Natalie: Hello and welcome to Learn on the go, the podcast from Community Care Inform, where we discuss the issues affecting social workers and social care practitioners. I'm Natalie Valios, senior content editor at Community Care Inform Adults.

This episode looks at county lines and child criminal exploitation. Discussing this with me today is Adam Elliott, founder of The Long Game, a youth-led intervention to reduce young people's risk of exposure to these forms of modern slavery.

Adam uses his lived experience to highlight how children and young people are groomed, exploited and manipulated into county lines.

There is currently no statutory definition of child criminal exploitation, however, it is commonly understood to be a form of child abuse where a child is used, coerced, controlled or manipulated into criminal activity.

It can take a range of forms and activities but most commonly involves drug distribution and supply, including county lines. This is when illegal drugs are transported from one area to another, often across police and local authority boundaries, usually by children or vulnerable people who are coerced into it by gangs. The 'county line' is the mobile phone line used to take the drug orders.

The Home Office describes county lines as the most violent model of drug supply. It estimated that approximately 15,500 children were identified as at risk or involved in child criminal exploitation in the year ending March 2025 but says this is likely to be a significant underestimate.

Before we go any further, I want to give a warning about the content in this episode. Adam's story is a traumatic one, including the violence he witnessed and suffered himself. We'd encourage you to look after yourself while listening and use supervision and peer support if it brings up anything difficult for you.

[00:01:45 on the podcast]

Thanks for joining me, Adam, I know you're very used to talking about your story now, but nevertheless it's not an easy thing to relive so I appreciate you doing this podcast. So let's go back to when you were 13. You were living with your older brother and your parents who were – and still are – together. They were both professionals. It's a white, middle class family, no one uses drugs and there are no links to any criminal activity.

So can you paint a picture of your life at that time, were you enjoying school, did you have friends, what did you like doing at weekends?

Adam: Yes, so thank you very much for having me. So yeah, age 13 is certainly the starting point of my story. So up until that stage, everything was quite literally perfect, you know. During primary school and middle school I was well known as an easy child to teach, a pleasure to work with. I had a lot of friends. I'd like to think I were quite popular growing up, and I would describe myself as quite a typical, normal 13-year-old lad.

I loved going out into nature, exploring all the wildlife. I was a keen photographer, so I'd like to take photos of that wildlife. And I really, really enjoyed being out and about on my bike as well. So every second of every day, I would be out and about biking around with friends, trying to see different buzzards and different wildlife like that. So things were great for me.

Even the family home, everything was perfect. My mum and dad were very loving. We always had food on the table. We didn't have cold winters without heating or anything like that. And I was also very privileged in the sense that mum and dad took us on holidays abroad. At least once a year, we'd go on holidays to different parts of the world and experience things that not every child gets to experience in life. So at this stage, I'd say things were perfect, actually.

[00:03:44 on the podcast]

Natalie: Okay, so nothing, in fact, that would make anyone think you might be targeted for child criminal exploitation. And I think one of the main things you want to highlight in this podcast is that although statistics show that there are several factors that make young people more vulnerable to this type of exploitation – such as being black, care experienced, excluded from school or experiencing abuse – it can and does happen to anyone.

What was going on in your background that made you vulnerable to being targeted, do you think?

Adam: So that's why I talk a lot about age 13, because it's a real pivotal point in my life, for sure. So like you just said, I didn't meet any of the stereotypes of a typical county lines kid or someone involved in drugs or even drug suppliers.

So I was about to start a new upper school at age 13 and I was really excited about that. I remember looking around the school thinking this is going to be amazing. And as I started the upper school, unfortunately, within a couple of weeks, maybe a month of actually starting, my dad got diagnosed with cancer.

We'd already had a couple of family members that had been diagnosed with cancer, and unfortunately, they hadn't survived. So when I found out that dad had got cancer, emotional is an understatement. I truly didn't think that he'd live through it, to be honest.

