

Tackling Child Exploitation Support Programme

Project Learning Report: British Transport Police

Project aims

The overarching aim of this Bespoke Support Project (BSP) was to explore the systems challenge that British Transport Police (BTP) faces as a national force with responsibility for working in partnership with multiple local area child safeguarding partnerships. In particular, this project focuses on making referrals, sharing information and embedding feedback loops to keep young people safe from child exploitation and extra-familial harm.

The fast-changing and adaptive nature of exploitation poses significant challenges to a safeguarding system that was not designed to respond to the movement of young people around the country. Many of the issues identified in this research resonate with wider learning from the Tackling Child Exploitation (TCE) Support Programme's experience of working with strategic leaders in local areas to tackle child exploitation and extra-familial harm (and are noted in this report where relevant).

Approach taken:

In discussion with BTP colleagues, it was agreed that TCE would conduct a small-scale research project to explore partnership working between BTP and local areas, identifying any potential levers for improvement. The following research was agreed:

- Analysis of BTP data¹
- Interviews with BTP staff and officers (n8)
- Interviews with local area representatives (n4) and the voluntary sector (n4)

It had been hoped that analysis of the data could happen first, to identify whether there were any referral and feedback patterns between BTP and local areas that could then be explored in the interviews. However, this was not possible due to time constraints. Therefore, the data analysis examined the profiles of (anonymised) young people with markers for child exploitation – either criminal, sexual or both. The interviews set out to identify, from the perspective of staff from both BTP and local area safeguarding partnerships, what was working well and less well in relation to information sharing and referrals.

Quantitative data analysis findings

The dataset analysed included 1,086 encounters between BTP and 897 children over a 12-month period from September 2020 to August 2021. For the purposes of analysis for this research, two groups were formed: those with indicators for child criminal exploitation (CCE) and / or child sexual exploitation (CSE). Descriptive analysis of these groups showed patterns that accord with the wider research evidence²: boys more likely to be categorised for CCE; girls for CSE (see below):

¹The data was analysed by Joe Calouri, Head of Research and Policy, [Crest Advisory](#) and TCE Delivery Partner

² See, for example, these TCE resources: <https://tce.researchinpractice.org.uk/the-hyper-visible-and-invisible-children/>; <https://tce.researchinpractice.org.uk/using-data-to-explore-equalities-diversity-and-inclusion/>

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Figure 1 CCE Encounters (n1086)

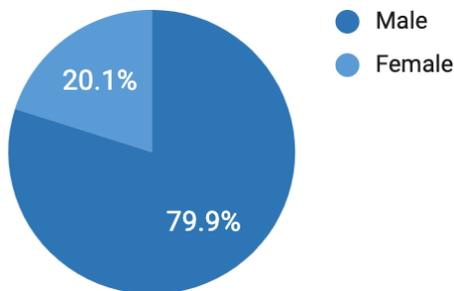
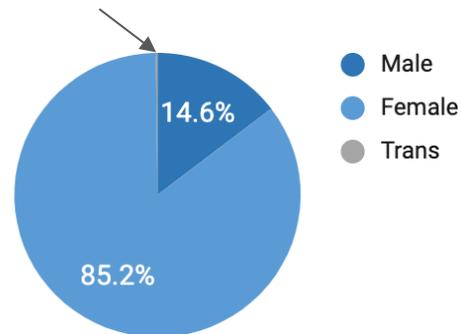


Figure 2 CSE Encounters (n1086)



Similarly, the ethnicity of children and young people also reflected wider patterns. Over a quarter (27.2%) of children and young people with CCE encounters were Black, and just over half (52.1%) were white. This compares with just over 1 in 10 (11.2%) of CSE encounters being Black children and young people and over three quarters white. See figures 3 and 4 below for detail.

Figure 3: Ethnicity of children and young people in CCE encounters

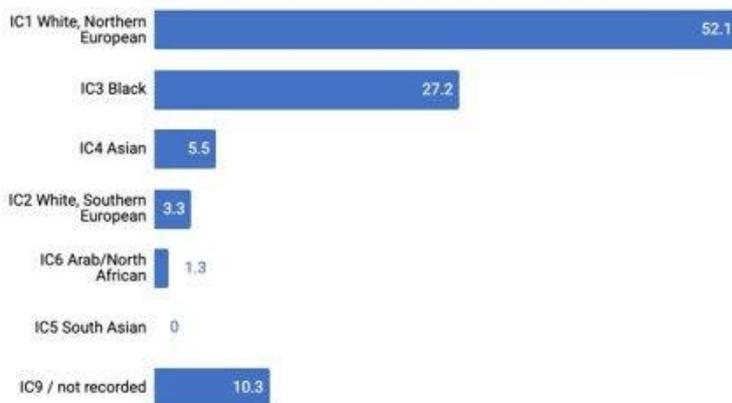


Figure 4: Ethnicity of children and young people in CSE encounters



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Each encounter was recorded with a unique reference number and each child was assigned a number to enable the identification of repeated encounters involving the same child. Within the sample, there were 94 children with multiple encounters, 4.7% of which (42 children) accounted for 16% of all recorded encounters. Of those 94, just over half (52 children) had two encounters, 21 had three and 10 had four encounters. 5 children had 7 or more encounters, 4 girls (13-15yrs) and one 17-year-old boy: all of these cases had been flagged and followed up by BTP³.

