“All of us were broken”

An exploratory study into family experiences of child criminal exploitation

Jane Hunter, Senior Research and Impact Manager
Jane.hunter@missingpeople.org.uk

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The National Police Chiefs’ Council (NPCC) definition of missing is:

“Anyone whose whereabouts cannot be established will be considered missing until located, and their well-being or otherwise confirmed.”
Child Criminal Exploitation

CCE occurs where an individual or group takes advantage of an imbalance of power to coerce, control, manipulate or deceive a child or young person under the age of 18 into any criminal activity:

a) in exchange for something the victim needs or wants, and/or

b) for the financial or other advantage of the perpetrator or facilitator and/or

c) through violence or the threat of violence.

The victim may have been criminally exploited even if the activity appears consensual. Child Criminal Exploitation does not always involve physical contact; it can also occur through the use of technology.

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County Lines

Term used to describe organised criminal networks involved in exporting illegal drugs into one or more importing areas (within the UK) using dedicated mobile phone lines, or another form of ‘deal line’.

They are likely to exploit children and vulnerable adults to move and store the drugs and money and they will often use coercion, intimidation, violence (including sexual violence) and weapons.

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Aims of the research

• To gain a deeper understanding of the experiences of families whose children have been exploited criminally, including through county lines

• To understand the role of and response to missing within criminal exploitation

• To understand more about the support services available both to the children and the families

• To highlight family perceptions of where interventions may have been helpful, and any examples of successful interventions
Methods

- 5 extended in-depth interviews, ranging from 2 to 10 hours
- Topic guide, but principally led by the families
- Transcribed and analysed the raw data
- Key ethical considerations were anonymity, confidentiality, informed consent and safeguarding

“Reaching out and interviewing as many families in my/our situation - to bring to the media, government the connections between CCE, CSE, adult vulnerability, stabbings, homelessness, youth behaviour - can only help forge some kind of positive result to start to tackle this nightmare of an epidemic.”

Family member taking part in the research
Findings: Early warning signs

- Abusive language
- Hostile or aggressive behaviour
- Obsessed by mobile phone
- Disengaging from activities
- Not being where they should be
- Secretive
- Disengaging from school
- Rapid and extreme mood changes
- New peer groups and/or relationships
- Exclusions and PRU

Impact on families

- Intuitively feel something is very wrong – not just typical teenage behaviour
- Shock at the often rapid change in behaviour and attitude
- Search for reasons e.g. bullying, mental health issues
- Helpless, isolated
- Don’t know where to go to for support
- Work affected
“He was like a zombie [...] He was all dishevelled. He didn’t smell right [...] He looked like he hadn’t slept for days.”

“Not being where they are supposed to be”

“Missing overnight”

“Frequency of missing episodes”

“Long term missing episodes”

“He was going missing, coming back, going missing, coming back and just trying to deal with it myself just not knowing what to do a lot of the time.”

“It was you know, to me a massive, overnight was a massive period of time for me”

“He’s been missing from home for three whole weeks and found in an area where he’s got no friends, no relations”

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“I didn’t think it could get any worse, but…”

Abusive to family → School exclusion and PRU → Youth criminal justice → Child attacked and injured → Child goes into care

Lack of engagement → Young Offender Institution → Arrested with drugs → Long term missing

Deteriorating mental health → Stabbed and hospitalised → Turns 18 → Adult criminal justice system → Homeless
Impact on family

“I was a nervous wreck, not eating, not sleeping and all”

“I was devastated [...] I’d isolate myself, I became unwell [...] I ended up having to be off sick”

“Part of me dreaded if the police knocked on my door. What were they going to be knocking with? Were they going to be knocking on the door with telling me she was in danger? Something happened to her?”

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Recommendations

- Awareness raising and training on CCE
- Support for the child
- Support for the family
- Missing related recommendations

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Thank you

jane.hunter@missingpeople.org.uk