



# Cuckooing Victimisation

An Information Booklet for Professionals

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This draft information booklet will be 'piloted' between July-December 2024. Revisions will be made to reflect practitioner comments at the conclusion of the piloting period. If you are using this information booklet, we would be grateful if you could contact Dr Laura Bainbridge ([L.Bainbridge@leeds.ac.uk](mailto:L.Bainbridge@leeds.ac.uk)) to allow us to monitor its circulation and request feedback.

## Authors

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This information booklet is designed to enhance professional understanding, awareness and curiosity in relation to cuckooing victimisation. Additional resources, including a Cuckooing Risk Assessment Tool, can be downloaded on the [Cuckooing Research & Prevention Network webpage](#).

## What is cuckooing?

Cuckooing is named after the nest-stealing practice of wild cuckoos.

It is a form of criminal exploitation where vulnerable people are conned, coerced, controlled, or intimidated into sharing, providing or offering up their accommodation to criminals, who then use it to base their criminal activity (adapted from Harding, 2020: 179).

Such activity may include using the property:

- To deal, store or take drugs (this is the most common)
- As a place to sleep
- To store cash, weapons, valuables or other items (such as CCTV equipment)
- For sex work

Perpetrators may also take over the property to financially abuse the tenant.

### At present, cuckooing is not a specific criminal offence

If cuckooing occurs, perpetrators may be prosecuted using a range of drugs, modern slavery, and serious crime legislation, or disrupted using civil remedies such as Premises Closure Orders and injunctions.

**Cuckooing is often, but not always, linked to county lines operations.**

## What is county lines?

County lines is a form of drug trafficking in which organised crime operatives in major cities establish networks for the supply and sale of illegal drugs in smaller towns and cities, often crossing police and local authority boundaries. Such activity is facilitated by the use of a dedicated mobile phone line or other form of 'deal line'. County lines is arguably distinct from traditional drug trafficking as it entails the use of violence, criminal exploitation of vulnerable people or children, and cuckooing.



## Risk factors

Victims of cuckooing are targeted because of their vulnerability.

Key targets for cuckooing perpetrators are those who suffer from drug or alcohol dependency, have a physical disability, a mental health condition and/or a learning disability.

Other risk factors include:

- Being in recovery from alcohol or drug dependency
- Neurodiversity or brain disorder (e.g. dementia)
- Financial insecurity (poverty)
- Housing insecurity and homelessness
- Loneliness, social isolation and/or lack of support network
- Age (i.e. older people)
- Being a lone female parent experiencing emotional or financial difficulties
- Involvement in sex work
- Young people living alone for the first time
- A history of being in the care system / being a recent care leaver
- Present or prior experience of neglect, physical and / or sexual abuse
- Connections to those who are vulnerable (e.g. the homeless; substance users) and/or those involved in street gangs or county lines activity

Cuckooing victims often live in deprived areas, and reside alone in either a block of flats or a house that has back alleyway access. Such properties are typically managed by social or private landlords.

'Functioning addicts' that are not subject to police, housing or adult social care attention are attractive cuckooing candidates to perpetrators as they are less likely to be chaotic, subject to safeguarding mechanisms or receive regular support at their property.

## Cuckooing pathways

The following strategies are often adopted by perpetrators to locate and target potential cuckooing victims:

- Visiting sites where drug users regularly congregate (e.g. abandoned properties) and having conversations with those purchasing drugs about their housing situation, or that of their friends, family, acquaintances or neighbours
- Calling-in a fabricated debt – e.g. 'we bought you alcohol last week, you owe us, you need to let us into your flat'
- Idling in deprived areas with the aim of identifying those with mental health issues
- Loitering outside of drug and alcohol treatment premises and approaching service users
- Sending out a 'we need a place to crash' message via text/social media
- Repeatedly calling drug-users to ask if they can visit them in their home
- Utilising existing knowledge of vulnerable people with their own neighbourhood (a.k.a. 'local' cuckooing)

Other strategies include:

- Waiting in hospital accident and emergency departments with the aim of identifying those displaying drug-seeking behaviour (e.g. those demanding opiates, benzodiazepines, and antipsychotics)
- Waiting outside of pharmacies to engage with those collecting methadone scripts
- Approaching people as they visit food banks, Jobcentres or churches
- Striking up conversations in cafes with those displaying signs of loneliness e.g. somebody nursing a cup of tea for several hours
- 'Honey trapping' single men

## The victim-perpetrator relationship

Cuckooing often commences with adult grooming.

