Safeguarding children at risk from criminal exploitation: it was hard to escape

Findings from a review by the Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel of 21 cases involving teenagers from 17 local areas in England who died or experienced serious harm where criminal exploitation was a factor.

March 2020

Background to the review

The Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel is an independent body set up to identify, commission and oversee reviews of serious child safeguarding cases. It brings together experts from social care, policing and health to provide a multi-agency view on cases which raise issues that are complex, or of national importance.

Following a serious safeguarding incident, local safeguarding partners are required to submit a rapid review to the Panel within 15 working days. This should set out, in detail, the circumstances of the event.

> Find out more about the case review process in each UK nation at **nspcc.org.uk/casereviews**

This is the Panel's first thematic report (Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel, 2020a). It was published alongside the:

- Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel's annual report (Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel, 2020b)

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- Department for Education's triennial analysis of serious case reviews 2014-2017 (Department for Education (DfE), 2020).

Report findings

Between July 2018 and March 2019, the Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel received rapid reviews concerning over 300 children who died or suffered serious harm as a result of abuse or neglect. The Panel identified 21 adolescents from 17 localities who died or were seriously harmed within a context of criminal exploitation.

This review looked at the service response to children and young people who have been drawn into criminal exploitation and where high levels of risk have been identified, focussing on what help was available to children and young people and their families.

The review included: conversations with professionals and experts in the 17 local areas as well as conversations with parents and carers and young people; a literature review looking at child criminal exploitation in the context of county lines; and visits to local areas developing innovative solutions to tackle criminal exploitation.

Common features of the young people

Risk factors around vulnerability

The literature review identified a range of risk factors which increase potential vulnerability to criminal exploitation, including: poverty, abuse, neglect, behavioural difficulties, school exclusions, special educational needs, drug use, children looked after and those with physical or mental health issues. However, except for exclusion from school, these common indicators of vulnerability were not present in the lives of most of the children and young people who were the subject of criminal exploitation cases in the review. The review found that 19 of the 21 children and young people lived with their parents or extended family.

Exclusion from mainstream school

The review finds that exclusion from mainstream school is a trigger point for risk of serious harm. 17 of the children or young people who died or experienced serious harm had been permanently excluded from mainstream education. Permanent

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exclusion was identified by practitioners and family members as a trigger for a significant escalation of risk.

Ethnicity and gender

The review found that boys from black and minority ethnic backgrounds appear to be more vulnerable to harm from criminal exploitation. In the cohort of 21 children and young people, 15 were from a black or minority ethnic background. All the children and young people covered by the review were male.

Identifying and assessing children at risk of harm through criminal exploitation

Use of effective practice

The review found a wide range of different practitioners working with the children and at different levels within the system across the 17 local areas. It found that even when local areas and practitioners knew the children and young people at risk of being drawn into criminal exploitation, many were not confident about what they could do to help them. There are a number of different approaches being taken across England, but the review finds little evidence of what works, and no central point where effective evidence is evaluated and disseminated. However, the review did find some examples of good practice in the ways local partners shared information and intelligence.

Trusted relationships

Despite a considerable number of practitioners being involved in the young people's lives, most people involved in the cases felt that no close and trusted relationship had been developed. From the young person's perspective, practitioner involvement was on the surface of their lives. The review points out that building a trusted relationship between children and practitioners is essential to effective communication and risk management.

Responding to the 'critical moment'

Professionals reported that there are critical moments in children and young people's lives when a decisive response is necessary to make a difference to their long-term outcomes. These critical moments include:

- the point at which they are excluded from school
- when they are physically injured

- when they are arrested.

The review points out that more evidence is needed about those key moments, so that interventions can be tested.

The current approach and service response to managing the risk

Parental engagement

The review found that parental engagement is nearly always a protective factor. However, the review points out that parents and extended family members need effective support in helping them manage risk from outside the home. Many parents said they felt they were being blamed and felt alienated from attempts by services to help.

Moving children and families

The review found that, while moving children and young people and their families works for a short period, it is not effective as a long-term strategy. It points out the need for a clear and consistent plan for supporting the children and young people and managing risk in the new location.

Disrupting perpetrator activity

The review found little information or working knowledge among safeguarding partnerships at local level on work to disrupt the activities of the perpetrators of child criminal exploitation. This is a marked contrast with the dual approach taken to children who are sexually exploited (i.e. to both help the victims and disrupt the activity of the perpetrators).

The National Referral Mechanism

The review found that the National Referral Mechanism (NRM), a framework for identifying and referring potential victims of modern slavery and ensuring they receive the appropriate support, is not understood and is inconsistently used. The definition of modern slavery (which covers trafficking and exploitation) means that young people who are being criminally exploited are often referred to the NRM in the hope that it will give them protection.

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Risk management plans

Evidence from the cases reviewed suggested that an intensive risk management plan which includes control measures such as electronic tags, within the context of a good relationship with the child and with parental support, can be effective in reducing risk.

Recommendations

The review makes four national recommendations to improve the context for the continuing development of services to children and young people who are victims of child criminal exploitation.

Recommendations

- The Department for Education (DfE) should fund and evaluate a trial of a practice framework which can respond to children and young people at risk of serious harm from criminal exploitation.
- The DfE should amend the current Working together to safeguard children guidance to reflect the specific circumstances of children and young people who are at risk of criminal exploitation.
- The Home Office should review the use of the National Referral Mechanism (NRM) as an effective mechanism for working with this group of children and young people, both in registering their criminal exploitation and protecting them from prosecution.
- The Department for Education, the Home Office, the Youth Justice Board, the Association of Directors of Children's Services and the police should agree to data collection to improve local and national understanding of prevalence, characteristics and service response to child criminal exploitation.

Learning points

The review also sets out a number of learning points for local agencies to focus on including:

- understanding the nature and scale of the problem and identifying children engaged with and at risk from criminal exploitation
- tailored support for front line staff
- service design and practice development
- quality assurance.

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