



**Five
Rivers®**

Turning children's lives around

Criminal Exploitation

What it is, knowing the signs
and how to keep safe

Introduction

What is this leaflet?

This leaflet is a resource to help people understand criminal exploitation and how it can affect children and young people. It outlines the various forms of criminal exploitation and will explain how and why young people can find themselves in these situations.

Who is it for?

This leaflet is for carers, young people, support workers, and teachers to read and discuss together. It is not a replacement for training – it is an accompaniment.

Helping You Understand Criminal Exploitation:

What is criminal exploitation

Child criminal exploitation is when someone uses a child (under 18 years old) to commit crimes for them (Metropolitan Police).

Who carries out the exploitation?

Groomers carry out exploitation. Grooming is when someone builds a relationship with you to gain your trust for harmful reasons. Once they have your trust, they will then abuse you and the relationship they have built; they might ask you to carry drugs, hold drugs for them, hold weapons, ask to stay in your house, or ask for naked pictures so they can blackmail you.

Groomers are experts at making you feel connected, respected, and special. They are attentive to you and your wishes, buying you presents - clothes, mobile phones, drugs, alcohol, they could make fantastic promises – some of which might happen, at least to begin with, lulling you further into a false sense of security with this person.

Some children report feeling very special in the grooming relationship at first. This is precisely what a groomer wants you to feel like so they can manipulate and abuse you once they have gained your trust. They begin by asking for small favours, and then the favours grow. They will manipulate and blackmail you, saying that if you don't continue to do as they ask, they will tell your family or the police, or they will hurt or harm you.

Groomers are known to get young people to use illegal addictive drugs; then, once addicted, the young person relies on the groomer to help them fund their habits, and they get stuck in a vicious, violent cycle.

How criminal exploitation can affect children and young people:

Who is most at risk of being groomed in criminal exploitation?

Anyone and everyone is vulnerable to criminal exploitation; criminals target the most vulnerable people. The rise of the internet and social media has increased everyone's vulnerability.

Groomers use technology and the internet to target people, meaning the risk is always present, even in your bedroom and home.

Sometimes, young people who are shy or feel isolated, perhaps because they are new to an area, find friendship and companionship online, and groomers are online looking for these people.

Groomers now live in the hands of our children: on their mobile phones, their friend's mobile phones, and their laptops. We can only combat this by talking to our children openly and honestly about their online lives.

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This resource was written alongside Children & Young People First. CYP First, is a Specialist Provider of all Aspects of Child Protection and Safeguarding. To book face-to-face training for staff, carers or young people, [click here](#).

Types of criminal exploitation:

Gangs

Lots of young people have gangs of friends they socialise with. This has always been the case. Street gangs are slightly different because they are associated with illegal criminal activity. Being in a gang is wrapped in their identity, and rival gangs from other areas will fight for dominance. There are also organised gangs—these are well structured, more like someone's day-to-day job, and aim to make money.

County lines

'County lines' is a term used by the police to describe a form of exploitation where gangs groom and exploit children to carry drugs, hold drugs, manufacture drugs, carry weapons, or carry or hold money. Groomers don't have an age limit when it comes to exploitation; everyone is vulnerable.

Groomers need people to carry items from one place to another, often in their neighbourhood, but children can also be trafficked from their home area to other areas. Usually, children are asked to carry items from cities to smaller urban areas.

Children may get some payment for this role, but after time, they are often forced to do it with threats of harm. It's very appealing for young people to be given gifts and large sums of money just for storing a show box under their bed. Sometimes, the young people won't even know what is in the box or the bag – they are just asked to keep hold of it for the groomers.



[Click here](#) or scan the QR code to watch a video about exploitation.



[Click here](#) or scan the QR code to watch a video about county lines.

Criminal exploitation can feel like glamour – it can give you kudos

Being part of a gang, where you have access to money, branded clothes, drugs, and alcohol – can feel exciting; you can feel protected and like you belong, especially if you have low self-esteem, a limited social network or have never felt like part of something previously.

Some individuals might pretend to be like 'family' and attempt to replace trusted adults, carers, teachers, friends, or anyone in your life who genuinely cares for you; this is how they work.

Signs of a young person being groomed

- Changes in behaviour.
- Sudden changes in friendship groups (friendships with

older people, new peer groups and/or relationships with unknown people).

- Missing from home or school and being found away from their usual area of residence.
- School performance getting worse.
- Self-harming behaviours, unexplained injuries.
- Changes in well-being, anxiety, worry, stress, violent or aggressive behaviours.
- Unexplained money, new clothes, designer clothes, jewellery, mobile phones etc.
- More than one mobile phone.
- Getting lots of phone calls or texts that need to be taken privately.
- Use and/or possession of drugs and/or alcohol.
- Possession of hotel key cards/keys.
- Carrying weapons.
- Using different language/terminology.

Any sudden change in a young person's lifestyle could be because of criminal exploitation, and you should talk to them about it straight away or reach out for specialist help.

Influences through drill music

Drill is a form of rap that is very popular, particularly among young people. It often covers topics that are descriptive and violent and involve drugs, weapons, and threats. Some drill glamourises violent and criminal activities and gang culture. Some drill music personalises lyrics toward particular people or gangs and may also use symbolism to hide its content to avoid being detected by everyone apart from those in the know. Such taunts in a song can be linked to offences and can fuel violent gang wars. Science tells us that repeated exposure to such messaging can lead to the normalisation of violent acts and lifestyles and increase the risk of criminal exploitation.



Criminal exploitation and its legalities

Child criminal exploitation

If someone who is 18 years old or older does something to make a child do something bad or illegal, they are breaking the law. This is true if:

- The child is younger than 13 years old, or
- The person doesn't really think the child is 18 years old or older.

What is cuckooing or home invasion?

Cuckooing, otherwise known as home invasion, is where criminals take over the home of a person to use it as a base for illegal drug dealing. This is typically part of a county-line operation. Care leavers have been identified as people at higher risk of being victims of this activity. Once a cuckoo is in your house, it can be challenging to ask them to leave. These people are dangerous and will use all sorts of threats when you want them to go.



[Click here](#) or scan the QR code to watch a video about cuckooing.

Controlling another's home for criminal purposes

If someone (Person A) takes over another person's (Person B's) home and uses it to help with a crime, they are doing something illegal. This is true if:

- Person A takes control of Person B's home,
- Person A uses the home to help commit a crime, and
- Person B does not agree to let Person A use their home for that reason.

Carrying weapons

It is against the law to carry weapons – this includes knives, guns, acid, or any weapon designed to harm people. If you believe you need to have a weapon to protect yourself, you need to contact the police—it's their job to protect you. Carrying a weapon as self-defence is still a criminal act.

Care leavers have been identified as people at higher risk of being victims of cuckooing.

References and signposting

This leaflet was created in conjunction with Children Young People. For more information about Criminal Exploitation, you can visit:



[Criminal exploitation of children and vulnerable adults: county lines \(accessible version\) - GOV.UK](#)



[Criminal exploitation and gangs | NSPCC](#)



[Child exploitation | Catch22](#)





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