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PCC says support services are vital to protect children from being exploited into criminal gangs



Children as young as seven are being targeted by organised criminal gangs to transport and sell drugs across the country.

Research done by the Children's Society says young people aged 14-17 are most likely to be targeted by criminal groups but there are reports of seven-year-olds being groomed into county lines, and 4 in 5 parents are worried about county lines in their local area.

Locally, we know there can often be links between county lines, child criminal exploitation and knife carrying amongst young people in Wiltshire, and an understanding of this as well as having the right support services available is crucial in keeping children and young people safe.

Police and Crime Commissioner Philip Wilkinson said: “It is deeply troubling that children as young as seven are being exploited by ruthless criminal gangs. This is not just a policing issue – it’s a societal one that demands a joined-up response.

“Through our Serious Violence Duty partnership, we are working to understand the root causes of youth exploitation and violence and invest in long-term solutions that protect our most vulnerable.

“Part of that investment includes commissioning vital drug and alcohol support services which help individuals break free from the cycle of addiction and exploitation, such as Turning Point in Wiltshire, and Change Live Grow in Swindon which are funded by my office and the local authorities.

“This is in addition to the specialist programmes we fund to support vulnerable young people at risk of both committing offences and becoming victim to criminality to divert them away from crime and support and encourage them to make good choices and thrive in their communities.

“Education, early intervention, and wraparound support are essential in preventing young people from being drawn into criminality, and my office remains committed to ensuring children and young people are given the safety, support and opportunity they need to thrive.”

Spot the signs

Last year, the Office of the Police and Crime Commissioner (OPCC) and Wiltshire Police ran a joint campaign ‘Spot the Signs’ which aimed to educate young people and their caregivers on how to spot the warning signs of exploitation that may be taking over a young person’s life.

The Wiltshire Serious Violence Duty Strategic Needs Assessment (SNA) highlights a 2023 schools survey which demonstrated that only 3% of young people admitted to having carried a knife.

However, most young people estimated that around 19% of their peers carried a knife, demonstrating the significant difference between the perceived threat of youth knife carriers versus the reality perpetuating a culture of fear amongst young people, which was challenged by the campaign.

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