

TRAPPED IN THE WEB

I am very pleased to be here today to support this initiative to raise awareness about the increasing exploitation of children and young people by criminal gangs.

Although the exploitation of children by organised crime to carry and sell drugs is not new there is a huge and growing problem of children being groomed to supply Class A drugs – crack cocaine and heroin – around the country in so called County Lines operations. This usually involves a gang from an urban area expanding their operations by crossing one or more police force boundaries to more rural areas setting up a secure base and using runners to conduct day to day dealing. A ‘county lines’ enterprise almost always involves the exploitation of vulnerable children and young adults. As more and more county lines are set up more and more children are being targeted and groomed to carry and supply drugs. For the criminal gangs it is a very successful business - new markets bring more income and using children and young people reduces the gang’s risk of detection.

For the children and young people it often ends in drug and alcohol addiction, violence, sexual and other exploitation .The children become criminals and the groomers and exploiters of other children.

An experienced worker with a drug and addiction charity in London came to see me last week because she was –in her words – ‘astonished’ by the increasing numbers of young people getting drawn and trapped in the County Lines net.

She told me:

“Even I have been shocked by the extent of it. I have never seen anything on this level in all my years.

“It is overwhelming - every young person we deal with is either involved in County Lines or has a story about it.”

The National Crime Agency say that 80% of police forces have reported activity in their area.

Anecdotally, I have been told by a well-informed police source that there could be up to 1,000 county lines operating throughout the country from major cities where there are well established criminal gangs, including Liverpool and Manchester. You may have seen reporting of a recent County Lines case on ITV when the police highlighted the fact that children and young people had been groomed and coerced into selling drugs.

The extent of county lines is very difficult to map as data is collected by various agencies and there is little sharing of that data.

In a County lines profile prepared in 2016 by the Safer Islington Partnership using multiple data Islington identified county lines by a number of known local criminal gangs to 32 towns involving 14 police force areas as far away as Devon and Cornwall.

One county line was established through a member having gone to university in one town, one from a family known to be gang related moving to another area and one when 3 young members of a gang were moved to a small town.

Some children are vulnerable to being targeted because of chaotic family relationships, others because they are looked after children ,some may be younger children whose older siblings have got caught up in drugs and others may have parents who become complicit in the use of their child by gangs to help feed their own drug habit.

In Islington 3 methods of recruiting children were identified - offer of cash and goods, coercion with threats of kidnap and young people working to pay back a debt owed to a gang member.

The excellent GMP YouTube video 'Trapped' made for this campaign illustrates vividly how a child initially drawn in by the offer of cash becomes more and more embedded in the gang.

Enticement and coercion used to groom children for sexual exploitation are used to groom children to carry and supply drugs. Some children suffer multiple exploitation.

I chair the All Party Parliamentary Group on Runaway and Missing Children and Adults and in March we held a roundtable on county lines taking evidence from victim's parents, experts and agencies.

The report we produced after the roundtable, 'Children who go missing and are criminally exploited by gangs' made clear that children from all backgrounds are at risk of being drawn into County Lines.

Indeed the parents who gave evidence to the roundtable were middle class and articulate and did not meet the profile of a chaotic family. Their sons had become involved through friendships with other young people who had associations with gangs.

Pressure on young people is huge and at a time of transition from childhood to adolescence they are particularly vulnerable to the pressure from peers.

Young people can get drawn in to what initially looks like a good offer in terms of cash and lifestyle but end up being trapped and coerced by some very terrifying people.

The drug dealer does not feel any moral responsibility to the child they see the child as making a choice. That absolves them of all responsibility. This was the same in the early child sexual exploitation cases when professionals who were supposed to be safe guarding children saw them as making a choice to become prostitutes. Similarly the boys and girls involved in County Lines are not seen as victims of grooming but as 'mini gangsters' with only themselves to blame making choices to take the trainers and the cash.

It was shocking to watch an interview with a drug dealer who uses children and young people to carry and supply drugs on You Tube who said it was “easy” to find children because he was making a good cash offer to young people. He admitted targeting those who had no support from families.

