

1. Child sexual abuse (CSA)

- CSA is a real threat to all children. It can take place **in person or online**. Children can be groomed or forced into sexual activity by family members, or by adults not known to the family. Most hidden groups are **children aged under ten, LGBTQ and disabled children, boys, and those from BAME communities**.
- **However, we know it is vastly under-reported, with most victims not coming forward or doing so many years after the event.**
- Children with **additional vulnerabilities** are at greater risk — for example, children with a disability are three times more likely to be abused.¹
- **Two-in-three** children and young people we support who have been victims of child sexual abuse or exploitation were groomed online before meeting their abuser.
- The impact of child sexual abuse on victims can be devastating. It is associated with an increased risk of both **mental and physical health problems** and has implications for the families of victims and survivors, and for wider society.
- Covid-19 and the necessary lockdown have meant that children and young people have been largely **'hidden'** from teachers and professionals. Since lockdown began, **45%** of our frontline staff have seen a **decrease** in referrals from schools, local authorities and police.
- Meanwhile, the National Crime Agency reported that **300,000** people in the UK present a **sexual threat to children**², and Europol raised concerns about an **increase in online activity by those seeking child abuse materials** during lockdown.³
- A shortage of online content moderators has also put children at **greater risk of encountering harmful content** during the lockdown.⁴
- With the summer holidays approaching and with safe spaces for young people, like summer camps, sports activities, and youth clubs still closed, and more parents returning to work and therefore not available to supervise their children, we are concerned that children and young people are facing a 'perfect storm' of potential exploitation and abuse. These children are **more likely to go unrecognised and unsupported - remaining hidden**.

2. Child Criminal exploitation (CCE)

- CCE is **child abuse**. It is when a child is **trafficked, groomed or coerced into committing crimes** such as shoplifting, theft, carrying drugs, or **serious youth violence**.
- It often **blurs the lines between victim and perpetrator** - these children are often criminalised, because their position as a victim is not recognised.
- Prior to lockdown, the national police lead from Modern Slavery and Human Trafficking said **CCE was at its highest level in modern times** as gangs capitalised on a lack of youth facilities and school exclusions.
 - Over a **three-month period 638 children under 18 were criminally exploited**, the majority as part of 'county lines' trafficking.⁵

¹ NSPCC, 2014. [We have the right to be safe': Protecting disabled children from abuse](#)

² National Crime Agency, April 2020. [Law enforcement in coronavirus online safety push.](#)

³ Guardian, April 2020. [Lockdown hampering removal of child sexual abuse material online.](#)

⁴ BBC, April 2020. [Coronavirus: Internet child abuse images not being deleted](#)

⁵ Guardian, January 2020. [Levels of child criminal exploitation 'almost back to Victorian times'](#)

- **Social media** is used to glamourise gang life and can be used as a tool to **recruit and exploit** young people into undertaking criminal activity.
- **During lockdown criminal groups have continued to find new and innovative ways to exploit children** despite the restrictions - these include disguising young people as key workers to sell drugs as well as exploiting the increased time children are spending online⁶
- With a **long summer, many parents returning to work and increasing levels of youth unemployment, combined with a looming recession** there is widespread concern that vulnerable young people will be even easier for criminal groups to target.

3. Increased exposure to online harms.

- Even before lockdown, we know that children were at risk of **harm online**, ranging from cyberbullying to sexual grooming.
- During April, **37%** of Barnardo's frontline staff said children and families are **concerned about spending more time online**.
- Our services have reported an increase in children seeing distressing Covid-19 content, using online forums to discuss eating disorders and self-harm, cyberbullying and sharing self-generated sexual images.
- **The current crisis strengthens the case for urgently bringing forward legislation to regulate the tech industry.**

Key questions for the Home Secretary

Child sexual abuse

- Barnardo's TV advert highlights the impact of child sexual abuse on victims. What steps is the Government taking to protect children from child sexual abuse at home and online during the Covid-19 outbreak?
- What steps is the Home Office taking to improve the identification of children who are sexually abused and are under ten, LGBTQ, disabled, boys, and/or BAME?
- When will the Home Office publish its strategy on child sexual abuse and exploitation?

Child Criminal Exploitation

- What steps work is the Government undertaking to understand the tactics used by what models of exploitation gangs to exploit children have used during lockdown; and to help identify children who have been harmed exploited?
- When will the Serious Violence Bill be published?
- What discussions are the Home Office having with the Department for Education to ensure that vulnerable children at risk of involvement in exploitations are supported to reintegrate in education?

Online Harms

- When will the Online Harms Bill be laid before Parliament?
- How is the Home Office working with technology companies to ensure the risk of harm to children online does not escalate during the lockdown?

About Barnardo's

Barnardo's is the UK's largest national children's charity. In 2018/19, we supported around 300,000 children, young people, parents and carers through more than 1,000 services. For more information please contact Claire Stewart, Senior Public Affairs Officer, on claire.stewart@barnardos.org.uk or 07584 347 308.

⁶ Guardian, July 2020. [County lines gangs disguised drug couriers as key workers during coronavirus lockdown.](#)