



# Diverting children and young people from Serious and Organised Crime (SOC):

## Guidance for Practice on Recognising and Preventing the Exploitation of Children by SOC

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## Introduction

Scotland's Serious and Organised Crime (SOC) strategy has four strands – Divert, Deter, Detect and Disrupt. These strands are interconnected and use research and information sharing, as well as seeking to raise awareness and understanding of the various guises in which SOC may present, in order to reduce the harm it causes. The Divert strand has a significant focus on children and young people, and aims to prevent their exploitation by SOC and provide opportunities to divert them from such involvement. In order to do this, greater awareness and understanding of what may increase the risk of being exploited by SOC (or indications a child or young person is already being exploited by SOC) is crucial. This information for practice aims to increase awareness and knowledge to prevent or divert children and young people from being exploited by SOC.

Serious and Organised Crime often targets vulnerable individuals who, whilst they may have some value to the SOC group, are expendable and replaceable. Children and young people are vulnerable to such exploitation and may be at risk of involvement in SOC often without even realising. Young people are not always able to understand the wider implications of the situations they become involved in, thus it is crucial that the adults around them are able to recognise potential indicators of SOC and what they can do to protect and divert young people from such a pathway.

[CYCJ Info sheet 47](#) outlines the evolution of [Scotland's Serious Organised Crime Strategy](#). It defines what SOC is and what it looks like in Scotland, as well as the range of legislation relevant to the implementation of the strategy. This legislation, in conjunction with Getting It Right for Every Child ([GIRFEC](#)) and the [Whole System Approach](#), seeks to divert children and young people, across the spectrum of offending behaviour, to more positive outcomes.

The motivation for involvement in SOC is often, though not always, financial gain. Some serious and organised criminals are diversifying into different crime types to maintain income ([National Crime Agency 2016](#)). Just over [half \(52%\) of known organised crime groups](#) are involved in more than one crime type, such as money laundering, cybercrime, drugs and human trafficking, and this is not an exhaustive list. Successful SOC groups often consist of a durable core of key individuals, though their structures vary. Around them is a cluster of subordinates, specialists, and other transient members, plus an extended network of associates. An individual will usually demonstrate that they are trustworthy in order to become involved with an organised crime group. Criminal trust is often developed through family, friendship, ethnic and cultural ties, and can be earned or acquired through recommendation – some 'crime families' are precisely that.

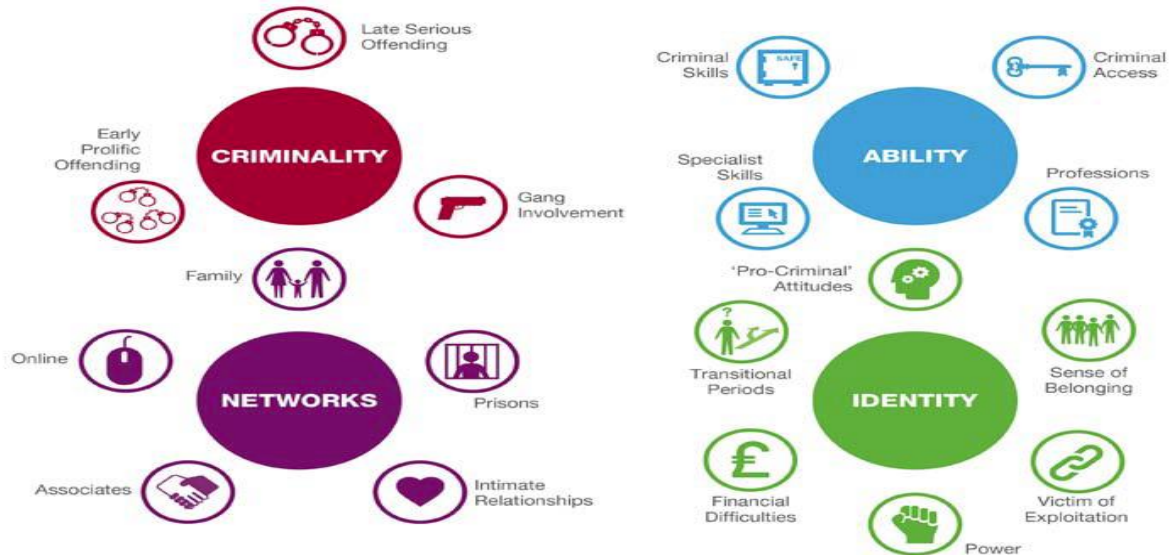
The [Serious and Organised Crime Interactive Toolkit \(Home Office 2015\)](#) illustrates how the following factors should be considered to assess the risk of being drawn into SOC:

