



**UNDERSTANDING CHILD
CRIMINAL EXPLOITATION IN
SCOTLAND:
CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE'S REPORT**

MAY, 2023

WHAT IS CCE?

What does Child Criminal Exploitation mean?

Child Criminal Exploitation is a form of child abuse. It is when a person or group controls a child into carrying out crime. The person controlling the child (the exploiter) usually benefits in some way from this.

The exploiter might give the child something the child wants or needs in exchange for committing the crimes, or they might use violence to get the child to do what they want.

Sometimes, the child might not realise they are a victim of CCE. It is important to remember that even when a child appears to be willingly carrying out crimes for the exploiter, they are still being exploited.



What are the different types of CCE?

There are many different types of crimes that children can be exploited into carrying out. Some of the most common types are:

- Transporting and dealing drugs
- Shoplifting or theft
- Cannabis growing
- Begging or busking
- Financial exploitation

How many people are affected by CCE?

It is really difficult to know how many people are affected by CCE. Victims often don't come forward because they are scared of what will happen, or because they don't realise they are being exploited. Also, awareness around CCE is too low in Scotland - so professionals and other adults might not realise when a child is being exploited. The statistics we do have show that across the UK, for the year 2021, 2679 potential victims of CCE were identified. The actual number, though, is likely much higher.



WHO IS AFFECTED BY CCE?

Any child could be criminally exploited, however exploiters might target some groups of children more than others. Our research found that the below factors can influence the likelihood that a child will be criminally exploited.

➤ **Additional support needs**

Children with additional support needs might be more vulnerable to CCE, including children with learning disabilities, ADHD, Autism, Dyslexia and other needs. These children might be more easily controlled by exploiters as they might be less able to make sense of the situation

➤ **Adversity, trauma, bereavement**

Professionals we spoke to said that children who have had difficult or traumatic experiences can be more at risk of CCE, including those who have been previously exploited

➤ **Age**

The professionals we spoke to said that the most common age group of victims of CCE is 13 to 16. Some professionals said they felt like victims were getting younger, with exploiters now targeting 12 and 13 year olds more often.

➤ **Care experience**

The professionals we spoke to felt this was a big factor. Children who are, or who have been, in care can be more at risk for a range of reasons, including that they often feel quite isolated and are looking for a group to belong to. Exploiters are often aware of this and target residential children's houses, recruiting several children at once.

➤ **Ethnicity**

Research from other parts of the UK shows that Black and minority ethnic children are overrepresented in CCE statistics. We don't know whether this is because these children are exploited more, or because racism and stereotypes mean police are more likely to identify and arrest them. There is less research about this in Scotland. The professionals we spoke to felt that ethnicity can play a role, however they added that children of all ethnicities can be exploited.

Family problems

Children with difficult home lives were thought to be more at risk. This might be where there is a breakdown in family relationships, or where parents have been neglectful or abusive. It was felt that exploiters could more easily take advantage of children who have lots of difficult things going on in their lives.

Gender

Statistics that we looked at showed that boys are much more likely to be criminally exploited than girls. However, we heard several cases of girls being exploited, and it is possible that girls are not being identified as often or quickly as boys because of assumptions that boys are more likely to be involved in crime.

Going missing

Children who go missing from home, care or school are vulnerable to being criminally exploited. They also often go missing more often once they start being criminally exploited.

Nationality

The majority of children who are criminally exploited in the UK are from the UK, however migrant children are overrepresented in statistics. Some children might have been exploited during their journey to the UK, whilst others might be targeted once they are here. Migrant children might be worried that if they report their exploiter to the police, they will be deported, and exploiters can take advantage of this fear.

Not in school

Our research found this was one of the most important factors in increasing a child's risk of CCE. This can include children who have been excluded. This is because these children might end up spending a lot of their time in the community without any adults looking after them.

Poor mental health

The professionals we heard from said that children who had poor mental health can be targeted. Children with self-esteem issues were seen as particularly vulnerable, as they often want to be liked and don't want to be rejected which can make it easier for exploiters to recruit them.

Poverty

Children who are living in poverty can be at higher risk of CCE. This is because they might be in more need of money, food, clothes, and other items, which exploiters can give them in exchange for carrying out crimes.

WHAT ARE THE WARNING SIGNS OF CCE?

By looking at research from across the UK, and through our interviews and survey of professionals in Scotland, we found a range of warning signs that might suggest a child is being criminally exploited. We have listed these below.

It is important to remember that if a child is showing some of these signs it does not mean they are definitely being criminally exploited. These signs should be considered alongside the child's individual situation.

➤ **New clothes, items or money**

This is one of the most common signs, especially if the child won't explain where their new possessions came from



➤ **Changes in behaviour**

This could include the child being more secretive about what they are doing, spending more time online, going missing, using alcohol or drugs and changes in sleeping patterns



➤ **Changes in social activity**

This could include the child going out more often and being picked up in cars or taxis, or if they start spending time with new, older friendship groups



➤ **Changes in mental health, self-esteem or mood**

This could be if a child's mental health gets worse, they might become depressed or anxious and might start self-harming. They might have more emotional outbursts, struggle to control their mood and have lowered self-esteem



➤ **Signs of physical or sexual harm**

This could be physical injuries, especially knife or weapon related injuries, or signs of sexual assault



WHAT ARE THE RISKS OF CCE?

