

NCA guidance for Councils on how to identify and support victims of Criminal Exploitation

To coincide with a week of awareness raising in relation to criminal exploitation, the National Crime Agency has developed guidance for councils on criminal exploitation. This is intended to provide a quick reference guide to the different types of Criminal Exploitation, particularly those where there is little information currently available. It also covers the signs of a potential victim and what to do next.

Modern Slavery offences within the UK are set out in the Modern Slavery Act 2015. The Act categorises the offences of slavery, servitude and forced and compulsory labour under section 1, and human trafficking under section 2.

Potential victims can be exploited in a number of ways, including sexual exploitation, forced labour, domestic servitude and criminal exploitation.

What is Criminal Exploitation?

Criminal exploitation is a lesser known type of Modern Slavery and Human Trafficking that encompasses acquisitive crimes such as forced begging, forced theft (including shoplifting and pickpocketing), as well as cannabis cultivation and financial exploitation.

Criminal exploitation is a sub category forced labour, which is covered by section 1 of the Modern Slavery Act 2015. Under the EU directive (2011/36), exploitation of criminal activities is described as *the exploitation of a person to commit, inter alia, pick pocketing, shoplifting, drug trafficking and other similar activities which are subject to penalties and imply financial gain.*

Approximately 95% of all known criminal exploitation offenders are British, Romanian or Lithuanian.

Whilst a high number of the crimes that fall under criminal exploitation can be viewed as 'low level,' many are committed by potential victims who are being forced to work under the control of highly organised criminals.

The homeless community, especially young men, can be particularly at risk. Traffickers are known to exploit vulnerable individuals by approaching them in homeless shelters, food banks and soup kitchens with a view to recruiting them to carry out short term work under the guise of cash in hand payment, however this can become criminal work where the recruiter may use drugs and/or alcohol as a means of control over the victim.

Traffickers are also known to recruit potential victims from other countries into to the UK, where they are forced to commit crimes such as shoplifting and forced begging.

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Those who manage to escape often find themselves homeless and are further exploited by traffickers who will prey on their vulnerabilities, often focusing on those who speak the same language in order to gain their trust. For victims who speak little or no English, it becomes even more difficult to seek help.

Types of Criminal Exploitation

Criminal exploitation covers acquisitive crimes (offences for which the offender derives material gain), cannabis cultivation and financial exploitation, including unlawful receipt of benefits within the UK welfare system. Potential victims of Modern Slavery and Human Trafficking often come into contact with the police for acquisitive crimes.

Forced begging and busking

Traffickers will approach individuals including those who are homeless, either on the street, or at places where they should feel safe such as food banks or shelters. Here they are offered short term work for cash in hand payment. Potential victims can also be recruited from other countries and often enter the UK with very few belongings other than clothes or personal items. Some may also bring a begging mat. Whilst begging, victims will be instructed to meet with their traffickers throughout the day to hand over any money they have been given. This can be highly organised where an exploiter may control a number of individuals, who are housed in the same cramped living conditions. The same can be applied to forced busking on the streets, either as an individual or in groups.

Forced shoplifting

The British Retail Consortium estimates that one third of shoplifting offences nationwide are committed by Organised Crime Groups (OCG's). Victims are usually in their early 20s, both male and female. Romanian victims are often sourced in their home country by the OCGs, playing on their vulnerabilities such as homelessness and unemployment with the offer of work and money abroad. They will then be transported to the UK where they are absorbed into OCGs and exploited to generate income, or for the trafficker's own financial gain.

OCG's are always well organised and will have a planned approach to shoplifting whereby they force victims to steal pre-selected items from stores and will provide them with a rehearsed narrative if stopped. If a victim is arrested, the gang will abandon them (known as 'burn out'). The victim will drop off the radar and return to their home country or be picked up by other traffickers and used for similar types of work.

There appears to be an emerging trend of criminal exploitation in migrant children operating under the supervision of adults. Operating in a family unit means a lower risk of identification so the children are exploited to maximise profit. More often than not, the children will not be registered with any government body including education and health services.

Pickpocketing

Victims are known to be recruited and brought to the UK to work as part of organised 'dipping' groups. Primarily from Eastern Europe, victims are forced to 'purse dip' whereby they will observe individuals using a cash point and 'shoulder surf' to obtain the PIN number or use a distraction method. They will then take the purse out of the bag, obtain the card and put the purse back. This is known to take place at big events such as concerts and Christmas markets.

Cannabis farming

Victims are predominately from Vietnam and more recently Albania. They are brought to the UK illegally to feed, water and look after cannabis plants. Victims often have a lack of knowledge of the English language and are fearful of authorities due to their immigration status. They are further controlled by their traffickers using a number of different methods including withdrawal of funds while paying off a debt that may have been incurred during travel to the UK. They are often imprisoned on the premises.

Financial abuse and benefit fraud

Victims may be coerced into opening bank accounts by their traffickers. Money is paid into victims' bank accounts in the form of 'legitimate' wages, however these bank accounts are controlled by the trafficker. This can also lead to victims unknowingly or being forced to claim benefits such as Universal Credit, which the traffickers take from them. This form of control is unique to Modern Slavery and Human Trafficking.

County Lines

County Lines is a very specific aspect of Criminal Exploitation, whereby victims are forced by criminal gangs to run drugs from urban to rural locations across the UK. To learn more about county lines and what to do if you have concerns follow this link: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/criminal-exploitation-of-children-and-vulnerable-adults-county-lines>

The council role and spotting the signs

Councils may come into contact with potential victims of all forms of modern slavery and human trafficking through different services, including regulatory services and work in the housing and homelessness sectors, especially when carrying out inspections of houses of multiple occupancy. Front line staff working in these areas can play an important role in identifying when something isn't right, such as squalid living conditions and overcrowding of properties, and safeguarding those who need help. It is therefore important that staff understand the signs of modern slavery. Some of the indicators of criminal exploitation are listed below:

- Low self-esteem / very closed off to others / scared to talk

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- Houses of multiple occupancy, where people live or are kept in squalid conditions
- Does the property house a number of individuals that is deemed a safe number
- Signs of psychological trauma / mental health issues / self harm
- Signs of injury / abuse – in need of medical care
- Fear and mistrust of those who appear to be in an authoritative position
- Concern of losing money / unexplained acquisition of money
- Lack of identification documents

It is also important that frontline staff who may come across modern slavery are familiar with their local structures for tackling modern slavery so that they know where to raise these concerns. A map of multi-agency anti-slavery partnerships is available [here](#). As a broad guide for how to respond:

If you believe somebody is in immediate danger, please call 999.

For help and advice, contact the Modern Slavery Helpline on 08000 121 700
www.modernslaveryhelpline.org

To report a crime, call the local police on 101 or pass information to Crimestoppers anonymously on 0800 555 111 www.crimestoppers-uk.org

Further information is available in an LGA guide to modern slavery:
<https://www.local.gov.uk/topics/community-safety/modern-slavery>

Resources and toolkits

[Stop The Traffik – Criminal Exploitation blog and flyers](#)

[Homeless Link – For staff working in the homeless sector](#)

[St Mungo's \(Routes Home\)](#) – Advice for homeless organisations working with EU victims of trafficking.

[Home Office: Multi-lingual leaflets for victims of human trafficking](#)