The illustration below highlights how these factors are structured around four categories, and are applicable to both children and adults:

- **Criminality** – Offending patterns and trends
- **Ability** – Specialist skills, access or professional positions
- **Networks** – Access to criminal associates through family, peer or professional networks

- **Identity** – Upbringing and lifestyle factors

Factors to assess the risk of being drawn into Serious and Organised Crime



Where do children fit into SOC?

Internationally, 13 years old is the average age at which SOC in a number of countries recruits children (Cavallaro, J. (p.63, 2015). *Violence, children and organized crime*. There is no one [pathway into SOC](#). Individuals of any social or economic standing can be drawn in. The top five threats from SOC are child sexual exploitation and abuse (CSEA), organised immigration crime, [cybercrime](#), firearms and high-end money laundering.

The [Police Foundation and Perpetuity Research \(2016\)](#) highlighted that communities with high levels of deprivation appeared particularly vulnerable to exploitation by SOC Groups. From their research across three neighbourhoods in England, it was stressed that young people were particularly at risk of being coerced into holding, carrying, cultivating or dealing drugs, and undertaking other high-risk criminal activities on behalf of SOC. The need for a sense of identity and status, as well as fear of the consequences of non-cooperation, influenced how young people's choices were often severely restricted and directed towards offending by SOC members who had status and influence in the area. For young friends or relatives of family-run SOC, choices were even more restricted.

Whilst there remains limited research regarding children and young people's involvement in SOC, the [Lifting the Lid on Greentown](#) case study focused on a crime network operating in Greentown (this is a pseudonym for a Garda Sub-District based outside Dublin, Ireland) in 2010-2011. It used data from official statistical crime records, a statistically constructed criminal network map indicating offending relationships between individuals (2010-2011) in Greentown, and testimony from individual frontline members of the Garda. The study sought to determine the reasons why children and young people would become involved and remain involved with SOC; how the network supported offending; and what opportunities a child involved in the network had to act upon their own choices, such as leaving the network.

Key findings from this study highlighted:

- Evidence of a network involving both adults and children in collaborative offending relationships
- The involvement of children in offences such as burglary, metal theft, drugs sale and supply should alert authorities to the possibility of involvement in SOC, and a need for greater protection of children
- Clear distinction between the life experiences of those children from the core family and kinship group who appeared to be reasonably well cared for, in comparison to children from 'associate' families. These latter children in the main had experienced chaotic, dysfunctional childhoods, which included chronic parental substance misuse, mental health issues, and poor levels of care or supervision
- It appeared these latter families were targeted by the core families due to their vulnerabilities
- The power and influence of the network is shaped most by the intensity of the relationships between individual members but geographical proximity between them also plays a role

Whilst the number of children involved in the Greentown network was small, their level of involvement in serious crime was five times higher than the equivalent national average for burglary. The findings suggested that the network influences in Greentown acted to encourage and compel certain young children into abnormal patterns of criminal behaviour. Where a child is involved in repeat offending, this should raise higher levels of concern but particularly for offences such as burglary then adult influence should be a prime consideration. This consideration of adult influence on children's offending behaviour should be welfare driven and protective, rather than punitive and justice related.

