

Criminal exploitation training gaps in UK policing and safeguarding



Key points

- The study found that most police forces lack sufficient, high-quality training for officers in identifying exploitation and victimhood among vulnerable children and adults involved in drug markets. This was true even in forces considered leaders in tackling this issue.
- Training deficiencies are especially pronounced among officers directly responsible for managing or supporting safeguarding practices related to child criminal exploitation (CCE) and criminal exploitation (CE), across all ranks. This reflects a lack of local and national strategic response in ensuring adequate training in this area.
- The lack of strategic commitment to CCE/CE training is also common among other safeguarding professionals and multi-agency structures, e.g. MACE chairs, co-chairs, and their representative members, who are involved in safeguarding.
- Current training standards for CCE/CE lack an evidence base. The commonly employed practice of combining specialist CCE/CE training with general vulnerability training is widely seen as ineffective. Relatedly, basic online modules that lack depth and interactive elements are considered inadequate.
- There is an urgent need for strategic, affordable, effective, and purpose-built training on CCE/CE and related victimhood. This will enable the establishment of a consistent baseline of training practices across police forces, MACE teams and safeguarding partnerships. All those with specific safeguarding responsibilities across a partnership should receive such training.

Summary

This report derives from the UK's first national study of police responses to county lines drug distribution and related Child and adult Criminal Exploitation (CCE/CE).

The study found that police forces are changing how they consider and process young people and vulnerable adults involved in drug markets, increasingly recognising vulnerability and exploitation. However, practices still vary widely between — and within — forces and safeguarding partnerships.

Whilst the police and local multi-agency safeguarding partnerships feel that genuine progress is being made in terms of recognising and attributing CCE/CE victimhood, they acknowledge that this still presents significant challenges. These challenges are worsened

by inconsistent, and often inadequate, training on exploitation and victimhood in drug markets across police forces. This lack of training is also evident among other safeguarding professionals and key multi-agency structures with CCE/CE responsibilities.

The findings suggest that to help establish an appropriate minimum baseline safeguarding response, consistent across all forces and safeguarding partnerships, there needs to be more detailed national guidance, policy, and centralised oversight in this area.

While training alone isn't a solution, effective and widespread baseline training on exploitation and victimhood is essential for those in operational and strategic safeguarding roles to achieve meaningful progress.

Background

The wider research from which this report is drawn found that criminal exploitation and related victimhood, which are seen as typical of county lines, are now also common in local drug markets. So, a focus on criminal exploitation in all drug markets is likely more important than a continuing focus on county lines operating across regional borders.

Until recently, young people and vulnerable adults involved in the supply of drugs would have been perceived simply as offenders. Now, they may be perceived as vulnerable and as victims of exploitation by organised (to a lesser or greater degree) crime groups.

This can make it challenging for the police to categorise and process people who are both exploited **and** criminally involved, particularly when a child or vulnerable adult do not see themselves as exploited or wish to hide it for fear of reprisals. Offender/victim status can also change over time. For example, a person might initially be a victim of grooming and entrapped in county lines drug supply but then act more purposively by exploiting other young people or taking a more senior role. These dilemmas are particularly apparent when young people turn 18 and are legally seen as adults. This is

a “cliff-edge” moment when greater culpability and lesser vulnerability is often assumed because of their “adulthood” even if initial grooming and exploitation occurred when younger.

Vulnerable people and victims of exploitation being effectively recognised and then processed appropriately is a concern to the police and other safeguarding agencies who acknowledge that there remain significant challenges to achieving this. One issue involves the ongoing presence of traditional policing culture that views CCE victims through an ‘enforcement lens’ rather than a ‘vulnerability lens’ and this exacerbates such challenges. It is recognised that helping safeguarding personnel such as the police and other key professionals to transition to a more nuanced vulnerability lens needs effective training.

Training for CCE/CE is not a simple exercise in information dissemination nor is it helpful to roll it up with generic training around vulnerabilities, or even child sexual exploitation (where victimhood is easier to grasp). Currently there is strong reliance on generic online training modules. Effective training on CCE/CE victimhood needs to equip professionals with the understanding needed to consistently and effectively identify victims of exploitation.

