

Introduction to CCE in Scotland

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This Info Sheet provides an introduction to Nesha Dixon's four-staged scoping review, undertaken to establish a baseline understanding of the nature, scale and extent of Child Criminal Exploitation (CCE) in Scotland. The four stages consist of: a literature review; the collation of multi-agency data; interviews with 22 professionals; and a survey completed by 45 residential staff. This summary draws predominantly on stages three and four. To read either the full report or the young person-friendly version, click [HERE](#).

Differing Perspectives, Inconsistent Approaches

A number of the key issues from a Scottish perspective reflect wider challenges experienced in addressing CCE across the UK. Responding to CCE as a child protection issue (as in the [National Child Protection Guidance](#)) was seen as critical by a number of professionals interviewed, as was targeting exploiters rather than criminalising children. The adultification of exploited children was also identified as problematic. A number of factors perpetuate this including: the language used; responding through a criminal lens; the view that children choose to be involved and the fact that some children don't agree / understand that they are being exploited. It is common for services to place responsibility for being exploited upon the child rather than their exploiter(s).

The need for a statutory definition of CCE and the effective application and knowledge of policy and legislation is intertwined with the need for stronger implementation of child protection in instances of CCE. There was also notable variation in relation to the use, and role of, the National Referral Mechanism (NRM) within practice.

Risk of Harm

CCE carries with it the risk of serious and significant harm. Sixty percent of participants reported an increase in weapons being used/carried by children, with protection given as the main reason. Professionals identified the risk of violence and sexual harm as being pervasive, with exploiters looking to assert control, punish those they exploit, or induct them via initiations. The risk of harm extends beyond children to family members and staff. Multiple participants reported safety measures being employed, e.g., families having to be moved. This risk is accentuated when organised crime groups (OCG) and serious organised crime groups (SOCG) are involved.

Types of CCE

The range of exploitation noted by professionals was varied, though not exhaustive. It includes: drug related activities (incl., but not solely related to County Lines); enforcement; acquisitive activities e.g. vehicles stolen to order; fraud; robbery; burglary (targeting both domestic and commercial property); shoplifting; holding illegal items such as weapons; begging; selling alcohol; and targeted vandalism.

Prevalence, Legislation and Data

The limited data available simultaneously highlights and exacerbates the difficulty in trying to understand the prevalence, scale and extent of CCE across Scotland. Police Scotland recorded 236 police concerns from March 2022 to February 2023 across 30 Local Authority areas. The nine responses from Local Authorities illustrated the lack of a consistent approach to recording and analysing data. 350 charges relating to the Human Trafficking and Exploitation (Scotland) Act 2015 were reported in total to the Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service (COPFS) as of 28th February 2023, of which 195 were prosecuted. However, as 'criminal exploitation' is not recognised as a criminal offence in itself under current legislation, COPFS could not advise how many involved CCE.

Identifying CCE

Professionals we spoke to identified a number of CCE indicators that could be grouped across: family and home life; socio-economic; and individual experiences. These should be viewed within the context of that child and their life, rather than being approached as a tick box exercise. Importantly, participants highlighted that children from any background could be at risk of exploitation. The main indicator identified was change: changes that couldn't be explained, whether in presentation, material belongings, money, behaviour, peers, mood, mental health, activities, places where they go, and attitudes.

Where are children being targeted?

Exploitation commonly occurs online; digital platforms that were identified included Snapchat, Xbox live (and similar gaming portals), Instagram, Facebook and the dark web, but these change and evolve constantly. Physical spaces where children might be targeted include: schools; chain stores; shopping centres; newsagents; takeaways; pop-up parties; barbershops; secure care centres; and young offender institutions.

Trends

Professionals grouped trends into categories, e.g., prevalence, victims, exploiters, risks, geographical, covid-19. There was a sense that younger children were being exploited, with a shift towards children aged 12-13 rather than 15- to 17-year-olds. 40% of participants felt CCE was increasing, with a disconnect between the numbers reported by professionals and the number of children appearing on the Serious Organised Crime mapping system. A number of participants highlighted the fact that children exploited on a long-term basis would then be used to recruit other children.

Next steps

- The relative lack of data needs addressed, to improve understanding of scale and prevalence.
- A statutory definition of CCE should be introduced, and improvements made to the effectiveness and use of legal remedies.
- The development of policy and strategy with, and by, children and young people. This should promote information sharing as part of a multi-agency partnership approach and should avoid criminalising children who have been criminally exploited.
- More awareness raising and training, strengthening the ability of systems to respond meaningfully and effectively; practitioners should have the opportunity to upskill, and resources should be shared equitably across Scotland, ensuring access to specialist services.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the scoping review illustrates that CCE poses a significant risk to children; it is an issue across Scotland with findings mirroring other parts of the UK. Further research is necessary to truly understand the nature, scale and prevalence in Scotland; this can then inform how to address CCE effectively. Improved information sharing also has a role to play here.

Exploited children, their families, and staff who support them face the risk of significant and serious harm; CCE needs to be reframed as child abuse, and is clearly a child protection concern.

For further info/support contact CYCJ on 0141 444 8622 or cycj@strath.ac.uk