The study also expressed the interaction between the conflicting push and pull factors illustrated through friendship and fear. The friendship relationship pulls the young person into doing something often for a more powerful person within the network who manipulates to this end and the fear of the consequences pushes the young person to act. These two factors combine to increase the likelihood of the young person's involvement. Intimacy and disposability are other issues highlighted by the study – the desire to be included and trusted, which creates a sense of intimacy, being the pull. This is dependent on how useful the child can be and can be fleeting, as they can become disposable the minute they no longer have value to the SOC Group. Whilst for some children and young people, fear will drive their involvement, for others it may be that the opportunity to create fear in others is aspirational in their desire to be perceived as someone strong, powerful, with kudos and material goods. Involvement and association within such networks results in their being regarded in a similar way, which maintains their involvement.

The researchers noted that solely supporting young people to cease their involvement in SOC has little impact upon disrupting SOC and in preventing the exploitation of those children who are recruited to fill the gaps, as they are also expendable. The study highlights a welfarist approach that recognises children's involvement in SOC as a reflection of need and exploitation rather than being punitive and driven by the justice system. This should be the primary consideration when seeking to disrupt those adults who are actively recruiting and grooming children towards criminal activity, particularly when coupled with the absence of nurturing and protective parenting.

## What do you need to look for?

In most cases, the indicators that a child is at risk of involvement in, or already involved in SOC, will reflect what we know about general offending behaviour, and the majority of the risk factors relate to vulnerability. Factors which may increase the risk of children becoming involved in general offending behaviour and may be relevant in relation to risk of SOC involvement, include poor affinity for school and performance at school, school exclusion, and family involvement in crime, drugs and alcohol misuse, anti-social peers groups and ineffective parenting / guardianship.

In the context of SOC, the nuances must be considered. Indicators which suggest that a child may be at risk of SOC include:

- Involvement in organised acquisitive offending which is quite sophisticated, either in requiring organisation, particular skills, or access to materials. Examples of this could be housebreaking, as knowing when properties are empty, what to take and how to gain access require a level of knowledge not generally featured in youth offending
- The suggestion that an older peer or adult orchestrates the offending who may seem to exert significant influence and/ or power over the young person and be revered by them. There may also be signs of fear or anxiety about disappointing this individual or coming across them in the community

As noted, involvement in SOC is not obvious and requires those who work and support children and young people to be aware of the challenges they face, and the various guises exploitation can take. In particular, CSEA and cybercrime are areas where children and young people may be at significant risk of exploitation. Further research is required to understand fully the pathways into CSEA and cybercrime in relation to SOC ([Home Office 2015](#)).

## Organised Crime and child sexual exploitation (CSE)

The role and depth of SOC involvement in CSEA is not fully understood, though they are functioning in this area, and it must be noted that not all groups involved in CSEA will be SOC. Group-based CSEA is a pattern of abuse, rather than a single offence ([UCL, Jill Dando Institute 2012](#)). [Barnardo's](#) have identified key indicators to help recognise when a child may be at risk of sexual exploitation. Individually, many are part of 'normal' teenage behaviour, which can impede detection of CSEA. They include going missing, disengagement from school, unexplained gifts, associating with other victims, negative changes in behaviour, drugs or alcohol misuse, or highly sexualised behaviour ([UCL, Jill Dando Institute 2012](#)).

Being aware of the indicators and risks that may suggest children and young people are being exploited and abused in such a manner is the initial step. Then, considering how this is being facilitated, by whom, and for what purpose, may evidence there is an SOC involvement, which should inform the agencies involved and the approach to be taken to protect and intervene.

A study by [Police Federation and Perpetuity Research \(2016\)](#) in Bristol found 43 groups linked to perpetrating CSEA, with an average of five perpetrators in each, many more than the six serious organised crime groups mapped by the local police. They identified a high degree of

connectivity between CSEA and other types of serious and organised crime, such as drugs supply, criminal exploitation, sexual exploitation for financial gain, and violence.

The children and young people exploited generally came from the same communities as the perpetrators. Four of the 43 groups groomed and exploited victims from outside of the police force area. Both local and external groups commonly used online communications to sustain contact with victims and coordinate the exploitation. The analysis also found that group-based CSEA overlaps with other, more conventional types of organised crime, some of which acted as an enabler for establishing contact and exploiting victims:

- 11 groups were linked to local drugs supply;
- Six groups were criminally exploiting young people, for example using them to carry or deal drugs; and
- Nine groups were sexually exploiting young people for financial gain while often engaging in sexual abuse

Future areas of concern highlighted by the study relate to the live streaming of CSEA online, where adults pay a fee to direct and watch a child being abused, as well as self-generated indecent imagery (SGII) by children and young people. This creates the opportunity for persistent victimisation and poses difficulties in addressing the sharing of such images.