And then to make matters worse, within a very short time period, my granddad got diagnosed with terminal cancer, as well. My brother has also got quite high behavioural needs as well. So all of this combined, all of a sudden made the house a little bit different, I think is the right way to describe it.

Things were moving at a very fast pace. And I had to adapt to this new upper school. And of course, a new upper school, new environment, and the bigger factor of all, new people.

So I've started this upper school and almost instantly, I've got people that are in year 11, and like sixth form, so about 15- to 16-year-olds, all wanting to be friends with little old Adam. Now, growing up, I was always known as a people pleaser. And what I mean by people pleaser is I cannot say ‘no’ to save my life.

Even now being 22 years old, I really struggle with that word ‘no’. And I actually think, even if I didn't have all of the other factors at play to do with my family etc, the fact that I just couldn't say no to people was actually a humongous vulnerability. So when I was introduced to all of these older peers, they were then smoking weed, cannabis, however we want to phrase it, smoking cigarettes, vaping, doing things that I simply wasn't used to, drinking on the weekends and stuff like that.

And before I knew it, they were introducing me to that world and to that life. And being that people pleaser, not being able to say no, and also looking for that escape of my family situations, before I knew it, I started smoking cannabis.

[00:06:52 on the podcast]

Natalie: I mean, that's an awful lot for you to be dealing with, with your dad, new school, mainly your dad, obviously, it's a huge amount for...and there's so much going on hormonally for children at 13 as well, isn't there? There's such a big change everywhere in your life going on there at home, at school, within yourself. You don't necessarily think of older kids mixing with the new younger kids when you go to a new school. They normally sort of look down as the most, you know, too young to be bothered about.

Do you think it was because they had already been groomed and they were looking for the new kids to take on the patch, you know, to come in with them. And that was what they were being groomed to do, to groom other young people. And that's why they were looking, they were like picking out the vulnerable people?

Did it start with young people approaching you rather than adults approaching you?

Adam: Exactly that. I think that was what their main objective was, to groom and recruit other people to be involved. I can't definitely say if there was malicious intentions in that first interaction.

And I couldn't actually say if it was a conscious decision that we're going to find these younger people and groom them etc. I think there is also an element that these older young people that were in my life at this stage, they wasn't seeing the nitty gritty side of drug dealing or drugs or they hadn't experienced how brutal it could really be at this stage. So I think there was even an element of they thought they were doing me a favour by supplying me with these drugs to have an escape from my family situations, by introducing me to new people and eventually trying to put some money in my pocket.

So obviously, I think they understood what they were doing was wrong. But I don't think they understood to what extent they were doing things.

[00:08:53 on the podcast]

Natalie: So you called your project The Long Game and I assume part of this is because criminals play a long game with those they're targeting. It starts off with a seemingly innocuous request, which escalates over time until the young person is drawn in. And by the time they realise what's going on, they feel trapped and it seems impossible to escape.

This is what happened with you. So you've said it started off with the older kids in the school approaching you, giving you weed etc. How did that go from being given some weed to being involved in the county lines? What happened next?

Adam: Yeah, it feels like things escalated really quickly for me, because it was as simple as a couple of weeks of smoking weed, started drinking on the weekends, they took me to a couple of parties. And then before I knew it, I remember as clear as day, like it was yesterday, where we're standing outside the school, after school. And they said to me, “Adam, you don't pay for any of this weed. We take you out drinking on the weekends, you're not paying for none of it.”

And I remember thinking money didn't even cross my mind that this stuff costs money. I guess I was a little bit naive in some senses. And I said to him, I said, “Well, unfortunately, I don't have money.” And in my head, I'm thinking, well, I've never asked mum and dad for money. I've never had pocket money off them, because they just, they feed me, they give me my basic needs at home. So why do I need additional money? And I almost managed to say that to them.

And I remember them saying to me, “Are you dumb?” I thought, am I? Like, “how do you think we make our money?”

And honestly, I was baffled. I didn't have a clue. I think I even said something stupid to them, like, “Mum and dad give you pocket money?”