He was oblivious to the damage he was inflicting on children and the wider community and yet said he would ‘knife’ anyone who tried to get his own children involved. And that he was saving up to move to a better area!

When challenged about the damage he was inflicting he said that was life and there were many others like him.

We have a responsibility to our children. The law recognises that by giving them special protection. It is not the children who are responsible it is the adults who exploit their vulnerability and our response to children needs to reflect that.

Missing children and County Lines

The All Party Group’s report in July 2017 from the roundtable “Children who go missing and are criminally exploited by gangs’ warned the safeguarding system was failing children involved in County Lines because of a lack of understanding of the signs of risk of exploitation.

The NCA has said that children involved in County lines are ‘often listed as a missing person’. It may also be that they are not reported missing, which was the experience of Islington.

In a County lines profile prepared in 2016 by the Safer Islington Partnership they found that of the individuals identified as being involved or suspected of being involved in County lines all but one were boys with a significant number aged 14 and 15.

A disproportionate number of boys are classed as being at low risk when missing, even though the majority of children being used to transport and supply drugs are boys.

Looked after children are particular targets for grooming by criminal gangs, those placed miles away from their home areas can be especially vulnerable.

There are additional difficulties in keeping children safe when they are placed away from their local area.

It is hard for a social worker to give support from hundreds of miles away.

We were concerned about the numbers of LAC children going missing.

However there is still no national data or evidence available on whether placing children in distant placements means that they are better safeguarded although that seems to be the prevailing opinion which is constantly repeated by ministers and officials in the DFE. There has however been a 78 per cent increase nationally in children placed in children's homes out of their borough from March 2012.

In March 2015 400 children were placed in children's homes in Greater Manchester. Half were in homes outside their local area. GM authorities had placed 100 children outside Greater Manchester.

The DFE is setting up a Residential Care Leadership Board, which will bring together representatives from local authorities and providers to explore how to improve commissioning of children's residential placements. As part of this work the Board will assess data on the use of out of area placements.

There is an opportunity for Greater Manchester to look at data that is collected by a myriad of organisations across the conurbation not only to inform the work of this board and also with a more consistent approach to return interviews for missing children an opportunity to map out the level of risk of children being targeted for criminal exploitation.

I was very interested in the evaluation of the Achieving Change Together project in Rochdale and Wigan. The project was funded by a DFE Innovation grant and evaluated in March 2017 by the University of Bedfordshire.

The initial purpose was to reduce the use and need of costly out of borough placements such as secure units when working with young people at risk of or victims of sexual exploitation.

In their first 8 months ACT provided intensive early support to 25 young people working with them and their families. These were predominantly girls under 16 with a range of complex difficulties. All of the young people were assessed as either being 'on the edge of care', or in care placements that were at risk of breakdown.

The evaluation of the project said that escalation has been avoided and no secure placements were used.

One of the features of the project was involving the girls in co – designing the services that they thought would work for them and social workers responding to the young people's priorities which was not necessarily their exploitation.

The project also challenges the view that children and young people need to be moved from their local communities to manage risk of exploitation.

The organisation of the safeguarding system is historic with responsibilities divided between the DFE and Home Office

This is how it felt to a parent who gave evidence to our roundtable in March whose 14 year son was being used to carry and supply drugs

“It became so frustrating as all services that were assigned to working with my son in this period ... were all working as separate entities – with this came, on many occasions, lack of communication, oversight or duplication of what was meant to be done or not take place, this caused me great distress.”

Parents told us it is very difficult to get help at an early stage in the process because the system sees the children as either victim or offender and is not responsive to the reality that children can be

both at the same time. The child who is being enticed and coerced to sell drugs is both offender and victim.

My concern is that the response of the safeguarding system is increasing the vulnerability of young people. The parent who is not supported will leave the child more vulnerable, the placing of a child or young person in a children's home which is being targeted by criminal gangs increases the vulnerability of that child, failing to appropriately assess risk in a missing episode will increase vulnerability.

