

Knife Crime General Debate: Monday 16th October 2023

Summary

- Child Criminal Exploitation is a form of child abuse, and can involve children being coerced into carrying, supplying and concealing knives and other weapons, among other forms of criminal activity.
- Exploiters and organised criminal gangs (OCGs) are utilising the cost-of-living crisis to exploit and coerce children and young people.
- Child criminal exploitation is misunderstood by professionals, which prevents the early identification of child victims. Too often, child victims of exploitation are criminalised rather than appropriately safeguarded, something which exploiters and OCGs anticipate and utilise to their advantage.
- Youth services play a vital role in tackling serious youth violence and child criminal exploitation, however they are not appropriately invested in. In the past 10 years, funding in youth services has been cut by £1.1 billion.
- For children who have been exploited, accessing a specialist support service is a postcode lottery, leaving children without the necessary support to help them process their trauma and escape the cycle of abuse and exploitation.
- Barnardo's, alongside a coalition of children's charities led by the NSPCC, is calling on the Government to take action for child victims of exploitation through the Victims and Prisoners Bill. This includes:
 - The introduction of a statutory definition of child criminal exploitation.
 - Placing a funded duty on the relevant authorities to commission sufficient specific support services for all child victims, including of abuse and exploitation.

1. Child Criminal Exploitation

- Child Criminal Exploitation (CCE) is when a child under the age of 18 is encouraged, expected or required to take part in any activity that constitutes a criminal offence under British law.¹ CCE can take many forms, including where children are coerced into carrying, supplying and concealing knives and other weapons. It can also involve the carrying and supplying of drugs, stealing or shoplifting to order, cannabis cultivation, and forced begging. CCE is a form of child abuse.
- All children can be at risk of exploitation, and there is no 'typical' victim, with children from different backgrounds and locations being vulnerable. However, those who do exploit children will often target children from particular groups that can be vulnerable because of inadequate protective structures. These include children in poverty; refugee and asylum-seeking children; children in care and care leavers; children with special educational needs or disabilities (SEND); children experiencing other forms of harm; and children who are out of school, including those who have been excluded.²
- It is difficult to get an accurate picture of the scale of CCE taking place in the UK, often due to fragmented and flawed data collection, a lack of understanding about CCE, and children being blamed and criminalised for their exploitation.

¹ This is Barnardo's and The Children Society's preferred definition for Child Criminal Exploitation. We hope that this will be included by the Government in the Victims and Prisoners Bill.

² Barnardo's, 2023. [Invisible Children: Understanding the risk of the cost-of-living crisis and school holidays on child sexual and criminal exploitation](#)

- Across the UK, 3,013 children were referred to the National Referral mechanism for child criminal exploitation in 2022, accounting for 43% of all children referred.³ These figures are just the tip of the iceberg, and there are some indications that CSE and CCE is a growing problem. In 2019, the then-Children’s Commissioner estimated that there were 27,000 children at high risk of exploitation by organised criminal gangs – and she did note that this is a conservative estimate.⁴
- In recent years, the use of online platforms to contact, groom and exploit children, and to keep them trapped in cycles of exploitation has increased.
- At an All-Party Parliamentary Group event on Child Criminal Exploitation on the Online Safety Bill, Barnardo’s practitioners said that exploiters use online platforms to make initial contact with and groom children, such as by sharing posts of luxury objects in trap-houses, such as money, trainers and weapons to show a ‘glamorous’ and ‘luxurious’ lifestyle.⁵
- Research in 2019 found that one in four (24%) of young people reported that they see illicit drugs advertised for sale on social media.⁶ In 2020, research by the Youth Endowment Fund found that 20% of young people had seen online content promoting gang membership in the previous 12 months, and 24% reported seeing content featuring carrying, using, or promoting weapons.⁷
- Revealing Reality’s report, Anti-Social Media, found that children across the UK are routinely viewing videos of illegal activity on social media, including fights, stabbings, and the sale of weapons and drugs online – with some children reporting that they see this type of content several times a day, every day.⁸
- Barnardo’s is concerned about how easily accessible weapons are online, including how they can be promoted towards children. In August, Barnardo’s was alerted to the sale and promotion of weapons and drug-related items on an e-commerce site, which were being sold through a ‘Back to School’ promotion. The types of items on sale included covert knives and stab pens.

2. Impact of the cost-of-living crisis on CCE

- Barnardo’s is concerned that the cost-of-living crisis is increasing the risk of CCE in the UK. As highlighted in our report, [Invisible Children](#), we found that, organised criminal gangs are utilising the financial difficulties that many families are facing to exploit children.
- In a survey of Barnardo’s practitioners in February 2023, almost half (45%) of Barnardo’s practitioners felt that children and young people are at a greater risk of being sexually and/ or criminally exploited due to the cost-of-living crisis.⁹
- For example, Barnardo’s Independent Child Trafficking Guardians shared how they are seeing increasingly smaller ‘debts’ being used to groom children – such as buying a child a sandwich after they are not being able to afford lunch, which the child is then told to ‘repay’, trapping them in a cycle of exploitation.
- Children who are looking to support their families and boost the household income are also being targeted by fake, realistic-looking job adverts that are posted on social media to entice children into criminal activity.

