



Shattered lives, stolen futures

The Jay Review of Criminally Exploited Children
Executive Summary

Content warning: This summary contains details, descriptions and first-hand accounts of violence, sexual assault, exploitation, drug use and traumatic events experienced by children and young people.

The Jay Review of Criminally Exploited Children

In November 2023, Action for Children launched the Jay Review of Criminally Exploited Children to gather evidence from expert witnesses on the scale and nature of the criminal exploitation of children, the legal and policy response across the UK and the support available to victims.

The Review was chaired by Professor Alexis Jay CBE, chair of the Centre for Excellence for Children’s Care and Protection and former chair of the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse.

Professor Jay was supported by Simon Bailey CBE QPM, the former Chief Constable of Norfolk Constabulary and a member of the Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel from 2021–2024, and Charles Geekie KC, a barrister specialising in areas of the law relating to children and a Trustee of Action for Children.

Over four days of hearings in November 2023, the panel heard 25 hours of evidence from witnesses in person and via video footage.

In total, the Review has received evidence from 70 organisations or individuals, including children, parents and mentors with lived experience of exploitation. A wide range of practitioners and senior leaders have contributed – from children’s services, education, local government, charities, inspectorates, academia and the police and youth justice systems across the UK, including the Children’s Commissioners from all four nations.

This executive summary outlines what the panel heard and learned from these expert contributions and its recommendations for a new system designed with the purpose of tackling the criminal exploitation of children.



“It’s the loneliest place in the world to be”

Liam* was fatally stabbed at the age of 18.

He had attended one of the best secondary schools in his area and was doing well until the pandemic. During lockdown, he formed a new friendship group linked to criminality and drugs and began to go missing. His parents reported this to the police. Liam told his mum that he’d been asked to hold money in a wallet. He lost the wallet and was then in debt to his friends. He began to lose things regularly (his phone, a bike, his house keys) as well as having unexplained new clothes.

After being found by the police in possession of drugs and a phone used for dealing, Liam was referred to Action for Children. In the months leading up to his death, he’d withdrawn from involvement in criminal activity.

Liam’s mother, Natalie, gave her view on the changes needed to support children like her son:

“From the time I was first extremely worried about my son I asked everyone I came into contact with – GP, social work, police, hospital staff, school liaison officers, intervention staff – one question: What have you seen work? None of the professionals who are dealing with the fallout have any idea of what works.

We are ill-equipped to protect and respond.

We simply don’t have the knowledge or the tools to tackle this effectively. The dangers faced by children have changed but our approaches haven’t. If the kid isn’t from a single-parent family or a deprived background, services simply don’t recognise the danger.

People said things like, ‘he’ll grow out of it’, ‘he’s just testing his boundaries’.

*This city is awash with cannabis. They want kids using it so they can sell them the next drug and then the next drug. **It is not harmless.** Criminals specifically targeted school kids with it throughout lockdown. They aren’t giving up that market now. It is pervasive harm targeted at kids which they can buy in school or have delivered to their doorstep while mum makes dinner.*

*The dealers want kids to supply for them. They target fit kids with bikes and scooters. They don’t give a hoot how much school they miss, what relationships it destroys, whether those kids end up in hospital or sleeping rough. **People don’t know what is going on until their kid is drowning in something toxic and that’s the loneliest place in the world to be.***

A parent with concerns needs to be able to tell someone who will believe them and who can help and that place doesn’t exist just now. The first time I felt like I was being listened to by someone who totally got it was when the youth justice sergeant visited and then when Liam was introduced to an Action for Children peer mentor.

*Lastly, **we need hope.** I think that comes from facing the issues, building knowledge, and working out some of the answers to the question I pestered everyone with: what have you seen work?”*

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I slept with one eye and one ear open for years and years.

Vicky, parent

“

It’s any kid they come across, they will try and suck them into what they do as a lifestyle. Like they aren’t going to just look at a kid and be like, oh, not him today. No, it’s every kid that walks past a group of boys will get sucked in.

Sy, young person with experience of exploitation



*Throughout this report, all names and some identifying characteristics of children and families have been changed to protect the anonymity of those who spoke to the review.

The criminal exploitation of children in the UK

The criminal exploitation of children is a complex type of child abuse where a young person is manipulated or pressured to take part in criminal activity.

It takes a range of forms including dealing and transporting drugs or weapons (including county lines), growing cannabis, theft and burglary; and street crime such as begging and pickpocketing. Exploited children often experience multiple types of abuse at the same time, including violence, threats, emotional and sexual abuse.

