

The common (mis)interpreting of Child Criminal exploitation (CCE).

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How practitioner's understanding of CCE can limit their ability to engage victims of criminal exploitation.

Experienced exploitation practitioners will be well aware of the complex nature of CCE; This article was written as a result of witnessing common themes with practitioners and those on the outskirts of CCE work. Often due to their interpretation of exploitation, practitioners can struggle to engage victims of CCE.

Criminal Exploitation is frequently portrayed in the media as a simple concept;

The young person is forced under the threat of violence to commit crimes (such as selling drugs) and participate in other activities which they don't want to do by a violent, dangerous, gang or individual.

The young person hates and fears their exploiter and wants a 'way out' but is too afraid to 'escape'. When someone in authority realises what is happening and takes action, the young person is extremely grateful to be 'rescued', they are happy to be whisked away from the exploiters grasp; they are saved, they have escaped evil & all is well...

Experienced practitioners will know that more often than not, this is not how it plays out.

In the real world the exploitation is often done by someone the young person looks up to, someone they respect and want to be like. Often the young person feels they are fully complicit in the actions and any suggestion otherwise is met with anger and rebuke. We often find that exploitation, especially when it has been done by an effective exploiter, manifests itself in the victim as a deep sense of loyalty and allegiance to the exploiter. It's not uncommon for a victim to be angry at their 'rescuers' when removed from the situation. We are aware of several cases of young people physically resisting and being verbally abusive towards staff when being driven home after being found 'OT' (Out of town - County lines exploitation).

It is also commonplace for young people to be angry at their parents or carers when they are brought back; reasons such as being angry that they have been pulled out of a situation in which they felt valued, in which they were making (sometimes large amounts of) money and in which they felt they were a part of something that gave them a sense of power and safety. Quite the opposite of the stereotypical terrified exploitation victim; however still a victim.

It is important to remember that exploitation is an extremely complicated human interaction; it's after affects are wide ranging and often manifest themselves in decisions and thought processes which can seem counterintuitive to someone looking in from the outside. Exploited young people who are brought home only to run away again are often labelled as 'knowing what they are doing' or being complicit. Whilst it may appear that the young person wants to be involved in the exploitation, this is a result of deeply rooted grooming.



This leads us to the question:

How do we change the way in which we view exploitation to encourage engagement from the young person?

Initially, understanding that exploitation is not a simple concept. Realising that the stereotype of a coerced young person may not always fit the profile of the young person you are working with.

So how do we classify the exploitation?

Using the concept of a 'spectrum of exploitation'.

The simplified version of assessment is to view exploitation as spectrum rather than a single category. The young person fits into a scale of exploitation based on how their exploitation is taking place and where they currently see themselves in regards to their relationship to their exploiter.

The most user-friendly and intelligible example I have seen of this categorised approach is put forward by Tony Sagers at StrataLogical through his 5 C's approach to explain youth involvement in county lines, which can be viewed here:

(<https://shoc.rusi.org/countylinesasanchoiceandopportunity>).

Below is an altered version of Sagers 5 C's of exploitation,

This concept explains that a young person who is being exploited can fall into one (or many) of the following categories;

Complicit - Those who know the risks, reap the rewards and do not suffer at the hands of others. NOTE: This does not mean that the individual is not being exploited.

Compliant - Those who are highly agreeable and likely to obey the 'rules, norms or values' set by their social group. They are easily influenced into activities and lack the necessary will power to say no.

Compelled - Those who feel a need to get involved (for various reasons; such as loyalty, paying off a debt, poverty, to ensure safety etc.)

Coerced - Those who are pressured under the threat or use of violence to participate.

Conditioned - Those who are groomed behave in a certain way or to accept certain circumstances.

For practitioners this concept is an effective way to understand the complexities of CCE; Whilst many young people are exploited through coercion, there are others who feel as though they are complicit in the acts. Some young people are compelled through outside circumstances and others are conditioned (groomed) to believe what they are doing is okay. A young person can move from one category to the next or exist in more than one category at the same time; Therefore a young person experiencing CCE can fluidly exist on the spectrum of exploitation on a constantly changing basis, based on their interactions and circumstances often outside of their control. Understanding this is key to delivering appropriate interventions and keeping the young person safe.



Below is a real life example of how a young person might move around this spectrum of exploitation:

A 13 year old male is initially **conditioned** into selling drugs by older individuals in their area through socialisation. After roughly 8 months of small time dealing the young person becomes **complicit** in the operation - he is happy being involved, enjoying the financial rewards, sharing notoriety of gang activity and is now involving and exploiting other peers. At some point during the following year the young person is robbed for a significant amount of drugs by rival dealers and becomes indebted to his supplier. He is now **compelled** to continue selling based on his need to pay off a debt through loyalty and perceived punishment as well as a fear of loss of social group and lack of safety. This change in motivation (selling drugs to pay a debt rather than to buy nice things) lead to the young man no longer enjoying his involvement in the supply chain and resulted in him wanting to stop dealing, This lead to violent **coercion** by the supplier who wanted his debt repaid.

The young person is being exploited throughout the entire timeline however, depending on where in this timeframe the practitioner enters the young persons life would dictate the approach used to effectively help the young person out of that situation.

The conversation you have with a young man who is being violently coerced is likely to be very different than the young person who is complicit and denies any notion that they are being exploited. Both ARE being exploited, however both view it in different ways and therefore require different approaches.

Understanding this ultimately gives the practitioner a better chance of being able to constructively to talk to the young person and create better opportunity for successful engagement.

This article is a part of ongoing research and education for practitioners working with young people at risk of exploitation. For further information, consultations or offer feedback please email info@strongerpeople.co.uk

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Stronger People is a community interest company that works with young people and communities at risk of, or affected by, Child Criminal Exploitation (CCE).