Responses

There needs to be more of a more joined up response from the National Crime Agency and at a regional and local police level. These are criminal gangs making millions from the exploitation and degradation of children and vulnerable adults and they are responsible for stabbings and murder.

They are corrupting whole communities.

But we also need to disrupt the supply of vulnerable children at the same time as prosecution of the senior gang members. Preventing a child getting into gangs in turn prevents many more victims.

The National Policing Chiefs Council are revising guidance on the use of Child Abduction Warning Notices which have been used effectively with children at risk of sexual exploitation and could be used to disrupt criminal grooming. They don't of course carry a penalty for breach but could be used as evidence to apply for civil orders under trafficking legislation which do carry penalties. The National Referral mechanism needs to be better understood and used to identify children as victims of exploitation including by criminal gangs to carry and supply drugs. That in turn makes it easier to prosecute under

trafficking laws those who are hiding behind the children and also makes their activities more risky for them.

The implementation of the new national Missing Persons' Register in 2018 should make it easier for police to share information about missing young people across force areas, which has been a problem.

RAISING AWARENESS AND EDUCATION

Raising awareness in communities of how children and young people are used to establish county lines is crucial.

This is not easy as these are children and young people who often cause a lot of disruption in local communities with their anti-social behaviour.

But again there may be cause for some optimism in the rolling out of the place based integration of local services across GM. It is an extension of the MASH's and Troubled Families approach with all with practitioners from all the services located in the same place serving the local community

If this new approach builds better trust with communities then it might also offer an opportunity to discuss what the community understands to be exploitation of children and what they see as solutions.

Often the local drug dealer is a longstanding member of the community he is not seen as an exploiter of children. We need community attitudes to harden against him.

Legislation is also important in setting perceptions and attitudes. The term child prostitution has been stripped from the statute book and instead the term child sexual exploitation has been inserted. How could we ever have had a child prostitute?

If we used language that talked about children being used and exploited to sell drugs I think that would also change public perceptions. And that good gangster would be seen in an entirely different light.

And of course schools are important Sex and Relationship Education is now compulsory in schools and that offers us an opportunity to give all children basic information and understanding how criminal grooming takes place. And we need to understand how to do that in a way that we can demonstrate is effective.

It is important as with CSE that young people help design educational material. They know the messages that work and those that don't particularly if you are trying to give information via social media platforms.

One interesting approach is CTZN a partnership project funded by the Home Office Innovation Fund, led by Greater Manchester Police

At the heart of the project is the development of a new mobile-based, digital platform created by and for young people. There is also a schools based programme. And a social norms study to try and establish what children actually do and inform children of actual social norms. So children don't get pressurised into behaviour because they believe that is the norm when in fact it isn't.

The innovation fund encourages different approaches and it will be interesting to learn from projects such as CTZN.

And of course parliament, ministers and MP's need to be more aware of the effect of legislation and social policy on communities particularly on communities where children and young people feel they have no hope. Why would they not take the only offer they're going to get.

The cost to society of County Lines is massive both in terms of financial and human cost. Young victims, who become embroiled in the net, find it hard to break free and their activities harm other children.

The cost to society of illicit drug use in the UK has been estimated to be £10.7 billion per year in 2010-11 health, criminal justice, prisons probation and mental health.

Not to mention the lost contribution to society of young people who could have been doctors, teachers, social care workers and plumbers.

That it is expanding should shock us because the message that organised crime is getting is that provided they use children and young people we are powerless to do anything about it.

So all of us using every resource at our disposal should try and disrupt this.

County Lines is the current big grooming scandal and when there are more high profile cases and serious case reviews we will see that we should have been better at spotting the signs, sharing information and intelligence and engaging with communities and young people.

This is why this initiative 'Trapped' is so important in recognising that we have to do more in engaging the community, changing attitudes and challenging the responses of the safeguarding system.

As professionals and practitioners and local leaders you have a really important role and I admire many of your initiatives.

But so much more change could be made using all the resources of Greater Manchester, its children, young people its communities all the knowledge and experience of the public and statutory and private sector.

Finding ways of working better together to use that huge potential to safeguard our children should be our priority.

ENDS