³ Home Office, 2023. [Modern Slavery: National Referral Mechanism and Duty to Notify statistics UK, end of year summary 2022](#)

⁴ Children’s Commissioner for England, 2019. [Keeping kids safe: Improving safeguarding responses to gang violence and criminal exploitation](#)

⁵ APPG on Child Criminal Exploitation and Knife Crime, 2022. [The Online Safety Bill and Child Criminal Exploitation](#)

⁶ Volteface, 2019. [DM for Details: Selling Drugs in the Age of Social Media](#)

⁷ Youth Endowment Fund, 2022. [Children, violence and vulnerability 2022: A Youth Endowment Fund report into young people’s experiences of violence](#)

⁸ Revealing Reality, 2023. [Anti-social media: The violent, sexual and illegal content children are viewing on one of their most popular apps](#)

⁹ Barnardo’s Practitioner Survey, February 2023

- Increased financial pressures caused by the cost-of-living crisis can mean that parents are needing to work more often, or work for longer, leaving children unsupervised.
- Barnardo's is particularly concerned about this when children are out of school for extended periods, including during school holidays.
- In YouGov polling commissioned by Barnardo's, 1 in 4 parents said that they will struggle to afford activities such as childcare and holiday clubs during the summer holidays. 1 in 5 parents said that they will struggle to afford time off work to spend with their children.¹⁰
- Barnardo's research shows that children not having access to a trusted adult during school holiday-time is having a real impact on how child exploitation is identified. FOI data found that, during months which include school holidays of two weeks or more, the police recordings of child sexual exploitation dips, returning to 'normal' rates when children are out of school.¹¹

3. Statutory Definition of Child Criminal Exploitation

- There is no statutory definition of child criminal exploitation in England. Barnardo's, alongside the Children's Coalition led by the NSPCC, is calling for a statutory definition of CCE to be included in the Victims and Prisoners Bill.
- The lack of a statutory definition of CCE can mean that children are criminalised for their exploitation, rather than appropriately safeguarded and supported, often due to a lack of understanding about what CCE is.
- In 2021, Barnardo's made a Freedom of Information request to police forces across the UK about CCE.¹² 30 police forces responded, but only one police force was able to provide any data on CCE. Many police forces asked about how CCE is defined, demonstrating how misunderstood CCE is.
- Taking a criminal justice approach to CCE, rather than a safeguarding one, can lead to exploitation not being identified, and children not having access to support services, having long-lasting impacts on child victims.
- For example, a number of Serious Case Reviews, which are established where a child has died or come to serious harm, have found that, even where children have been known to authorities, they still haven't been safeguarded and supported. The Serious Case Review into the fatal stabbing of a 15-year-old boy known as 'Archie' in Sheffield in 2018 contains a list of failings by authorities to protect him from harm. Agencies were too slow to act; information was not shared; and youth engagement was abruptly ended.¹³
- Certain groups of children can be more likely to be criminalised for their own exploitation. These include Black children, who can face adultification, and children in care. More than half (52%) of children in care had a criminal conviction by age 24 compared to 13% of children who had not been in care.¹⁴

4. The role of youth clubs and preventative services in tackling child criminal exploitation and knife crime

- Access to youth clubs and youth services can be a critical protective factor from child criminal exploitation, child sexual exploitation, and other harms.

¹⁰ Barnardo's, 2023. [Invisible Children: Understanding the risk of the cost-of-living crisis and school holidays on child sexual and criminal exploitation](#)

¹¹ Barnardo's, 2023. [Invisible Children: Understanding the risk of the cost-of-living crisis and school holidays on child sexual and criminal exploitation](#)

¹² Barnardo's, 2021. [Exploited and Criminalised: What can the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill do to ensure that children who are criminally exploited receive the care and support they need?](#)

¹³ Sheffield Children Safeguarding Partnership. [Learning Brief: Archie – Serious Case Review](#)

¹⁴ Office of National Statistics, 2022. [The education background of looked-after children who interact with the criminal justice system](#)