And they said to me, they go, “No, look, what's gonna happen here is you're gonna take this tiny little package, you're gonna bike 10 minutes up that footpath, there's gonna be someone standing there, and you'll be able to know who it is.

“They'll stand out. You're gonna drop that little package off to them, and they're gonna give you some money. You'll bike back, give it to us, and you can carry on smoking all the weed you want.”

And I was actually relieved when they said that to me, because I thought, wait, all you want me to do is bike 10 minutes in that direction, hand over this, whatever that is, get some money for it, give it to you guys, and my life stays the exact same. So that's exactly what I did. And the thought of being able to keep my friends, keep my social circles, and the risk of losing that was stronger than the fear of meeting this random person, dropping off this little package.

[00:11:38 on the podcast]

And I think it also highlights how good people are at simplifying this really dangerous trade. Just bike 10 minutes that direction. Anyone can bike 10 minutes in one direction.

So you think, well, that sounds easy. And if I say, “Oh, I can't do that” – “What do you mean you can't bike 10 minutes? You bike every day of your life. All you're doing is quickly saying ‘hello’ to somebody.”

So I'd say that's kind of where I was introduced to drug dealing. But I wasn't actually under the impression that I was a drug dealer, if that makes sense.

[00:12:14 on the podcast]

Natalie: That does make sense. And these were still kids that you were at school with doing this? Yeah. So they were obviously older than you, so were they targeting any other kids in your year?

Adam: Yeah, yeah, there was a couple of us. At this stage, there was one lad that was younger than me, actually. So he was about 12, maybe coming up to 13. And then there was another person that was in the same year group as me.

And actually, that young person, I were friends with at middle school. So then when we went up to upper school together, we kind of came as a bit of a pair. But I definitely did notice that these older young people took a real liking to me.

And my other two friends actually were starting to get a little bit jealous of that. And then I think that even fed into the desire of me trying to please these older people. Because I'm thinking, wow, well, if my friends are getting a little bit jealous of me, then this must be like a good opportunity almost.

[00:13:13 on the podcast]

Natalie: I mean, in hindsight, if anyone had been looking for them, what would you say were the early warning signs that you were being groomed?

Adam: So, I mean, you've got your obvious ones that I think are probably easier to start off with. But my appearance really rapidly changed. I was always a very well put together young person, you know, that really prioritised wearing school uniform, looking presentable, making sure my hair and everything like that was a decent enough standard.

So within a couple of weeks, you know, my shirt's untucked, so I'm not wearing school jumpers. That standard has really, really dropped. I'm now starting to smell of cannabis on a regular basis. One of the biggest things that I think professionals probably should have noticed was the fact that I was arriving late to school most days. I would never be naughty within class or I wasn't somebody that would swear at teachers. I'd always have respect to the teachers.

But there were certainly more times where I'm sitting there getting a lot more fidgety, my phone's starting to ring a lot more often. These older peers would walk past the classrooms and be like, "It's Adam, it's Adam." So I think even my social status had definitely risen.

And I think the professionals and the teachers within the school probably should have asked themselves, "Why is a 13-year-old lad that's just joined year 9, all of a sudden spending his break times, lunch times, after school, before school, with our year 11s and our sixth formers?" I stood out like a sore thumb standing next to these absolute giants of teenagers, right? So I think that was a real big sign.

[00:14:59 on the podcast]

Natalie: I can completely see why that would be a real red flag. I'm going to sound very ignorant. I have to admit that I've got no idea really about how county lines actually operate and what it would have entailed for you. Can you explain how it works?

Adam: Yeah, definitely. And I actually think using my personal story is probably the best way to describe that. But a county line is a drug phone that comes from a major city into a more rural area, typically. And when they do this, there's two means that they take over the local level drug dealing network that already exists. So they either use violence to get rid of all those pre-existing drug dealers, and they take over the drug trade with force within the town, village, wherever it might be.

Or they actually buy all of the drug phones off the local level drug dealers that have been operating for years, so that they've got all of the contacts, and that they can literally just walk into a town, they've got all of the numbers, they can set up shop, and they can operate.