Often, in order to secure further pictures or sometimes money, CSEA offenders will threaten their victims with sharing their pictures online or with family members. Ensuring an understanding of CSEA indicators, being able to recognise these, and considering against whether there is a suggestion or evidence of SOC involvement may indicate a more specialised response and intervention is required. Work is ongoing to clarify the level of involvement of SOC Groups in CSEA.

## Pathways into Cybercrime

Our children and young people are becoming more immersed in society's rapid growth in the application and availability of technology. In 2016, 93% of young people in the UK reported daily internet use. A recent survey of Scottish children aged 12-15 found that a third reported illegally downloading films, media or music ([Herlitz et al 2016](#)). Whilst this is an area of opportunity, it is also an area where young people are being exposed to levels of risk through their own behaviour and the behaviour of others.

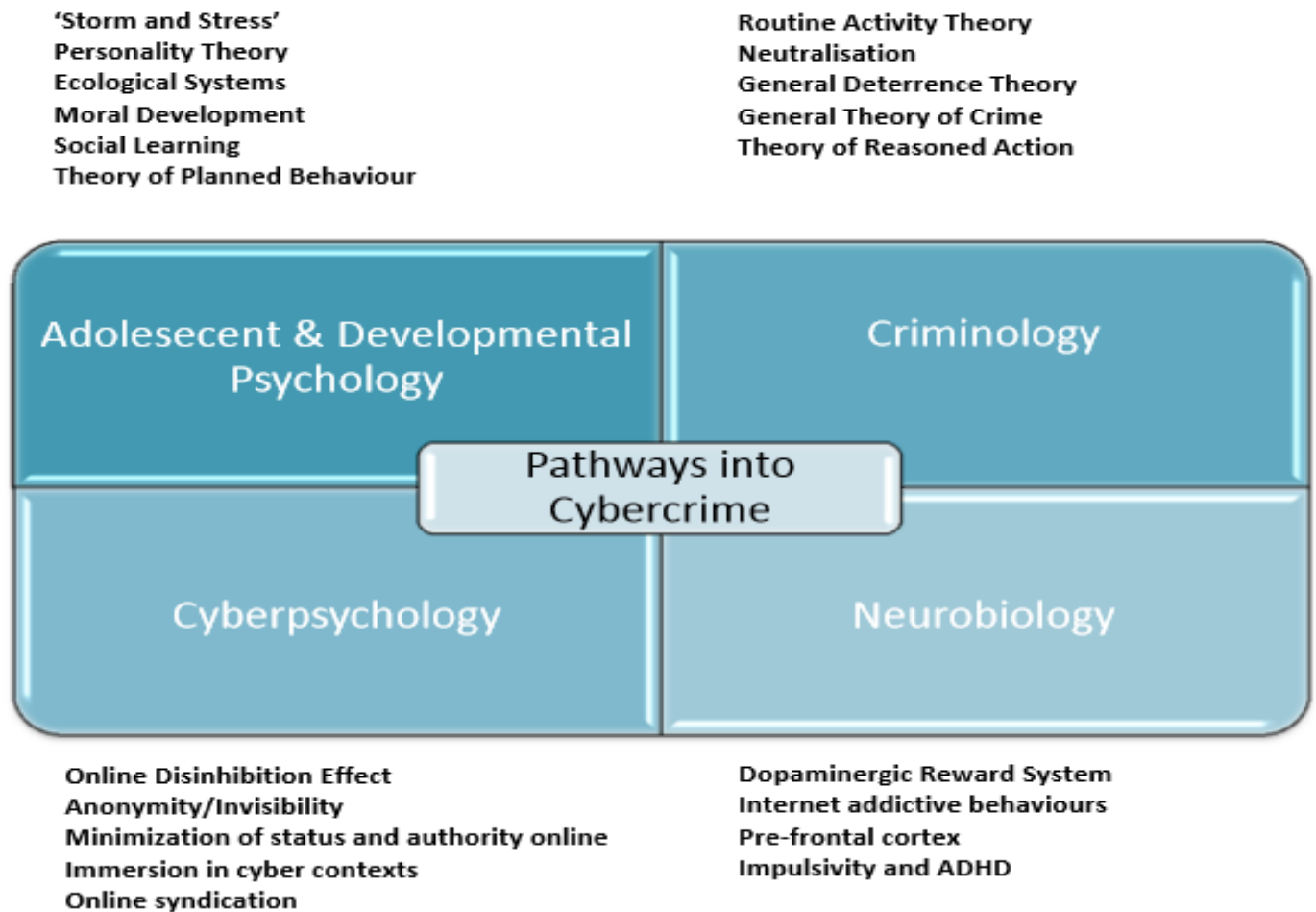
Although [NCA research in 2017](#) acknowledged that information in this area is limited, there are concerns regarding increasing number of teenagers in the UK who would be unlikely to be involved in traditional offending are becoming involved in cybercrime. Cybercrime attracts young offenders – 61% of hackers begin hacking before they turned 16. The average age of suspects and arrests in the National Cyber Crime Unit (NCCU) investigations in 2015 was 17 years, the average age of arrest of those involved in NCA drug cases in 2015 was 37 years and the average age of arrest of those involved in NCA economic crime cases in 2015 was 39 years.