What we did

Phase 1 involved conducting 50 semi-structured interviews with representatives from 44 of the 45 UK territorial police forces and British Transport Police about their response to criminal exploitation in drug markets, perceived progress in this regard and multi-agency safeguarding partnership working. Almost all interviewees were police officers who were force leads on county lines or exploitation, with ranks ranging from Sergeant to Superintendent. Several interviews were undertaken with civilian police analysts.

Phase 2 involved conducting rapid appraisals of three locations to gain a better understanding of how vulnerability and exploitation within drug markets is perceived and responded to by police and safeguarding partner agencies and professionals. The research team spent a week in each location and conducted 58 semi-structured interviews with

employees from police forces, statutory agencies and NGOs that support people impacted by exploitation.

Also, 17 semi-structured interviews with People with Lived Experience (PWLE) of involvement and exploitation in drug markets were undertaken. The interviews with PWLE were informed by two meetings with Experts by Experience where the team consulted them on all aspects of the research. The researchers also undertook several observational ("ride-along") accompaniments of county lines related police operations.

Additionally, the team interviewed key people from a number of national organisations working on county lines and local drug market criminal exploitation and partnership safeguarding and its governance.

Key findings

Overall, the current national training approach to CCE/CE is largely deficient.

Most officers have not received CCE/CE awareness training of any kind and those that have may have received generic vulnerability training that is not considered optimal for understanding CCE/CE and victimhood. Consequently, the shift from an enforcement policing lens to one that is informed by vulnerability and victimhood is being hindered by a lack of awareness.

Effective CCE/CE training is complex, and several senior respondents embedded in, and experts in, CCE/CE training suggested that the cheap online modules commonly used are insufficient and unfit for purpose and would continue to be so.

Police training in CCE/CE is a postcode lottery.

Due to the current deficiencies around CCE/CE training it was suggested that it should not be left to individual police forces, juggling different priorities, to determine if their officers should undertake CCE/CE training and that it should not be hidden within generic training around many vulnerabilities. Those with dedicated responsibilities for CCE/CE (from those working in Child Centred Policing Teams (or similar) to those heading up such teams or co-

chairing structures such as the Multi-Agency Child Exploitation hubs (MACE) whose primary remit is to safeguard those victims of CCE) are also rarely trained – this should not be the case.

Multiagency partnership working was seen as the best approach to safeguarding, but other safeguarding professionals within such partnerships also suffered from similar deficiencies in training.

Observations of MACE (both contextual and tactical) and interviews with senior professionals with responsibilities towards MACE and contextual safeguarding evidenced a general deficiency in training and at times an understanding of their MACE-related role. Interviews with experts on multi-agency safeguarding structures and governance processes suggested that many local MACE hubs lacked a thorough understanding of effective processes and how to achieve desirable outcomes – a situation exacerbated by deficiencies in baseline delivery across the sector in CCE/CE safeguarding training. Some MACE teams had established highly progressive governance protocols and had extended their remit (in line with broader safeguarding guidance) to include those older than 18 years, but dissemination of best practice is poor, and progressive regions do not necessarily have baseline training strategies in place.

The team recommends that there be national guidance for baseline structures, responses and protocols in safeguarding partnerships and local MACE hubs for dealing with child and adult criminal exploitation – including training.

This would aim to provide strong informed guidance on what baseline structures, processes, practice and desired outcomes might look like both nationally and at individual force levels.

Next steps

The team is working with partners on the implications of the research for policy and practice.

The team has developed an impact-focused project that draws directly on findings from the Centre's County lines, Policing and Vulnerability research project.

Crossing the Line: Rethinking the Alpha Victim is a suite of creative and engaging training resources that explore the complex realities facing young people caught up in county lines drug trafficking – specifically those labelled 'alpha-victims'. These are available on the [Vulnerability & Policing Futures Research Centre's website](#).

The CPD workshop, which is available online and can be delivered in-person or as a webinar, features a professionally produced short film based on lived experience, and activities that support reflective professional learning and discussion about victimisation and complicity. Please contact vulnerabilitypolicing@york.ac.uk to receive full details and arrange your CPD session.

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For further information

Read more about this project at: vulnerabilitypolicing.org.uk/county-lines

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