Victims may be approached in a friendly manner, with efforts made to swiftly build trust and rapport. Perpetrators may be charming, and are likely to have honed their manipulation skills over time.

Offering the victim something of interest to them is a common strategy of cuckooing perpetrators. This could be, for example, a romantic relationship, friendship, sex, alcohol, money and/or drugs – with the latter being the prevailing 'gift' offered and received. In return, the perpetrator will then request 'a favour', typically a place to stay for a few days, a place to meet their friends, or the storage of items.

Some county lines operatives are honest about why they require use of the victim's property (e.g. to facilitate drug dealing) while others lie to gain entry.

Because of the exchange that occurs, victims of cuckooing may not always recognise that their relationship with the perpetrator is exploitative. Rather, they may view it as beneficial or believe the perpetrator to be 'a mate'. Moreover, victims of cuckooing may not readily self-identify as victims, and in turn may not be recognised as victims by police or safeguarding agencies.

Once a perpetrator has gained access to a property, the relationship between the victim

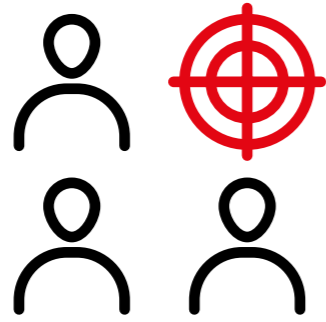
and the perpetrator typically deteriorates rapidly, although this is not always the case. There is some evidence to suggest that young people and female perpetrators have acted as cordial houseguests and undertaken some caring responsibilities.

For the majority of victims, however, the 'benefits' offered by the perpetrator swiftly begin to reduce over time and may be terminated entirely.

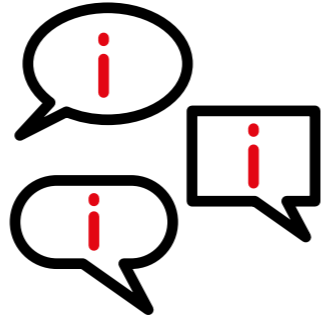
For those unaware that the perpetrator is a member of an organised crime group, the takeover of their home can be particularly distressing. Victims have reported that they felt betrayed, confused, angry and frightened, with fear exacerbated by the intimidation, (death) threats and violence that began when they asked the perpetrator(s) to leave their home.

Research findings suggest that some victims may be subjected to debt bondage by cuckooing perpetrators. Here, the perpetrator will refuse to leave the property, claiming that items (e.g. drugs) that were originally understood to be a 'gift' or 'benefits' would now need to be paid for. In some instances, this has resulted in victims being coerced into selling drugs on behalf of the organised crime group. Staging a burglary to trigger a debt bondage arrangement is also a strategy used by cuckooing perpetrators to retain power and control over the victim.

# The 7 Stages of Adult 'Cuckooing' Grooming



1. Select victim



2. Gain information



3. Build connection



4. Fill a need



5. Prime the target



6. Instigate the home takeover



7. Maintain control

**Bainbridge, L and Loughery, A. (2024).**  
Adapted from Sinnamon, G. (2017).  
The Psychology of Adult Sexual Grooming:  
Sinnamon's Seven-Stage Model of Adult  
Sexual Grooming. In Petherick, W. &  
Sinnamon, G. (eds). The Psychology  
of Criminal and Antisocial  
Behavior. Academic Press.

## Forced entry

Perpetrators have impersonated housing staff, private care staff, and third sector professionals to gain access to victims' properties.

Forced entry is nevertheless quite rare. Where this does occur, the threat or use of violence is customary, and the property is likely to:

- Be the home of an individual that is already known to the perpetrator, either because of previous contact or because they or one of their relatives owe the organised crime group money
- Be known to the organised crime group as an address that is used by a social landlord to house a vulnerable person. The victim may be tailed when they enter their property.

## Suffering in silence

Victims of cuckooing are unlikely to contact the police or other safeguarding agencies to request support due to fear of:

- Eviction
- The police (whom they may generally distrust)
- Adult or children's social services intervention
- Being arrested and convicted for drug offences
- Losing access to friendship, drugs, alcohol and/or money provided by the perpetrators
- The perpetrators seeking revenge
- Being labelled a 'grass' or disloyal

Feelings of shame and embarrassment may also deter a victim from reporting that their home has been cuckooed.



## Warning signs

The warning signs that feature in the tables below are not exhaustive, nor do they indicate that cuckooing victimisation is definitely occurring. Indeed, such signs may suggest that individuals simply require additional support or advice. Nonetheless, it is important to be aware of these warning signs and to exercise professional curiosity in situations where cuckooing victimisation is suspected.