So in my story, that's exactly what happened. I got to about 14 years old, obviously already been groomed and exploited by the 16-, 17-year-olds, have been introduced to some of the slightly higher level figures within the town.

They were entering their 20s, mid-20s. And then one day, I received a phone call from a number I didn't recognise, from a voice I didn't recognise. And he basically said that he's bought the phone off the mid 20-year-old.

He's told this London-based county line that I was working for him. And I was almost sold as part of that line at that very initial stage. And that's something that kept on reoccurring throughout my whole journey.

So I received that phone call and it goes along the lines of, “You don't work for that person that you know, you now answer to me.” And that then starts operating.

County lines are also very well known to supply crack cocaine and heroin. But in my case, there were crack cocaine, heroin, cannabis, MDMA, pills, ketamine, psychedelic substances as well. And then some of the reasons why a county line based gang from London, Birmingham, Manchester would actually supply alternative drugs than crack cocaine and heroin is because if they've just bought those phone networks, well they're going to have people calling up for pills and crack cocaine and heroin and all of the above, right. So they need to meet that demand if they've taken out all of the local level drug dealers.

[00:17:38 on the podcast]

Natalie: Wow, that's a lot, isn't it? I mean, this is probably going to sound a really stupid question, but was it your phone? Did they give you a phone?

Adam: Yeah, so to start off with, it was just my personal phone. So that is how things operated up until the age of about 14, 15. And then once I was introduced to the London-based gang, I was given a Nokia 360, I believe. For those that don't know what that is, that is a typical burner phone. It's not got a touchscreen on it. You have to press the 'a', 'b', 'c' to text. They're quite old-school phones.

Natalie: So that's probably something for parents and professionals to look out for if a young person's got one of those phones. That's a typical burner phone. That's another red flag maybe.

Adam: Definitely. And I remember even being in school having one of those phones in my possession. And that ringtone is really, really obvious and distinctive. So again, I think that ringtone, especially in 2026, just stands out like a sore thumb.

But unfortunately, things have progressed from burner phones and trap phones. And actually, drug lines are being operated from iPhones quite commonly now. So just anyone in possession of two phones that isn't working a legitimate job is certainly a red flag.

[00:19:00 on the podcast]

Natalie: Okay. And county lines, are they open 24/7? Are you on call every day of the year like Christmas Day? Is that a stupid question?

Adam: Not at all. I'm actually really pleased that you've asked that question because quite often I don't emphasise that enough. But yeah, it is a 365-day, 24/7 line. It does not stop. Unfortunately, yeah, I've supplied drugs on Christmas Day, Christmas Eve, Boxing Day, you know, all of those times that you're meant to be with your families, unfortunately, I was out and about supplying Class A drugs. And I remember even one particular harsh winter biking around in the thick snow. It was absolutely brutal. And the problem is because the drugs are so small, it's so fiddly. So you're taking off your glove, you're then getting the drug out your pocket and your hands are freezing cold. And just every turn of that pedal is just absolutely brutal.

And I think that's what a lot of young people certainly don't understand that almost aspire to be part of a gang or a drug dealing network, however you want to describe it. But also the professionals don't take into account enough is the physical drain of running a line or being part of a county line or a local level drug dealing network. So yeah, it's brutal.

And then even, you know, just try and picture for anyone that listens to this, try and picture being 14 years old and having to be out at four o'clock in the morning working a corner. For anyone that's even been out at three, four in the morning, your emotions are very heightened, your senses are extremely heightened. And then to top it all off, you're meeting the very unpredictable drug users.

And then you've also got the police that are constantly after you. And quite often you'll have rival gangs or rival drug dealing networks also wanting to take you out. So it does really feel like the whole world is stacked against you every second of the day.

[00:21:08 on the podcast]

Natalie: I can't even imagine how that must make you feel, emotionally, it just sounds absolutely terrifying. And how many calls could you be having a day? Are we talking hundreds, thousands?

