

“Improving the Hope of Young People impacted by Serious Violence and Child Criminal Exploitation”.

Interim Report April 2023

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The changing picture of serious youth violence (SYV) and child criminal exploitation (CCE) in the North East of England

In terms of understanding the picture of SYV and CCE in the North East, emerging findings from this project indicate:

CCE in the North East primarily involves drug distribution. Young people can be exploited to transport weapons, but usually this is also connected to drug-dealing activities.

Young people and stakeholders can identify several distinct gangs in the North East connected to county lines/drug distribution activities. Young people use the label of ‘gang’ and explain the internal hierarchy in terms of ‘youngers’ and ‘olders’. Some groups are named after postcodes in Newcastle, however not all members reside in these areas.

Both girls and boys can be targeted for CCE, though the involvement of girls might sometimes be overlooked by agencies.

Serious violence tends only to be used instrumentally by young people; it is related to their criminal exploitation, or to gain/maintain their status within the gang.

Some stakeholders suggested that levels of violence and exploitation are increasing in the North East, which may be connected to increases in the value of the drugs they are transporting.

Some stakeholders reported witnessing greater prevalence of knife and weapon carrying amongst young people in the region including amongst increasingly younger children who are being exploited by county lines activities. However, interviews with stakeholders and young people suggests that most young people in the region are carrying weapons for status

A significant amount of these activities is likely still unknown; perpetrators are very proficient at diversifying.

In understanding the risk factors for CCE and SYV in the North East, interviews conducted thus far indicate that:

Children who are not attending school, have poor mental health, have learning difficulties and/or are experiencing isolation are inherently more vulnerable to forming unsafe relationships with groomers/exploiters. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated some of these issues for young people, however these were already prevalent and the contributions of reduced funding for public services, including mental health services, have been emphasised.

Poverty also makes young people more vulnerable to exploitation. Although some young people are initially attracted to the music and status associated with criminal gangs they observe on social media, rather than financial motivations, money remains a significant pull factor for young people, especially following the cost-of-living crisis.

Young people can be targeted for exploitation online, in person or by family members.

Having family members or peers already involved in county lines/gangs or other criminal lifestyles can be a risk factor. Young people in these situations can be groomed into grooming other young people to participate in criminal activities.

Young people searching for a sense of ‘belonging’ are more vulnerable, especially those with conflict at home, who are seeking asylum,

and/or protection without an intention to use them.

have experienced racism, and/or language barriers.

The nature of county lines activities might be more localised in Newcastle compared to other metropolitan areas in England and Wales.

Young unaccompanied asylum-seeking males are particularly vulnerable to trafficking and exploitation, increases in the numbers resettled in the North East could influence the current picture of CCE and SYV in the region.

The principles, approaches, models and methods used by the Children's Society to engage with young people and the effectiveness of these.

In terms of the principles and approaches offered by The Children's Society (TCS), findings from the qualitative data so far suggest the following factors to be particularly significant:

Small caseloads permit an intensive approach to working with young people, which other services might not be able to provide.

An individualised, flexible, child-centred approach which works collaboratively with the young person to determine their needs, goals, and targets was highlighted as positive by both stakeholders and young people. A targeted trauma-informed approach which starts from the young person's lived experience is essential in understanding what function gangs and violence is playing for the young person and other ways in which those needs might be met.

The building of positive relationships between stakeholders and young people is central to the success of the SCARPA project. The value of the relational work undertaken with young people and the trust built cannot be understated. This was identified not only by stakeholders but also the young people themselves and is reflected in the number of peer referrals into the service.

Mutual respect and a non-judgemental attitude are central to building positive relationships. TCS often work with young people that have been identified/labelled as 'hard to engage'. Emphasis is placed on identifying positives and strengths, and

in helping to build their self-esteem. TCS works as advocates for these young people.

Flexibility in timescales, recognising that building a relationship with a young person and helping them to recognise their exploitation requires a long-term approach. Young people are empowered to determine when they are ready to end their engagement with TCS.

Transparency, predictability and consistency with young people around how and in what instances the information they provide may need to be shared is heavily valued by the young people. Young people are often fearful about sharing information. Empowering young people so that they can make an informed decision as to what information they share, when they share this and how TCS will use this information is important in making them feel safe.

TCS emphasises the importance of taking a contextual safeguarding approach which recognises the wider environments in which risk of harm may occur. Emphasis is placed on choosing to believe the information young people share, prioritising the voice of young people, and collaborative decision making within a team committed to the same high standards of safeguarding.

Working together with families to improve relationships and communication.

The impacts of the work of The Children's Society on young people, families, communities and services

Engaging the hardest to reach:

The boys and young men that the SCARPA project in Newcastle works with are considered by agencies as being very high risk. They have often been exploited and/or trafficked and are deeply embedded in criminal gangs, some are in leadership roles. These young people have often not engaged with other services (statutory or voluntary) and may have been 'written off' as unwilling to engage. Despite this, the TCS has high levels of engagement from these young people.

Practical support:

Interviews indicate the value young people, and their families place on practical support including, financial support, employment, education, asylum applications and housing.