### Covert cuckooing

**Some cuckooing perpetrators deliberately avoid drawing attention to themselves by coming and going quietly, and/or dealing in alternative locations (e.g. woods, parks, cars). Signs that sophisticated organised crime group operatives have engaged in a home takeover can include:**

	Yes	No
The victim not being seen by neighbours for a while		
People remaining in the property while the victim is out		
Reports of an illegal sub-let		
Unfamiliar people driving the victim's car, or being driven by the victim		
Curtains or blinds being closed during the day		
Gardens becoming overgrown		
Children and young people with no known connection to the victim seen entering the property		

### Overt cuckooing

**Other organised crime groups are less cautious, and choose to deal directly from the cuckooed property thus creating an indoor drugs market. When this occurs, indications of their presence can include:**

	Yes	No
An increase in the number of visitors to a property, with visits being brief in duration and occurring around the clock		
An increase in bikes, mopeds and vehicles (including taxis and hire cars) arriving at the property, or parking close by		
People arriving in expensive cars (e.g. BMWs)		
Groups of people congregating in front gardens or at the back of a property		
An increase in litter outside of the property, including takeaway boxes and discarded drugs paraphernalia (e.g. foil, syringes, cling film)		
External doors being propped open		
Damage to doors and windows		
Graffiti		
Unknown people pressing buzzers to gain access to buildings		
An increase in theft in the local area		
Loud parties (that may generate noise complaints from neighbours)		
An increase in reports of anti-social behaviour		



## Inside a cuckooed property

Upon entering a cuckooed address, the following may be observed:

	Yes	No
Piles of stolen goods		
Drug-dealing equipment (e.g. scales, deal bags) and paraphernalia		
Drug-manufacturing equipment (e.g. pill presses)		
Weapons		
Children and young people with no clear connection to the victim		
Individuals with large amounts of cash, expensive items and/or multiple mobile phones		
Lack of access to rooms within the property / newly installed locks on internal doors (e.g. bedrooms)		
Newly installed CCTV equipment		
Takeaway boxes or containers		
Signs of violence in the property (e.g. damage to internal doors)		
Bedding and clothing that does not belong to the victim		

## Cuckooing victims

Cuckooing victims are likely to prevent others from entering their property, and may disengage from support services. They may also cease physical and virtual contact with their social network. Other warning signs include:

	Yes	No
Suspicious new friendships / relationships (e.g. age difference, controlling behaviour)		
Gang association		
Arriving to appointments in unknown vehicles or taxis		
Unexplained injuries, or providing accounts that do not reflect the injuries		
Sexually transmitted infections or unwanted pregnancies		
Changes in mood, behaviour and/or appearance		
Weight loss		
Presenting as angry, anxious, fearful or withdrawn		
Displaying disruptive, aggressive or over-confident behaviour		
Providing accounts which seem coached or rehearsed		
Using new sexual, drug-related or violent language		
Avoiding eye contact		
Acting in a secretive or reserved manner		
Increased dependency (e.g. drugs or an intimate partner)		
Moving out or staying away from the property whilst an unknown person remains		
A reluctance to return to the property		
Rough sleeping or sofa-surfing		
Being found begging or involved in other low-level crimes		
Unpaid bills, a sudden loss of income or assets and/or an increase in debt		
Possessing large sums of money or goods that cannot be accounted for		
Sudden payment of rent arrears		
Receiving excessive amounts of phone calls and messages		
Carrying multiple mobile phones		
Regularly losing their keys or access fobs		
Not having access to documents		
Carrying weapons		



## Support challenges

Challenges may arise when seeking to support a victim of cuckooing. Such challenges are not, however, insurmountable. Below is a list of common challenges encountered by professionals, along with some suggested solutions that may help.

