



MIDDLE CLASS CHILDREN TARGETED FOR COUNTY LINES from NCA

Criminal gangs are targeting children and teenagers from middle-class families to sell drugs, a parliamentary report claims.

It says youngsters as young as eight from "stable and economically better-off" backgrounds are at risk of being exploited by urban crime networks.

The report from the All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Runaway and Missing Children and Adults follows warnings that children are being used in a drug distribution model known as "county lines".

This typically involves city gangs branching out into county or coastal towns to sell heroin and crack cocaine.

They deploy children and vulnerable people as couriers to move drugs and cash between the new market and their urban hub.

Based on testimony given at a meeting of experts, parents and agencies earlier this year, the APPG's paper says: "The participants of the roundtable heard that any child can be groomed for criminal exploitation.

"Some children are initially approached by their peers, who have also been groomed and exploited, which can make it even harder for them to identify the risks without prior education."

It raises concerns that vulnerable youngsters who are exploited by gangs to distribute drugs are often perceived to have "made a choice" and are criminalised, rather than recognised as victims.

Chair of the APPG, Labour MP Ann Coffey, said targeted children need support: "Young people who are groomed into drug-running by adults are being exploited in the same way as those who are enticed into sexual activity.

"They too are vulnerable and need our support.

"We need a greater understanding and awareness of this kind of criminal exploitation of children and better training to ensure it is recognised and prevented at an early stage.

"Once a child is criminalised it is very hard to get them back to the other side of the law."

A Home Office spokeswoman said: "There is more that all partners can do, which is why we are tackling county lines through a national action plan and reviewing our cross-Government strategy on Missing Children and Adults and developing a clear implementation plan for delivery."

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