In cases of children at heightened risk of or experiencing exploitation, it is likely that the encounters with BTP account for just a small proportion of a wider pattern of missing incidents. This information is shared with local areas and the interviews highlighted the value of having good communication flows between BTP and safeguarding partners. As well as providing insight into how County Lines are perpetrated, it informs safeguarding partners of the proportion of children encountered by BTP who go missing on multiple occasions.

Qualitative data analysis: key themes

Analysis of the interviews with BTP, local area and voluntary sector staff identified five themes:

1. Referrals

As noted above, working with multiple children's safeguarding partnerships, all of whom operate their own local referral systems, was a key issue for BTP. The interviews highlighted the fact that, although referring young people to local areas for safeguarding assessment *should* be a straightforward process, which *can* work well, challenges are experienced. These include:

- a. varying thresholds between areas
- b. either a delay or lack of response (with lack of cover at weekends highlighted as a particular issue), as well as lack of feedback.

A reluctance to accept out of area referrals for ongoing support was also noted, despite the fact that it is the responsibility of local areas to safeguard their children and young people regardless of where an incident happens.

These issues were not just experienced by BTP staff, but by social care staff as well, as the following quote highlights:

'I'm a social worker with 20 years' experience. I have struggled recently to make a referral to a local authority on the [xxx] coast and I feel like I know all the ways in.' (Local area participant 4)

2. Communication and information sharing

Even with the small number of interviews conducted for this project, it was notable that there was a wide range of experiences in terms of communication and information sharing between children's social care, BTP and Home Office police forces.

³ More detailed analysis of this dataset was shared with BTP for internal use

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Good communication was described as involving timely and detailed information sharing between agencies for the purposes of safeguarding, as well as criminal investigation and attending relevant strategy and NRM meetings to provide a joined-up response. When these processes worked well, the impact on young people at heightened risk of or being exploited could be significant.

By way of example, one participant from children's social care described the difference between receiving a police report that says young person 'A' was arrested at 'X' train station for County Lines activity, compared with one that includes details of who 'A' was arrested with and how much money and / or drugs they had on them. The latter means that there is the possibility of identifying others involved, be they victims, instigators of harm or both. Knowing about what sums of money and quantities of drugs were involved can indicate the size of debt a child might owe and what risks they might be exposed to post arrest.

There were also examples shared where protective measures could be put in place for children as a result of good communication and information sharing between children's social care and BTP. The following quote illustrates this:

'...we had a far fuller view of what he was doing on a day-to-day basis, and... as part of that, we were told that he was dealing drugs in [name of town]. He'd committed a couple of serious assaults up there. In terms of that young person at the time, who was just 17 going up towards 18, we had more information about the significant risk he was placing himself at by operating in those environments where there was drug supply and potentially weapons as well. It really just put us in a more informed way about the risks he was taking, which, obviously, if you don't know the risks, you can't plan to protect.' (Local area participant 3)

The benefits of having inter-agency representation at strategy meetings – both BTP and Home Office police forces where relevant – was described. The information held by different agencies meant that gaps and any duplication could be identified to ensure as complete a picture as possible could be drawn of a child or young person's circumstances.

Some of the challenges described were about local areas not knowing who to contact in BTP in relation to safeguarding matters. Lack of feedback between local areas and BTP meant that neither agency knew whether information shared had been received and acted upon. Amongst participants in this research, where contact had been established, it had been initiated by the County Lines Taskforce, but that is not to say this was always the case. What was apparent from the small number of interviews carried out for this project was that there is no obvious or easy solution to address the challenge of effective information sharing. Although all incidents should be shared with Home Office police forces, it was acknowledged that they might not all be acted upon due to a lack of capacity to manage the volume of reports received.

The in-custody strategy meetings initiated by the County Lines Taskforce team were seen to be a highly effective approach, providing the opportunity to safeguard a young person at a time of potentially heightened vulnerability. The importance of receiving timely information from local areas to enable these to happen was emphasised.