Adam: Oh, well, I do remember looking up my call log once and 1,500 phone calls that came in over a 24-hour period. So to say thousands really isn't an underestimate whatsoever. Obviously, different lines are at different stages within the pecking order. But yeah, I'd say a fairly well-established line, you're talking anywhere between 500 to 1,500 phone calls a day.

And something else that I think is probably quite a good opportunity to highlight at this stage, when you are operating a drug dealing phone, or you're being coerced to hold a line or whatever it might be, even if it is an iPhone, that is still going to be a pay-as-you-go SIM.

If you're supplying drugs, and you've got a monthly contract, then you're probably not very high up within the market, right. So no matter what, you have to go to a shop every single morning and buy, I don't know, £30 worth of credit, because you need to text all 1,500 drug users to say, “Lines open”, or “We're operating from seven in the morning to seven in the morning, every single day”.

Or there will also be different deals that are advertised each day as well. So the drug market will change quite rapidly in pricing. So a large quantity might come into the country which then will drop the price of the drugs, will then eventually filter down to the drug users. So you have to update them. So again, a 14-year-old lad walking into a shop every single morning to buy £30 worth of credit. Again, for me, it's a red flag. Even if you've got hundreds of mates, who are you texting 1,500 times a day, and a real pattern to it as well.

[00:23:13 on the podcast]

Natalie: I think your story demonstrates that there are so many different adults in whatever capacity that could pick up on warning signs, but if they all talked, so if there was a local authority, I don't know, place you could go to report fears about county lines, so many different people could be doing it from the newsagent to the teacher to a social worker, you know, there's other people that you wouldn't necessarily think about, you wouldn't necessarily think a newsagent could be part of helping fight the war against county lines. But that's such a good point.

How long did it take you to realise what was really going on? What was in those packages? And what you were actually involved with?

Adam: Yeah, I'll just quickly also just touch on what you just said, because again, not enough people are thinking like that. But to actually tackle county lines and drug supply, this is a

community problem. It's an old-fashioned saying that it takes a village to raise a child and unless we all come together and stop putting the blame on social services, youth justice, statutory services, this is not getting no better whatsoever. We've all got to come together, we've got to train the shopkeepers, we've got to train the community leaders and exactly what you've just said, have a really good robust system for people to report into.

But yeah, so thank you for bringing that up. But to go back on to your question, when I first started to realise that, number one, I was part of a drug dealing network and actually supplying drugs, I would say that was probably at about 14-years-old when unfortunately, I was first arrested, because like we previously mentioned, I grew up in a household where drugs were never spoken about, where mum and dad didn't have much knowledge around drugs whatsoever, the conversations didn't take place. So when I did start realising that, yeah, maybe these are drugs within the packages, I didn't actually realise the law side of things, the fact that you could get arrested, that you've got class A, class B, class C, that you could go to prison for etc. So yeah, it was 14-years-old that I realised that and that was my first point of arrest.

[00:25:22 on the podcast]

Natalie: How did it make you feel realising you were involved with that?

Adam: Heartbroken, I completely broke down to be honest with you. I remember I told the school absolutely everything. I told them where the drugs were being picked up from each day, who exactly was involved. I completely broke down and I couldn't stop speaking about it, actually. But unfortunately, I didn't quite get the response I was looking for at that point, which kind of set me back a little bit.

[00:25:52 on the podcast]

Natalie: I believe this started because you were 14 and a teacher saw you accepting a pill from an older boy and called the police. And while you were waiting for them to arrive, you told the school everything and asked for help.

You didn't get the help, as you've mentioned, you were arrested. Why had the boy given you the pill in the first place? What happened when the police arrived? I would have thought this would be the turning point you needed to get help, but sadly it wasn't.

Adam: So the reason why I was handed that pill was because one of the older students needed to take my bike at break time to go to the neighbouring estate to hand over a fairly large quantity of money to our supplier and receive what you would call a reload, so resupply of drugs.