[Youth Pathways into Cybercrime](#) research (October 2016) by Middlesex University considered the possible pathways from young people who are curious and developing skills in technology, to cyber delinquent, to lone cybercriminal, to involvement in organised cybercrime. They



identified the need to understand the drivers for becoming involved in cybercrime and the interaction and impact upon a young person through four key frameworks outlined below:

*Figure A: Distinction and integration of literature in understanding youth hacking*



Commonalities have been found ([NCA, 2017](#)) that contribute and/or increase the risk of young people being drawn into cybercrime:

- Availability of low-level hacking tools encourages criminal behaviour
- Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) appears to be more prevalent amongst cyber criminals than the general population though this remains unproven
- Offenders begin to participate in gaming cheat websites and 'modding' (game modification) forums and progress to criminal hacking forums without considering consequences
- Financial gain is not necessarily a priority for young offenders
- Completing the challenge, a sense of accomplishment and proving oneself to peers are key motivations for those involved in cyber criminality
- Offenders perceive the likelihood of encountering law enforcement as low

- Cybercrime is not solitary and anti-social. Social relationships, albeit online, are key. Forum interaction and building of reputation drives young cyber criminals
- Many offenders see hacking as a victimless crime

The skill barrier to entry into cyber criminality is lower than ever. Off the shelf hacking tools, which require limited technical expertise to utilise, are available at little or no costs to the user. Low level hacking or gaming forums openly advertise many illegal products. Video guides and systematic tutorials on how to use these products are readily available on the open web. Thus, the skills and attributes of a young person curious and seeking challenge within the technology and cyber sphere may be easily groomed and exploited to become involved in increasingly more criminal behaviours, without necessarily understanding the full consequences of their actions. As noted, their drivers and motivators will often not be financial, though this may become an incentive.

Positive opportunities, role models, and mentors can deter young people away from cybercrime. Targeted interventions at an early stage can steer pathways towards positive outcomes. Parents, caregivers and positive adults need to create space for conversations that highlight the illegality of cybercrime, as well as identifying and humanising victims to combat the sense of isolation and distance. Raising awareness of initiatives such as the [Cyber Security Challenge](#), which provides opportunities for children and young people to develop their cyber skills in a safe yet challenging environment that promotes their curiosity and recognises the importance of such skills for the future workforce.

## In Scotland

The Serious Organised Crime Service by Action for Children is a multi-agency partnership initiative to target and divert young people away from SOC in two areas of Glasgow. This service is the only project of its kind in Scotland. The service was set up to work with young people aged 12-18 years, over a three year period, in response to identifying the vulnerability of children and young people in these geographical areas, specifically to SOC involvement.