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3. Multi-agency (embedded) working

The positive impact of embedding social workers into the County Lines Taskforce team was described by local areas and BTP staff. Two particular advantages were highlighted. Firstly, having social workers as part of the County Lines Taskforce meant there was in-depth knowledge and understanding of what good practice in relation to safeguarding children at risk of or being exploited should look like. Having this level of expertise meant safety planning could be challenged if there were concerns about a response from a local area. It also meant (as outlined above) there was understanding and awareness of what information was important to share with local areas. Secondly, social workers could support colleagues by leading on safeguarding processes, freeing them up to focus on investigation, and by debriefing on any questions after strategy meetings, (such as language, definitions or processes). The importance of understanding partner roles in relation to safeguarding children and young people has been a recurrent theme in the TCE Programme's wider work with local areas and underpins good partnership working through being able to complement each other's roles and remit to progress the safeguarding agenda.

4. Raising awareness of County Lines

Across BTP and other staff employed on the rail network, a concerted – and effective – drive to raise awareness of County Lines activities and the young people who may be at heightened risk of or being exploited as a result was described. Amongst BTP staff, participants spoke of the training that had taken place, with the Modern Slavery toolkit mentioned as having been particularly helpful. The Children's Society's 'Look Closer' campaign was also mentioned, as were the quarterly National Crime Agency County Lines intensification weeks, all of which were seen to have contributed to an overall increase of awareness and submissions. Examples were shared of retail staff working in train stations identifying young people that looked vulnerable and making sure they were followed up.

Despite progress being made, it was also acknowledged there was still a lot of work to do. For example, as the quantitative data highlighted, there were still question marks about whether girls at risk of or experiencing exploitation remained unseen.

5. Listening to the voice of the young person

The importance of listening to the views and experiences of young people affected by exploitation was acknowledged by participants interviewed. This has been a central tenet of the TCE Programme's approach – to ensure that [young people's voices](#) are heard by strategic leaders and considered when responding to exploitation and extra-familial harm. The challenge of balancing a young person's right to have their views heard against their right to protection from harm was described by participants in this study, reflecting wider debates in the research literature about the 'double bind' this can put professionals in⁴. For example, in one case, a young person and their

⁴ Lefevre, Michelle, Hickle, Kristine & Luckock, Barry (2019) 'Both/and' not 'either/or': reconciling rights to protection and participation in working with child sexual exploitation. *The British Journal of Social Work*, 49(7), 1837-1855.

<http://sro.sussex.ac.uk/id/eprint/79839/>

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parents were requesting that the young person be released from custody despite concerns that this could put them in a potentially dangerous situation. The role that the voluntary sector can play in engaging with young people was noted to be of particular importance given that young people refusing to answer police questions was described as commonplace.

In addition to these themes, practical factors were reported to be working well in the County Lines Taskforce, including being able to download mobile phone data quickly, and the use of targeted patrols based on intelligence.

Next steps

The research conducted for this BSP has certainly captured and reflected some of the systems challenges experienced by BTP as a national force working with multiple child safeguarding partnerships. What stood out from the interviews was the difference effective communication and information sharing between local area safeguarding partners and BTP can make to children and young people's safety. Embedding social workers in the County Lines Taskforce has supported this and, as such, is an approach that warrants consideration in terms of development and / or expansion. One suggestion was to have a social worker embedded from 7am to 11pm on a 7-day basis as part of an operational and investigative response.

The increase in awareness of young people at potential risk of exploitation on the railways was commended. However, it was also acknowledged that BTP are balancing multiple priority pressures, including sexual harassment, trespassing on the lines and suicide, the latter of which requires an emergency response. In discussion with BTP colleagues, scope for improving the mechanisms and processes for information sharing between BTP, local Home Office police forces and safeguarding partnerships was explored. This could really benefit children and young people who repeatedly go missing, and help to put in place better protective strategies.

Reflections from BTP:

This has been a useful project to have engaged with and has enabled some really helpful reflections and insight into the work that has been undertaken and reflects some of our own and the national challenges. We are pleased to see the value of the social work function within the taskforce and will continue to embed the in-custody strategy meetings for those we arrest to ensure timely information sharing and effective safety planning.

In terms of areas for BTP to develop, we will continue to consider how we can extend the added value of the existing additional social work resource and our work with the voluntary sector. We will also explore the potential for other subject matter expertise to be added to other areas of work.

In terms of our missing response, this work has highlighted some of the broader challenges in this area and BTP plans to extend scrutiny via repeat and high risk children and young people panels. This will be coupled with ongoing analysis of repeat source locations and via a new quality assurance Vulnerability Coordinator, who will review all referrals for missing children.

Date: 4/4/22

Signed by: Amanda Radley