I didn't want my bike to be taken. I tried to put up a bit of a fight, obviously come back down to being that people pleaser. And he handed me that pill and said, “Sell it, make a couple of quid, take it, get high today, do whatever you want.”

And that teacher saw. So as you mentioned, I've asked for help, help not received. I actually got told that I was trying to pass off the blame and that I was trying to drag other people down with me. And I remember one staff member, she used the words that “you've made your bed, you now need to lie in it”. So I was called a liar in simplest terms. No one believed me apart from my mum.

I think the police had a little bit more of an understanding at this stage, but it wasn't high levels of sympathy. And unfortunately that day I was also strip searched as well. So because my understanding of the procedures was so limited when they then strip searched me, I'm thinking,

what are you doing? So my first encounter with the police was quite negative, although their words wasn't as hurtful as what the school was saying.

And being strip searched confused me, I think is the right word to use. So that was a real breakdown for me of how I viewed statutory services.

[00:27:52 on the podcast]

Natalie: I just find it so shocking that the first time you asked for help, which was such a brave thing to do, and you told the school and the police what was really going on, you were treated as though you're the one in the wrong and no professional intervenes despite what you've said. And I think you were suspended from school at that point. And then were you permanently excluded and sent to a pupil referral unit?

Adam: Yes, yeah, that's correct. Unfortunately, I then had another encounter with the police within a couple of month period. Once again, I was arrested, processed for a small quantity of cannabis and then I was permanently excluded from mainstream school.

And it was at this point where the London county line gang came into the town and introduced themselves to me. So I wasn't actually in education at that stage. I was waiting to get placement.

And yeah, I then got placement at my pupil referral unit. And I remember during the time of waiting for my pupil referral unit placement, I've got the people contacting me saying, “Look, you need to do this, you need to do that.” But I'd seen the misery that it caused mum and dad.

And that was always like my biggest fear. I didn't want to disappoint them or stress them out when they had so much going on. So I managed to almost avoid this gang. But then to get to my pupil referral unit, it was in a different town. So I had to go there via taxi every single day. So this taxi driver started picking me up.

It was quite obvious at a very early stage that he was a really big drug user. And I would actually probably call him drug dependent. And so he would pick me up most mornings, you know, eyes very big. At this point, I kind of knew how to spot if somebody was on drugs or not. And to make the matter worse, this taxi driver was buying his drugs off this London-based gang. And it wasn't long until they realised, hang on a minute, we all know little old Adam.

So that taxi driver then started dropping me off at places he shouldn't do after school, you know, some days we'd leave school early and he'd drop me off here, there and he'd always go, you know, "Tell your mum that you're seeing a friend" or very good at coming up with excuses for me. And this is where I was then introduced to the world of trap houses and seeing people shooting up heroin. I'd already seen that and I'd already seen people smoking crack cocaine. But it was more in the context of I would go around a friend's house and his mum would be sitting there injecting heroin or dad would be smoking a pipe of crack.

So now I've got to the pupil referral unit at age 14, I've been introduced to the actual world of actual trap houses. And for those that will listen to this and might not have a great understanding of what an actual trap house is, they're basically derelict buildings, but someone still owns it. Quite often that person's been cuckooed, you've got needles all over the floor, you've got bodily fluids like faeces, blood, stuff like that on the walls, quite often broken windows. They are literally your worst place to ever put a child, essentially. Like there's nothing safe about them whatsoever.

[00:30:59 on the podcast]

Natalie: I think that's such an important message, isn't it? Because quite often on films and things like that, drugs and gangs can be glamorised. And to say the reality of what it really involves, and to actually hear the reality of what a trap house is, and I think it's such an important message to give young people about what you were seeing and how incredibly traumatic that is. And I can't even imagine how you dealt with that.

Adam: Because I also think the other point that a lot of people miss out on, especially professionals, but even at this stage, I wasn't going missing. So I knew that mum and dad expected me home every single night, otherwise they'd have a heart attack. So I'd always find a way to get home.