Action for Children delivers services that help prevent vulnerable children from becoming involved in criminal activity. Since 2012, its Serious Organised Crime Early Intervention Service (SOCIES) has helped children at risk in eight areas of the UK, including Glasgow, Edinburgh, Newcastle and Cardiff.

Over the past decade, the criminal exploitation of children has become a growing priority for child protection, police, schools and local support agencies. Terms like ‘county lines’ have gained traction in the media, contributing to a broader public awareness of criminal exploitation. Research reviews, changes to national policy and guidance and service restructures have been undertaken to tackle exploitation, with several government programmes aimed at funding innovation and improvement in adolescent safeguarding and preventing youth violence.

Despite this, the crisis of exploitation is getting worse. Though the lack of a legal definition means there is no comprehensive data collection across the UK, the patchwork of data available gives an indication of the scale of the problem. In 2023, 7,432 referrals relating to children were made to the National Referral Mechanism (NRM), the framework for identifying potential victims of modern slavery and criminal exploitation, an increase of 45% since 2021¹. The most common reason for referral was criminal exploitation (3,123), with over 40% of those relating to county lines. Between April 2022 and March 2023, 14,420 children in need assessments in England recorded criminal exploitation as a risk of harm, an increase from 10,140 the previous year². These figures are a product both of increase in prevalence and increase in identification.

Too many young lives are being lost and blighted as a result of criminal exploitation, and too many families are not receiving the help they need. Over the five years between April 2018 and March 2023, 568 children aged 16–24 were violently killed in England and Wales³, and 24 in Scotland⁴. The vast majority were killed by being stabbed. Over the same period in England and Wales there were 19,399 cautions or convictions of children under 18 for possession of a knife or offensive weapon⁵ in addition to 20,973 drug offences⁶.

The link between criminal exploitation and serious violence has been strengthened over the past 10 years⁷, with increasing evidence from agencies such as the National Crime Agency stating that violence at street level is often linked to drugs supply, and criminal exploitation in particular (through county lines)⁸. The UK government’s Beating Crime Plan notes that changes to the drugs market such as county lines are fuelling increases in serious youth violence⁹. Violence Reduction Units have taken into account their approach to combat the criminal exploitation of children as part of local strategies. Additionally, the implementation of the Serious Violence Duty in England and Wales during 2022 has legally obliged authorities to work together in addressing the adverse effects of serious violence, including criminal exploitation¹⁰.

As the understanding of criminal exploitation has grown, a complex picture of the operating model of perpetrators, gangs and criminal organisations has developed. There is a wide spectrum of criminal activity linked to child exploitation, from local street gangs dealing drugs on a ‘postcode’ model, to serious organised crime groups (OCGs) operating across national borders. The UK government’s Serious and Organised Crime Strategy estimates the cost of organised crime (including county lines) at £47 billion a year, noting that a single county line is able to generate £800,000 of income annually.¹¹

51

children killed in England and Wales between April 2022 and March 2023.



4

children killed in Scotland during the same time period (April 2022 and March 2023)



Criminal exploitation recorded for

14,420

children in need assessments in England between April 2022 and March 2023.



7,432

referrals of children to the National Referral Mechanism in 2023.



15,623

people (adults and children) arrested through the County Lines Programme in England and Wales between 2019 and 2023¹².



Any child can become a victim of exploitation. However, the majority of victims have a range of risk factors that make them particularly vulnerable.

These include:

- Having had previous contact with the youth justice system
- Being a child in need or care-experienced
- Poor mental health
- Special educational needs or disabilities (SEND), particularly ADHD or ASD*
- Alcohol or substance misuse issues
- A history of adverse childhood experiences
- Living in poverty or homelessness
- Exclusion from mainstream education
- Unsettled immigration status in the UK
- Perceived sense of status, belonging and/or protection

*Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and autism spectrum disorder

Black and minority ethnic children are overrepresented in statistics on criminal exploitation and are more likely to experience multiple vulnerabilities that put them at risk of exploitation, including contact with the youth justice system, poverty, undiagnosed special educational needs and exclusion from school.

What we heard from children, parents and professionals

Throughout the Review, we heard about the devastating impact of exploitation on children, their families and communities.

Through the eyes of children and young people, exploiters often don't appear to be criminals. They are seen as friends or local figures with wealth, status and influence. They offer false promises of financial gain, social standing and community protection that makes it hard for children to understand the danger they pose. The resulting harm is both acute and long-lasting, and includes criminalisation, incarceration, drug addiction, psychological trauma and brutal physical and sexual violence.