### The victim may be reluctant to disclose information

- Identify the most appropriate professional to approach the victim. Ideally, this should be someone who the victim trusts
- Reflect on the impact of breaching confidentiality and trust if you are considering raising a safeguarding alert without the victim's consent
- Mention of the police and/or social workers can trigger anxiety and fear – broach the issue of contacting these agencies carefully
- If your client does agree to disclose information, arrange meetings with agencies in discreet locations
- It may be safer for the victim to submit an anonymous report to the police

### Individuals may struggle to identify as a victim

- Avoid 'why' questions where possible. Instead, ask open questions: 'What would happen if you were to ask them to leave?' 'Have you ever felt unsafe?' 'Do you know all the people coming into your property, or are some of them friends of friends?' You do not need someone to tell you they are a victim to know they need support

### Professionals may not view the individual as a victim

- Advocate in the best interests of the victim, particularly when policies or processes are constraining the support that is offered
- Signpost professional partners to cuckooing information and resources to improve their awareness and understanding of the issue

### The circumstances of the individual may impact on the exit strategies that are available to them. For example – safe houses will not accommodate those with complex needs

- Manage the victim's expectations – provide reassurance but do not overpromise
- Consider private rental properties or a house exchange
- Contact your local police force and the chair of your local Community Safety Partnership to discuss target-hardening the victim's property

### For the police to have the power to intervene, they need to be able to identify and evidence criminal offences taking place

- Partner with the police and be guided by their advice
- Ensure that the police understand your client's vulnerabilities, and status as a victim

## Minimising the risk to staff

- Arrange to meet the victim away from their property where possible
- Avoid lone visits to the property
- Visit the property with a police officer where appropriate
- Establish safe words with the victim, team members and the police
- Increase the amount of supervision and support that is offered to staff (e.g. line-managers should arrange regular meetings)

Avoid, or only consider with extreme caution:

- Entering the property when the victim is out to check who is there
- Knocking on the door when you know that the victim is out to see who answers
- Confronting, or attempting to forcefully remove, any visitors to the property
- Using the threat of eviction to secure disclosure and/or compliance from the victim
- Enforcing visitor restrictions or locality rules without consulting the victim





# Resources

## Victim Perspectives

- [Susan](#)
- [Aimee](#)
- [Mark](#)
- [Lisa](#)

## Cuckooing Toolkits

[Cuckooing Research & Prevention Network](#)

[Groundswell](#)

[Safer Lives](#)

[Cuckooing Animation](#)  
[West Yorkshire Police](#)

## Organisations

[College of Policing](#)

[Crimestoppers](#)

[National County Lines Coordination Centre](#)

[The Salvation Army](#)

## Reports, Strategies & Guidance

Home Office [Criminal Exploitation of Children and Vulnerable Adults: County Lines Guidance](#)

Home Office [National Referral Mechanism Guidance](#)

HM Inspectorate of Probation [Child Criminal Exploitation Report](#)

NCA [County Lines Drug Supply, Vulnerability and Harm – Intelligence Assessment 2018](#)

NPCC [County Lines Policing Strategy 2024-2027](#)

## Academic Publications

Dr Jack Spicer – [Cuckoo Land](#)

Professor Maria Ioannou et al. – [An Examination of the Insights and Experiences of Cuckooing Experts](#)

Professor Simon Harding – [County Lines: Exploitation and Drug Dealing Among Urban Street Gangs](#)

Professor Stephen Macdonald et al. – [Becoming Cuckooed: Conceptualising the Relationship Between Disability, Home Takeovers and Criminal Exploitation](#)

## Support Services

[Catch 22](#) is a specialist support and rescue service for young people and their families who are criminally exploited through county lines

To report intelligence anonymously, contact [Crimestoppers](#)

For advice on drugs, their effects and the law, talk to [Frank](#)

[IvionTrust](#) work with parents and carers of children who are at risk of being exploited by perpetrators, and offer guidance and training to professionals

[#LookCloser](#) is a national campaign encouraging everyone to learn the signs of child exploitation and how to report it

24-hour [National Domestic Abuse Helpline](#)

Professionals can contact the [NSPCC](#) to discuss concerns about a child

24-hour [Rape & Sexual Abuse Support Line](#)

[SafeCall](#) is a free, confidential and anonymous helpline and support service for young people and family members that are affected by missing, county lines and criminal exploitation. The service also provides confidential support and advice for professionals in relation to their work with an exploited young person or family

If you suspect that someone is the victim of cuckooing or modern slavery, contact [The Salvation Army](#)

[The Survivor's Trust](#) If you suspect that someone is the victim of modern slavery, contact The Salvation Army

[Victim Support](#) is an independent charity in England and Wales that provides specialist practical and emotional support to victims and witnesses of crime

# CUCKOOING

RESEARCH & PREVENTION NETWORK

The Cuckooing Research & Prevention Network was launched in 2023 to facilitate the exchange of cuckooing knowledge and promising practice between members. Over 1,000 academics,

practitioners and policy-makers have joined the Network, spanning the local, regional and national levels.

Join the Cuckooing Research & Prevention Network [mailing list](#)



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