Our research showed that the impact of Child Criminal Exploitation for children can be severe. There are a range of risks that CCE poses. These can have an immediate negative impact on children's lives, and a more long-term impact as they become adults. Below are five of the most common risks related to CCE according to our research.

Serious physical or sexual harm

Children who are exploited can experience serious physical and sexual harm, including death. This can be from their exploiter, or from other people they come into contact with through being exploited

Mental health and trauma

Children might feel stressed and afraid, and often witness or experience very traumatic events. This can lead to children developing long-term mental health issues. The risk of self-harm and suicide is high

Criminalisation

Sometimes children who are being exploited aren't recognised as victims. Instead they are viewed as responsible for the crimes they carry out and can be arrested, sentenced, and receive criminal records

Brain development

Experiencing traumatic events can have a big impact on how our brains develop. Children who are being exploited are likely to be in survival mode, which can change how their brains develop and lead to them having difficulties later in life



Drug and alcohol use

CCE can lead to children starting to use alcohol and drugs to help them cope, or using them more often. They can become dependent on these substances, which exploiters have often given them in return for carrying out crime



WHAT NEEDS TO CHANGE?

There are a lot of things we need to do differently if we want to better respond to Child Criminal Exploitation and prevent it from happening in the first place.

Our research showed us there were several key challenges facing us in Scotland, but also opportunities for how we can overcome these. These are listed below.

➤ **Better support children and make sure their needs are met**

A key way that exploiters are able to control children is by giving them something they want or need - like money, food, or a sense of belonging. To prevent CCE, we need to be better at supporting children and making sure these needs are met. This could be through better education or employment opportunities; helping them build good relationships with family, friends, or workers; or through positive community activities like youth groups. It is also important that children are able to access the mental health supports they need - which means we need to ensure services are available to them as and when they need it.

➤ **Make sure that children who are being exploited are seen as victims of child abuse**

CCE is a form of child abuse, however our research showed us that children affected by this are often not seen as victims. This means they don't get the support they need and often end up with criminal records for the crimes they commit whilst being exploited. We need to make sure that police and other justice professionals working with children understand that people affected by CCE are victims of child abuse.

➤ **Increase knowledge and awareness about CCE amongst professionals, families and children**

This could be in the form of awareness-raising training with different groups of people, including social workers, police, teachers, residential childcare workers, etc. This should also involve speaking with children and families so that they are aware of the warning signs and risks of CCE. This would help us all be better at identifying when someone is being criminally exploited.

➤ **Improve how we collect data about CCE**

Currently, data on CCE is not well recorded which means we don't have a full picture of what is happening. Improving how CCE is recorded and making sure this data is widely available will help us know more about the scale and nature of CCE.

➤ **Improve how information is shared between different agencies**

Whilst our research found that different agencies are often working well together when responding to CCE, sometimes enough information wasn't shared quickly enough which meant that key people didn't have what they needed to properly respond to CCE and support the children they were working with.



SUPPORT AVAILABLE

There are a range of services available to support children who are victims or at risk of child criminal exploitation. A list of these services can be found in our main report.

If you, or someone you know, has been affected by CCE **it is really important that you speak to someone** about this. This could be a family member, a teacher, a social worker, or another adult that you trust.



You can also speak to **Childline**. If you are a young person, you can call Childline on **0800 1111**. If you are an adult concerned about a child, you can call 0808 800 5000. You can also message them on their webchat via [their website](#).

You can also report CCE to **Crimestoppers**. You are able to do this 100% anonymously. You can find out how to do this on [their website](#).



If you or the child you are concerned about doesn't already have a social worker, you can find out contact details for their [local social work department here](#).

If you are a parent or carer, you can also contact **Children 1st Parentline** to discuss your concerns. Their phone number is 08000 28 22 33 or you can contact them via [their website](#)



It is very important that if you, or someone you know, is in immediate danger as a result of CCE that you call the police on 101 or 999

ABOUT OUR RESEARCH

This resource is based on research carried out in 2023 by Nesha Dixon for the Children and Young People's Centre for Justice (CYCJ), Action for Children and the Scottish Government.

We were looking to find out more about Child Criminal Exploitation (CCE) because in Scotland there is not enough research about this issue.

There were four parts to this research:

- **A literature review** where we read research about CCE from across the UK
- The **collection of data** from different agencies in Scotland, including Police Scotland, Local Authorities and the Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal
- **Interviews with 22 professionals** whose role is related to CCE in some way
- **A survey** of residential childcare workers which was completed by 45 people

Findings from this research were then written up in our report "*Understanding Child Criminal Exploitation in Scotland: A Scoping Review*".

This resource summarises these findings, but if you'd like to read the full report you can access it via CYCJ's website.