And even at this stage, I wasn't doing like the 24-hour shifts or anything like that. So from a statutory response point of view, “Well, he's not going missing, so he can't be that high risk.” And a lot of professionals think to be working in a trap house, you need to be doing 24-hour shifts for five days a week or whatever. And that's not always the case, especially how county lines has now evolved. These county lines, they used to bring kids from the city of origin into the town.

But now quite often they just recruit within the town because it's less hard work, right, having to traffic them from one end of the country to another. So because at this stage I hadn't been trafficked, at this stage I hadn't gone missing, people didn't think it was as bad as it was.

[00:32:30 on the podcast]

Natalie: So that's another red flag to be aware of, isn't it? You don't actually have to be missing or be in a different county to be involved. It's just getting rid of those myths, isn't it? And stereotypes.

You've said you've seen trap houses now, you've seen the sort of horror of what you're involved with, you've been arrested, all these things have happened to you. What tactics did the gang use to make it seem impossible to escape? Was there any point where you thought you could say no and just walk away?

Adam: Yeah, and I think that question will kind of evolve as this podcast goes on, for sure. But at the stage that we're at currently, at that point of about 14, that is the first point that I ever encountered being robbed by a drug user. I had a bit of a slice through the side of the arm, so he used a weapon during that robbery. The actual injuries wasn't hugely severe or anything like that.

But I guess I was in shock that someone's done that to me, that someone's willing to use that sort of force to get £20 worth of drugs. I've gone running back to the trap house with these people from London sitting inside, they're all between the ages of 25 plus. And I've said, “Someone's just, you know, sliced me through the arm.”

And they said, “Well, where's the money?” I've said, “They've robbed the drugs.” And there was the bloke that was being cuckooed sitting on the sofa. And they've grabbed him and they've just started beating him black and blue, had nothing to do with the robbery or anything like that.

And it felt like a lifetime that they were just kicking him and punching him. And it was horrible to watch, I really hated it. And then they stopped and they looked up at me. And they go, “Look, this is what could happen to you, unless you make sure you don't get robbed again, unless you make sure that you do better at this.”

So for me, that was the point that I realised these guys don't care that I've just been hurt. They don't care what's just happened to me out there. And actually, they're setting an example. And the person they beat up was a grown adult. So, of course, that literally inserts a fear into your brain that, well, if they can do that to a grown adult, what can they do to a 14-year-old lad, right? And then also, because of this taxi driver picking me up from home and stuff like that, they also then knew where I lived as well. So they made that quite apparent at that stage.

[00:34:51 on the podcast]

Natalie: Okay, I mean, that's enough to make anyone not try to leave, isn't it? Especially when they start threatening your family.

And for those who don't know what cuckooing is, it's when, in this case, the gang takes over somebody's home. It's quite often a vulnerable adult, isn't it? They have nothing to do with the gang or any criminal activity, but they use their home as the base. Is that correct?

Adam: Yes, spot on.

Natalie: So at 15, you left the PRU with no qualifications. You've seen extreme violence to make you scared to leave. And you must have felt like there were no options out there for you. But at 16, your mum found you an apprenticeship in health and social care. Did this give you hope that you could finally escape?

Adam: Definitely, because the other point that I did just miss out there, the gang were really good at reminding me that I had been kicked out of school, that I wouldn't really amount to much. They didn't quite use those words, but in their gang slang, essentially.

So yeah, when mum then found me this apprenticeship, and I remember I didn't know nothing about it, she dropped me off at the building and said, “Look, I've got you a job interview, go in there, give it your best.” And I did. And to my surprise, they gave me the job.

So I've gone from feeling really worthless, like scum of the earth, that's part of all this evil stuff and etc, to now actually thinking, okay, yeah, you know what, maybe I'm not as bad as what I think. Maybe I can still have opportunities and employment etc.

And I'd always had this dream of becoming a paramedic. That's all I ever wanted. I thought this apprenticeship would potentially help me accomplish that dream.

