



## SafeCall in Schools and Colleges: A lifeline for children and families forced into criminal exploitation

### County Lines – Threat, harm and risk to pupils and students

The threat associated with County Lines drug distribution networks has rapidly grown with over 2000 identified drug lines operating across the UK, primarily through dedicated mobile phone lines. Children and young people are approached physically or online before being targeted, groomed and exploited by drug gangs. They are forced to transport and store drugs, weapons and cash between import and export areas as well as to work on the line, delivering and dealing drugs, usually crack cocaine and heroin, to vulnerable drug users.

*“The threat is growing... Serious and organised criminals exploit children and ruthlessly target the most vulnerable in our society, ruining lives and blighting communities.” Rt Hon Priti Patel 28 October 2019, The Telegraph*

Children and young people exploited through County Lines are victims of a crime – Child Criminal Exploitation. There is a considerable and real on-going risk of **significant harm including serious injury and loss of life** while they are being targeted for County Lines. While missing and away from the care of their parents/carers, young people are exposed and entrenched in an area where they experience repeated physical, emotional and psychological trauma. Intervention at the earliest possible opportunity is needed in order to identify young people at risk, and ensure an effective and robust multi-agency response to effectively safeguard every young person from exploitation.

The nature of County Lines and Child Criminal Exploitation is a rapidly changing picture of threat, harm and risk. Gangs and those wishing to exploit children and vulnerable adults are continuously adapting their business tactics to increase their chances of going undetected by law enforcement and other agencies. Working together across sectors is critical to safeguarding children and young people from the multi-faceted challenges presented by CCE to those who are most vulnerable, their families/carers and to the professional network.

### Challenges faced by Schools and Colleges

Schools and colleges are presented with constant challenges in terms identifying exploitation, and adapting their safeguarding responses to meet the needs of those at risk or involved in County Lines, while supporting the educational attainment of the pupils and students and school reputation.

While continued lateness and poor attendance over a number of days were previously strong indicators of possible involvement in County Lines (alongside wearing two layers of clothing), there is now a move towards being missing for shorter periods during a school day. This new trend avoids triggers being hit within school or college, and staff not being alerted as promptly to the missed lessons and absence.

Children and young people presenting with reasons to be being sent home is also a growing trend to allow them the opportunities to run errands for gangs. This could include presenting with behaviour problems, attending school in the wrong uniform, deliberately breaking a school rule or ‘forgetting’

homework so that they are either sent home, have to return home or are excluded for continued non-compliance with school rules.

To further complicate the safeguarding picture for schools and colleges, every pupil and student is deemed to be at risk – varying ages from 12-18+ years and any gender. The risk is presented from gang members outside the school community, and also those inside the school community who are looking to recruit their peers (either from the same or different academic year) i.e. peer on peer abuse.

While traditionally ‘at risk’ students were perhaps seen as having certain characteristics, schools and colleges are experiencing victims coming from all backgrounds where any vulnerability is being targeted for example: age, special educational needs, not linked or linked to crime, stable or unstable home lives and those who face discrimination or lack the positive influences of protective factors for example success at school, mind health, self-esteem or strong social support.

### **An Introduction to Safecall for Schools and Colleges**

Offering independent, confidential and anonymous support to victims of exploitation and children at risk through SafeCall is vital to safeguarding these young people. Research has shown that young people at risk of CCE are unlikely to engage with statutory authorities, which can include schools:

*“Children who have been groomed to take part in criminal activity are unlikely to talk to the police about their exploitation due to mistrust, fear of the consequences for themselves or their families, or because they have been given instructions by adults who groom and threaten them not to share any information. There was a consensus about this amongst the mothers of gang-exploited boys, the young person and the frontline practitioners in attendance.” All-Party Parliamentary Group for Runaway and Missing Children and Adults 2017*

SafeCall provides practical and emotional support that is needed to help keep families safe. We know that when a young person is exploited their family not only face the trauma of ambiguous loss, but the worry that their loved-one (or they) will be seriously hurt or harmed.