Positive impacts stakeholders report observing in young people:

- ◆ Keeping themselves more safe
- ◆ Increased school attendance
- ◆ Reduced substance misuse
- ◆ Less carrying of weapons]
- ◆ Recognising exploitation, power imbalances and grooming
- ◆ Young people exiting gangs

Building trusting relationships with young people:

Interviews indicate that young people can be more comfortable sharing information with TCS than statutory services. Young people feel this is a safe space to share, and the extent of TCS' local knowledge and understanding of the issues, challenges and risks young people face gives them credence. Equally TCS work to encourage young people to trust more in statutory agencies.

Peer referral and recognisability:

Young people trust TCS to the extent they are recommending the service to their peers. This in turn makes those young people who have been referred by peers more trusting and willing to engage with the service.

Gathering intelligence, information and local knowledge and sharing it with other services, such as CSC to better inform their work with young people.

However, **lack of funding/resources can limit TCS impact** – stakeholders acknowledge that while TCS intensive approach is effective for the young people they are working with, to enable them to address the scale of the problem in the Northeast great funding / resources are required.

Broader practice lessons about supporting young people affected by serious violence (practice standards)

Emerging findings indicate that it is important that organisations operating in this area:

Consistently approach the area of CCE and SYV with a strong contextual safeguarding focus, rather than criminalising approach. Despite increasing recognition of these issues in the last five years, there are concerns that 'adultification bias' is still prevalent and that agencies working in this area are criminalising and stigmatising young people

Recognise the value of professionals as mentors for young people. Prioritise the quality of that engagement; even hard to reach, high-risk young people can engage.

Recognise the value of one-on-one, structured, consistent support to help those impacted by CCE.

Use robust, evidence-informed approaches.

who have been victims of exploitation and grooming. ***In addition...***

Furthermore, there are concerns that when a young person reaches the age of 18, they are classified as ‘perpetrators’ which may fail to recognise the extent of the exploitation and grooming they have experienced.

Stakeholders assert that forums for sharing information around CCE need to be consolidated and tightly governed – improved standards would allow for more information sharing and a less fragmented understanding of these issues, vital to tackling the harms caused by CCE and SYV

Have unlimited timeframes for working with young people – the complexity of exploitation and the situations young people are in necessitates time to build relationships and provide support. There is no quick fix.

Stakeholders express a need for a greater level of governance / regulation / scrutiny of organisations working in this area – there are concerns that the sector may have moved away from the quality standards, good practice guidelines, evidence-informed approach that has previously been used for exploitation work.

Recognise that diversionary activities will not address the underlying reasons why a child is being exploited.

Stakeholders state there is a need for more preventative work in this area, as it currently is very reactive – some stakeholders point to a need for more resources to be directed towards youth work, education and mental health support for young people.

Are transparent with young people about how and when they might share their information and obtain their consent from the outset.

Are respectful of young people and the information they share and that they prioritise safeguarding, quality standards and the protection of sensitive information. The risks of sharing information without consideration of the wider context in which that information relates can be huge for these young people and practitioners.

The Newcastle context – how Newcastle’s demographics compare and relate to other core cities

Drawing on Data from Newcastle Youth Justice Services, we know that: 86% of first-time entrant (FTE) offences are gravity score 3 (in other words low level offending) and below. For non-FTE offences this figure is 80%. For young people who go on to commit a serious youth violence (SYV) offence, 57% of their FTE offences are gravity score 3 and below, with 43% at score 4 and above. An analysis of data from 2020-2022 found that SYV accounted for 3% of all offences over this period. Of the 234 SYV offences, 111 (47%) were violence against the person offences.

Ethnicity

In Newcastle 91.3% of the general population is described as “white” (the second highest for any English core city).

The 10–17-year-old general population is 83% white (Census, 2011).

Newcastle has the lowest number of non-UK born residents (excluding students) and the lowest number of people migrating in from other parts of the country of any other English core city (Source: ONS).

Accommodation

Living arrangements, housing and financial considerations are a factor against desistance for 16% of the current YJS caseload.

Education

Of the current YJS caseload for Newcastle, in the pre-16 bracket, 66% are at school for fewer than 25 hours per week. 76% are recorded as persistent absent. Overall school attendance for this cohort averaged at 54%

CSC rates

36% of the current YJS cohort in Newcastle are known to Children's Social Care. 16% are Children in Care. Newcastle has a higher rate of young people in care than other major cities.

Health

In a recent study Newcastle YJS identified that emotional development and mental health issues were key desistance factors; this included speech, language, communication and neuro-disability.

Substance misuse

Of a sample of young people who were in the YJS case load obtained between 2020-2022, substance misuse is identified as a key factor in desisting from criminal behaviour for 46% (65 of 142).

For those over 16, 50% are not in education, training, or employment (NEET). Of these, 25% were in care.

Deprivation

30% of Newcastle's LSOAs (Lower Layer Super Output Areas) are in the most deprived 10% nationally.

For FTE into Newcastle YJS (74%) were living in the most deprived 20% of areas, as defined by the IMD.

In an age-matched sample of children who had not offended, 67% lived in such areas.

75% of FTE were in receipt of free school meals, compared with 59% of the non-offending sample.