We heard about the speed with which a young person can become trapped in exploitation, and the difficulty they face in extracting themselves once the cycle of exploitation has begun. The response of the system to exploitation is often slow, reactive and lacking in capacity. It frequently targets children's behaviour rather than their vulnerability and creates barriers to a coordinated, child-centred, family-focused and effective approach.

From parents, we heard of the fear and desperation of witnessing their children being groomed, coerced and threatened into criminal and dangerous activity. Often under threat of violence, it is common for children to conceal their exploitation, meaning parents may not realise what is happening until it is too late. We heard that parents can feel judged and abandoned by a complex web of services, left to cope with their child's situation alone until it escalates to the point of crisis.

From professionals and practitioners, we heard about the dedication of those working to care for children in a system that is fragmented and frustrating at every turn. Data and information sharing, funding and resources, disconnected policies, failures of partnership working and a lack of training or awareness of exploitation act as barriers to coordinated, targeted approaches.

Progress made across the UK at a local level – in schools, child protection, family support, criminal justice and policing – is too often unsupported by the legislative and policy framework that ought to underpin the whole. This includes a response at government level that is uncoordinated and lacks the urgency and political heft required.

Finally, we heard the pride of the mentors with lived experience who support children caught in cycles of exploitation and violence, and their belief that every child can find their way to a safe and happy childhood.

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Often, all they need is a bit of care. They haven't had it their whole life. That can sometimes be enough for them to think, 'no, I actually think you've got my good interests at heart, and I do want to listen to you and I do want to get out of this life'. ... It's important that every young person has the opportunity to know what their gifts are and to use their gifts to go and do well in life.

H, Action for Children mentor

“

These days, it's like the kids out there, they're drowning. They're only looking to each other for support. Then we wonder why there's so many issues with the drugs, the alcohol, the knife crime.

Femi, young person with experience of exploitation

What we learned

As we listened to those with lived experience, to professionals and to experts from across the four nations of the UK, a number of key lessons stood out.

1

The absence of a clear and consistent definition of the criminal exploitation of children contributes to a failure to protect and support children. The ability of services to safeguard children is limited by the lack of a specific child protection pathway for risk that occurs outside the home, and the complexity of the legal system for children who commit crimes as part of their exploitation. A statutory definition is essential to enable a new offence to be established and so that there can be a consistent response across agencies and sectors, to prevent a postcode lottery, and to identify exploited children more quickly. The proposed definition of the Review is below. Supporting guidance should be clear that exploitation is a form of child abuse that can occur online or in person.

A statutory definition of the criminal exploitation of children

We echo calls for a statutory definition and propose the following wording:

The criminal exploitation of children occurs where an individual or group takes advantage of an imbalance of power to coerce, control, manipulate or deceive a child into criminal activity. The victim may have been criminally exploited even if the activity appears consensual.

2

Existing legislation and criminal processes are not fit for purpose in identifying or protecting exploited children, and are leading to vulnerable children being failed. Section 45 of the Modern Slavery Act 2015 in England and Wales, which gives a defence against being prosecuted for crimes committed while a victim of modern slavery, is too restrictive in its understanding of exploitation and does not always comply with children's rights. The National Referral Mechanism does not offer effective protection to children, with delays of up to 18 months for a decision to be issued; in some cases, preventing the defence of modern slavery being used in court.

In Scotland, the Human Trafficking and Exploitation (Scotland) Act 2015 requires the Lord Advocate to issue instructions for prosecutors that include presumption against the prosecution for exploited children. However, this only addresses criminal offences linked to exploitation and does not offer protection at an earlier stage.

In addition, the current approach is too lenient on exploiters. There are very few prosecutions under the Modern Slavery Act in England and Wales, with 47 prosecutions and 24 convictions between January and June 2023¹³. This is in contrast to the 15,623 adults and children who have been arrested through the County Lines Programme in England and Wales since 2019¹⁴.

The picture is similar in Scotland. In the period 2020/21 to 2022/23, 116 accused were reported to the Crown for an offence in terms of the Human Trafficking and Exploitation (Scotland) Act 2015. Ninety-two were placed on petition or indictment, and two on summary complaint, for an offence in terms of the 2015 Act. In the first six months of 2023, 24 accused have been reported to the Crown for an offence in terms of the 2015 Act, 13 of whom have been placed on petition or indictment so far¹⁵.



3

Too many exploited children are treated as criminals rather than victims and do not receive a child protection response. This causes additional harm to children and makes them more vulnerable to further exploitation. The aim of youth justice across the UK should be to prevent exploited children entering the criminal justice system, using diversion wherever possible.

