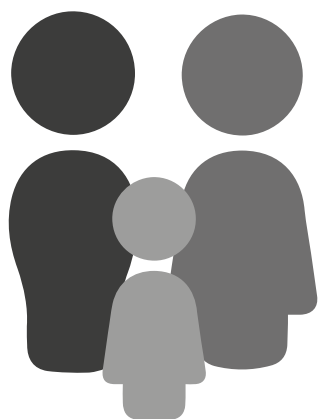
<sup>8</sup> National Crime Agency, *ThinkUKnow*

of exploitation and how this links to missing. When children refuse RHIs repeatedly local authorities should consider this is a potential indicator of CCE and develop an appropriate response.

6. The Home Office, alongside the Tackling Child Exploitation (TCE) programme, should ensure a national, joined up approach to support for victims of CCE and their families. This should include the mapping of existing services and identification of any gaps. Local authorities, with oversight from Ofsted, should ensure that the support available is sufficiently expert to address the following:
- A lack of engagement from children who may have been groomed to distrust and not cooperate with services
  - The impact of exploitation on a young person's mental health
  - The links with child sexual exploitation
  - The transition to adult services and the ongoing impact of exploitation into adulthood
  - The need for advocacy for families to help them navigate the often complex system, as well as direct support to address the emotional and mental impact of the exploitation on parents, carers and siblings.

- When victims of CCE are placed in care, the need for specialist expertise in placements. These placements should be staffed by trained professionals with access to appropriate and expert support.

7. Police forces and local authorities must work across administrative boundaries when safeguarding victims of CCE because the children and young people being exploited typically move between local authority and police force areas as part of the exploitation. Joint Area Strategy Meetings should be arranged for children suspected or known to be being groomed or exploited across different police force and local authority areas. They should include resident police forces and local authorities, and those where the CCE activity is occurring to ensure that lines of accountability for interventions are clear and that support and protective actions are implemented effectively regardless of geography.
8. As part of the Modern Slavery Act Review, the Home Office should ensure that use of the National Referral Mechanism is effective for victims of child criminal exploitation, and that practitioners know when to make a referral and what a positive grounds decision means.<sup>9</sup>



**It is incumbent  
on all professionals  
working with children  
who are being exploited by  
criminals or at risk of CCE  
to use the accounts families  
shared so generously to  
stimulate change and ensure  
there is an effective response  
to CCE for children and  
their families.**



<sup>9</sup> Home Office 2019, *Independent review of the Modern Slavery Act*



# Introduction

## Research aims and methodology

This report explores the experiences of parents with children who have been criminally exploited, including through county lines, and as a result have been frequently missing from home. Participants' accounts detail the harrowing experiences of the children and their families, as well as a lack of effective support services.

The main aims of this research are:

1. To gain a deeper understanding of the experiences of families whose children have been exploited criminally, including through county lines
2. To understand the role of and response to missing within criminal exploitation
3. To understand more about the support services available both to the children and the families
4. To highlight family perceptions of where interventions may have been helpful, and any examples of successful interventions

Missing People conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews with family members of 5 children who had been criminally exploited. The interviews were detailed: each took between 2 and 10 hours to complete. A topic guide was developed, see Appendix A, however the research was principally led by the participants; this approach gave participants the flexibility to talk about their experiences and self-identify what was important for them to share.