Families who have no experience of statutory intervention are left having to navigate a complex system of professionals, often unable to gain the help and support they need, and their child needs at the right time. We provide the missing piece of the jigsaw and are able to advocate for families to get the help they need to keep their loved one and their whole family safe, the parent would often turn to the school or college to access this support time which may or may not be available.

### **Safecall Support Service**

We provide a national telephone based support service to those in crisis caused by County Lines including young people, families/carers and professionals. We operate 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

For young people we provide **crisis support**, whether that is at 3PM on a Monday afternoon or 3AM on a Saturday morning. We are there to help them with safety planning and mapping, mobilising help from other agencies and supplying them with a free **safety device** (Ownfone) where appropriate.

*“There was one girl we were working with, she’d been asked to carry some cannabis from A to B, not an overall incredible amount. But then she was robbed en route ... it turned out the same guys that gave her the drugs to carry, their friends were the ones that carried out the robbery ... they wanted to get this girl sexually, so by doing this, they had another coercion tactic over her. We were able to talk through her options with her and what would happen if she spoke to the police”*

**Missing People CYP& Gangs Worker**

We provide a unique role by **advocating for families** in crisis to be heard by the statutory agencies in their life, ensuring that they get the support they need as a family and that information is shared effectively to build a picture of the harm their child is facing. At the same time we provide much needed **emotional support** to parents and carers who may turn to the school or college in the first instance to help them.

*You were absolutely brilliant and I had a semi-decent night’s sleep last night – the first since this horrible situation began. You listened so intently and left me feeling supported, I could have asked for more at this stage”.*

**Parent supported by Safecall**

We give both young people and families a **safe and confidential space** to talk about their experiences, help them to understand the risks faced by their loved ones and hold their space for them. This empowers them to be able to explore their feelings and wishes which we can address by working together to develop **practical plans** which minimise risk and maximise their safety.

For professionals, we provide **advice, guidance and specialist knowledge** regarding missing and the risks young people face while away from home or care. We are able to support in building relationships between agencies and young people or families and most importantly, we are able to mobilise local networks of professionals to intervene when a young person is at risk.

**Case Study:**

SafeCall was contacted by the mum of a 15 year old, K, who was missing and a suspected a victim of criminal exploitation. After SafeCall enquiries with different police forces, police found him at a flat over 250 miles away from home with three men over 40. The police reported him safe and well despite K having bruising and suspected burns on arms, and the police did not remove K from that situation. SafeCall challenged the decision to leave him there. K then handed himself in to police station and SafeCall worked with mum and St Giles Rescue and Response team to get K safe as soon as possible. Despite their 50 mile radius limit , two St Giles workers travelled 250 miles with mum and stayed overnight. K came home with them and with SafeCall support, K is now living in a looked after placement out of his local borough and at a distance from the people who were exploiting him. K is continuing to engage with the St Giles service to help him exit the exploitation. SafeCall continues to support mum through this challenging time



### **Referring to SafeCall**

To refer a young person or family member (with their consent) there are a number of ways you can contact the team:

Complete the online referral form here:

<https://www.missingpeople.org.uk/how-we-can-help/safecall/974-are-you-a-professional.html>

Email - [safecall@missingpeople.org.uk](mailto:safecall@missingpeople.org.uk)

Telephone Safecall - 0208 392 5710 between 10.00 – 18.00 hours Monday to Friday

Telephone Missing People Helpline 24 hours, 7 days a week - 116 000 (who will respond outside of Safecall office hours)

### **Supporting your staff to respond to CCE**

Schools play a crucial role in the early identification of young people at risk of CCE and in responding when a young person is suffering harm caused by exploitation. Missing People offer bespoke training and awareness sessions to support professionals to recognise the signs of criminal exploitation and how to respond effectively.

Our training will allow you to refresh and learn best practice about what guidelines and research currently state about county lines and exploitation and Child Sexual Exploitation, explore the evolution and structure of gangs, understand the associated risks of county lines and identify the indicators and early-intervention opportunities. It will also include; techniques of how to manage difficult conversations, and exploring how to access support for those experiencing exploitation.

We welcome any opportunities to discuss your staff teams training needs.

**Your contact at the charity:**

**missing  
people**

Registered charity in England and Wales (1020419)  
and in Scotland (SC047419)

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**SAFECALL**