- Youth workers are often not seen as connected with 'scary' statutory agencies and are therefore able to build trusted relationships with children, that are sustained. Youth workers often play a unique role, including by reaching out to vulnerable young people in society, and can effectively bridge the gap between young people and adults in society.
- Youth services also play a vital role in supporting children and young people involved in serious youth violence, by providing counselling, social activities and careers support and guidance.¹⁵
- However, youth services are few and far between. Research by Barnardo's and Redthread for the APPG on Child Crime Exploitation and Knife Crime found that, between 2010/11 and 2017/18, 87% of local authorities had seen one or more youth centres shut.¹⁶
- Research by the YMCA in 2020/21 found that, in England, local authority spending on youth services totalled £379 million – a £1.1 billion cut in youth services from 2010/11.¹⁷
- Barnardo's practitioners, and children and young people have told us that they want access to free safe spaces such as youth clubs, and recognise the benefit of a trusted adult being present. A young person supported by Barnardo's said that *"if an adult is there it makes it safe. We just want a space where we can hang out and do our thing but you know there's someone there who's got your back"*.¹⁸

What not having access to a safe space can mean

A Barnardo's practitioner at a child exploitation service in Wales told us that, during winter, groups of children often gather outside a leisure centre and sit by the air vents, as they let out warm air and there isn't anywhere else to go that is safe and warm.

Because groups of children do gather there, the practitioner said how it has become a risk spot for exploitation, and described it as "a bit of a hotspot for adults or older teens with cars driving by and offering lifts... and McDonald's".

Other Barnardo's services have said how children will congregate in areas where there is access to free WiFi, or where they are able to charge their phones.¹⁹

5. Specialist support services for child victims of abuse and exploitation

- Barnardo's, alongside the children's coalition led by NSPCC, is calling for the Victims and Prisoners Bill to place a duty on the relevant authorities to commission specific support services for child victims of abuse and exploitation. This should be supplemented by placing a further duty on the Secretary of State to make a national statement on the current volume, need, provision and investment in support services for children who are victims of crimes including abuse and exploitation, so that sufficient specific support services for child victims can be commissioned. Greater investment is also needed in specific support services for child victims of abuse and exploitation, and this should be announced alongside the Bill.

¹⁵ All Party Parliamentary Group on Knife Crime and Violence Reduction, 2020. [Securing a brighter future: the role of youth services in tackling knife crime](#)

¹⁶ All Party Parliamentary Group on Knife Crime and Violence Reduction, 2020. [Securing a brighter future: the role of youth services in tackling knife crime](#)

¹⁷ YMCA, 2022. [Devalued: A decade of cuts to youth services](#)

¹⁸ Barnardo's, 2023. [Invisible Children: Understanding the risk of the cost-of-living crisis and school holidays on child sexual and criminal exploitation](#)

¹⁹ Barnardo's, 2023. [Invisible Children: Understanding the risk of the cost-of-living crisis and school holidays on child sexual and criminal exploitation](#)

- Children who have faced child criminal exploitation – and other forms of abuse – often miss out on accessing vital child-specific support services, which play a significant role in supporting and safeguarding children.
- These services include therapeutic and counselling services, mental health services and advocacy services. Research indicates that specific support services are best placed to meet the needs of victims or survivors, with many children preferring to receive support from third sector organisations and NGOs.²⁰
- Despite the benefits of such services, children can often face a postcode lottery when it comes to accessing them. In 2023, Barnardo's made an FOI request to local authorities and Police and Crime Commissioners across the UK to ask them how many specific support services they had commissioned in the previous 12 months for child victims of child sexual exploitation, and child victims of child criminal exploitation. Out of the local authorities who provided information, 68% had not commissioned any services in the past 12 months. For Police and Crime Commissioners, this was 39%.²¹
- As well as supporting child victims, investment in specialist support services makes economic sense. Barnardo's and Pro Bono Economics evidence found that, for every £1 invested in specific support services for child sexual exploitation, it can save the taxpayer up to £12.²² These savings are shared by multiple agencies and Governmental departments.

Suggested questions

1. Do the Government share the concerns of Barnardo's, as highlighted in their report *Invisible Children*, that the cost-of-living crisis is impacting the risk of children experiencing child criminal exploitation?
2. Do the Government agree with Barnardo's, The Children's Society and other children's charities that there should be a statutory definition of child criminal exploitation, to aid understanding of the form of abuse and ensure that children are safeguarded and not criminalised?
3. Will the Government commit to placing a funded duty on the relevant authorities to provide specialist services for all child victims of abuse and exploitation through the Victims and Prisoners Bill?
4. Will the Government commit to investing in preventative services for children and young people, including youth services?

For more information contact Jess Edwards, Senior Policy Adviser – Childhood Harms at Barnardo's, on 07513703728 or jessica.edwards@barnardos.org.uk.

²⁰ The Centre for Criminal Justice, 2021. [Unsafe children: driving up our country's response to child sexual abuse and exploitation](#)

²¹ Barnardo's, 2023. [Invisible Children: Understanding the risk of the cost-of-living crisis and school holidays on child sexual and criminal exploitation](#)

²² Pro Bono Economics and Barnardo's, 2011. [An assessment of the potential savings from Barnardo's interventions for young people who have been sexually exploited](#)