One of the key findings of Whyte & Menzies (2016) report regarding the Organised Crime Service reflected that almost a third of the young people in the service were involved with social work services from birth and 93% had involvement over a significant period.

The report also found that, of the young people involved in the Serious Organised Crime Service:

- 80% aged 16-18yrs
- Youngest was 13yrs
- **31% known to social work since birth**
- **93% previous social work involvement**
- 50% previous care / kinship care history
- 43% previous period of secure care

- 87% pro-criminal family
- 100% disengaged from education/ refused to attend school
- 100% known to police
- 100% termed as perennial non-engagers and viewed as hard to reach by statutory services

The report highlighted the following key mechanisms to divert children and young people away from SOC:

1. Disassociation from known offenders.
2. Provision of or direction towards positive role models.
3. Encouragement in the formation of stable relationships.
4. Working towards the acquisition of a sense of direction and self-awareness through diversion and engagement.

## What can you do?

From the available, limited SOC research, certain commonalities can be identified across the groups of children and young people at risk of SOC. Relationships are noted as one of the strongest drivers and facilitators of involvement in SOC – including for children and young people – from relationships which create a tie and sense of expectation, perhaps from family connections, through to peer relationships and attempts to feel included by and bonded with others. The adults who groom and exploit these children and young people, to engage in behaviours that are usually illegal and harmful, use relationships to facilitate this. Also consider:

- Mapping relationships across individual, or groups of, children and young people, with particular adults or locations they are attending, which may assist in identifying exploitative behaviours
- Coordinated discussion by appropriate agencies such as Education, Police Scotland, and Social Work to consider whether exploitation by SOC is present
- Where appropriate, linking with family members to involve them in addressing concerns
- What, if any, protective measures are required such as [Child Protection](#) or [Care and Risk Management \(CARM\)](#) that do not increase risk to the child / young person or their family
- Ensuring appropriate interventions and/or supports are available, and consider who is best to progress this with the child / young person and family, as statutory agencies may not be best placed
- Recognising that these children / young people will value the relationships or perceived standing within their role with any SOC and will be unlikely to disclose information. Building a trusting relationship is key

- Clear multi-agency assessments and understanding of risk to the child, their family and practitioners in relation to contact with members of SOC in undertaking any intervention

The above actions are applicable across all work with children and young people. As already highlighted, it is about understanding the nuances of where SOC may be involved, and within this context understanding the possible risks, and how these can be managed for all involved.

[The Serious and Organised Crime Interactive Toolkit](#) for 11-18 year olds, devised by the Home Office, attempts to provide practitioners working with children and young people with information to help them:

- Understand why young people get involved in SOC
- Understand how organised criminals operate
- Spot risks and identify when young people need support
- Help young people at risk to access the support they need

This toolkit can be a starting point to understanding the nuances of how SOC recruits and uses children and young people and why they might be unwilling or unable to remove themselves from such involvement. This must be understood within a GIRFEC framework, with multi-agency involvement as appropriate. There is often a focus for third sector involvement, which may assist in overcoming barriers to engagement.

## Conclusion

It will not always be obvious that a child or young person is at risk of exploitation from SOC, or already being exploited. The risk indicators are similar, if not the same as those which may increase the risk of involvement in 'typical' offending behaviour. However, there are some additional factors which are more specific to SOC. Being aware of these indicators as well as considering the involvement or influence of SOC are crucial to identifying children at risk and in taking preventive, diversionary and most importantly protective actions.

It is important to understand that SOC adapts to maximise opportunities, not just within expected illegal activities such as drugs, counterfeit goods, financial crime – it is evolving into the areas particularly relevant to children and young people, such as cybercrime and CSEA. Thus, where an adult or someone is suspected of orchestrating a child's involvement in offending behaviour, then exploitation and SOC should always be investigated.

## References

Menezes, D. and Whyte, B (2016) *Serious Organised Crime Service*. Glasgow: Action for Children (Unpublished)

Cavallaro, J. (2015). *Violence, children and organized crime*.