In February 2024, an inspection of the Metropolitan Police¹⁶ found it was ‘ineffective’ in its handling of criminal exploitation of children – a concerning finding for a force handling the largest number of county lines and serious youth violence cases in the UK.

4

The lack of data on exploitation makes it more difficult to identify, prevent and respond to it.

Children cannot be safeguarded from exploitation if we do not know where, how and to whom exploitation is happening across the country. A lack of information sharing at a national level is hindering our understanding of the scale and extent of the criminal exploitation of children, patterns of criminal activity, priority areas of focus and whether progress is being made. Practitioners attempting to share information and learning at a local level are frustrated by incompatible IT systems, requirements to record data in multiple formats, and concerns about the interpretation of GDPR.

5

School is an essential protective factor in children’s lives. Primary and secondary schools, alongside early years settings, alternative provision and further education, are vital in identifying and safeguarding children at risk of exploitation, but do not always have the right tools to do so. There is high variability in schools’ understanding of exploitation and ability to respond, including approaches to children with low attendance or who are at risk of exclusion.

6

Local safeguarding arrangements are not always effective in supporting children at risk of exploitation.

The existing child protection and legal frameworks were not designed to tackle, at scale, harm to children that happens outside the family home (known as ‘extra-familial’ harm or ‘risk outside the home’).

Collaboration between agencies working with children is essential for ensuring children receive the best safeguarding and support to promote their wellbeing. A gap in statutory guidance and the lack of a specific child protection pathway for risk outside the home has led to variation between local authorities in their approach to exploitation.

7

Early intervention is essential to prevent and disrupt exploitation but a decade of funding cuts in early intervention services has restricted the ability of services to respond. Alongside the benefits to children, investing in early intervention is well-evidenced in avoiding the substantial costs to the public purse associated with crisis support, high-intensity care placements, A&E attendance, police time and costs to the youth justice system.

8

Serious, preventable harm to children is being caused by a lack of national leadership.

There is no consistent strategy, leadership or focus from central government on tackling criminal exploitation as an urgent and preventable crisis. Collaborative intentions – locally and nationally – are undermined by different priorities across local agencies and government departments, with a lack of collective national investment, impact analysis or shared view of outcomes.



Recommendations of the Jay Review of Criminally Exploited Children

The criminal exploitation of children is a hugely complex problem. In attempting to repurpose the existing structures of child protection and criminal justice, the system of support around children has replicated that complexity.

The Review has heard detailed evidence on the many aspects of legislation, policy and practice that are not working effectively in supporting children. Witnesses suggested nearly 150 recommendations for improvements, including amendments to policy, guidance, funding arrangements, social care practice and legislation. Though there is no doubt that these changes would constitute improvements to current provision, they do not tackle the

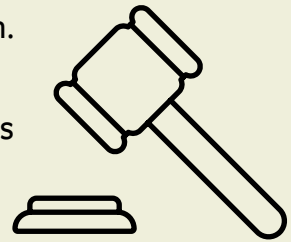
fundamental problem that the system as it stands is not fit for purpose. Indeed, much of the current framework was never designed to be applied in cases of child exploitation.

What is required is a new system designed with the explicit purpose of tackling the criminal exploitation of children.

We recommend this is built on the following three pillars:

1 A single, cohesive legal code designed to tackle the criminal exploitation of children.

- The criminal exploitation of children should be given a statutory definition within UK law and included in the relevant legislation and guidance across England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. A consultation should be held with children and families to develop corresponding guidance.
- Specific legislation should be drawn up for England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland covering child abuse through exploitation. This should create a new criminal offence of criminal exploitation.
- The legal and human rights of the most vulnerable children must be safeguarded throughout, as set out in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC).
- New powers should be given to the police and criminal justice system to identify and sanction exploiters.



2 Coordinated policy and practice at a local and national level.

- The UK government should take the lead in developing a national strategy for preventing the criminal exploitation of children.
- Exploitation must be recognised as a distinct category of child protection in all four nations with a new pathway for protecting children from risk outside the home.
- A welfare-first approach should be taken in the management of offences committed by exploited children.
- Local safeguarding arrangements must be robust and well-funded.



3 Investment, research and whole-system learning.

- Investment and funding for early intervention and prevention services for exploited children must be specific, increased and ring-fenced.
- Data and information collection must be standardised to allow for identification of children at risk and disruption of perpetrators, with a new cross-border protocol for sharing data between the four nations.
- Data, learning and evidence from the four nations must be brought together to understand the full picture of exploitation and apply what works.



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Report published March 2024

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