And it was the best and potentially the worst thing that ever happened to me, because I'd started this apprenticeship so excited, so full of life. You know, just stunned at the fact that you get paid an hourly wage, and stunned that you could call in sick and still get paid. And they're telling me you get eight weeks’ holiday leave and stuff like that.

Just all of this stuff, I just didn't know. And I'd plucked up the courage and called up the people I'm working for and said, “Look, I can't do this anymore. I'm working from seven in the morning until half two, Monday to Friday. I ain't really got the time to be out and about working for you.” They were alright about it when I made that phone call, they actually gave me some words of encouragement. But it wasn't long until I received a phone call once again, number I didn't recognise, but long story short, I was asked if I was at work.

I said yes. I was then told to look out of my work window to look out for a black car. I could see the black car. He said, “Look, it's me sitting in this car.” And this random person was either gonna run into work, give me a kicking, drag me out and have a little chat with me. Or I could

quickly walk out of work, get in the car and speak to the person. So that's what I done. And he went absolutely berserk at me. He said, “What, do you think you're special? Because you've got a job, you think you can step away from this? ”

That was quite tough to hear. Told me that I needed to go back to the trap house, go back to supplying drugs. You know, he knew where I worked, knew where I lived and the repercussions for this essentially. So he then said that there was an alternative job where I could meet somebody in a location, give them quite a large amount of money. In return, I'd receive a rucksack full of, you know, all sorts of class A drugs and some class B drugs. So then go and drop it off at the trap house. And I could do that once a week, things would be alright. So that is what I did. And for once a week, that means, you know, I still get to keep my apprenticeship, keep mum and dad happy, all of that side of things.

And then I went, dropped off that bag, went home that night. And then the next day, I was arrested for being concerned in the supply of class A and B drugs.

[00:38:40 on the podcast]

Natalie: Okay, so that's a serious charge, isn't it? And you could face a long prison sentence for that. What did the gang do? Did you owe them money at this point? I say owe in quote marks, obviously.

Adam: For sure, right. So obviously, before point of arrest, I didn't owe money. Then point after arrest, during interview etc, I was told that I'm looking at a minimum of about a five-year prison sentence. So that was quite tough to hear.

And then left custody and later on that day, that evening, I believe, or it might have been the next day, it's a bit of a blur, but once again, I've been contacted, I'm picked up, basically this time forced into that car. And they started off by saying that I owed them £20,000.

I was quite confused about that. I thought, well, I've done my part of the job, right? I've dropped off what I needed to do. I'm just trying to escape this. I don't want any involvement. They shouted at me, they used some unpleasant words. And then once again, they switched. And this was quite a common pattern I was noticing. It's almost like good cop, bad cop quite often. So you'd have this one person that's going mental going, “I'm gonna kill your family. I'm gonna kill you, this and that, you know, you can't just not pay us £20,000.”

And then this other bloke turns to me and goes, “You know what, Adam, you've always been a hard worker. You've always done what I wanted you to do. Give me £10,000 and you're good to go.” So obviously, I've gone, “Well, I ain't got £10,000, mate, you know, I just don't have it.” And I remember him saying, “Well, yeah, obviously.” I was like, "Okay."

He goes, "It's part of the job, isn't it? People get in debt. Yeah, you win some, you lose some. You need to now go back, work this debt off, give it a couple months and you would have worked that money off in no time."

Obviously, again, because they've reminded me, they knew where I lived, they knew where I worked. And because the relationship that I had with the police was not great at all. I remember even in the build up to that arrest and everything, police come around the house saying I'm gang affiliated, that I'm a gang member.

And that really broke me because my picture of a gang member is someone that's carrying large weapons, that's inflicting, you know, serious harm on people. And although I was involved in drug dealing, I naively convinced myself I was the moral drug dealer.

I'd never carry a weapon. I'd always ask those drug dealers how their day was. I'd always want to listen to what their problems were. And I actually, I remember being 15, thinking I'm a bit of a therapist and a drug dealer all at once. I knew who was cheating on who on the local estate. I knew, you know, these really horrific things. Some people had lost children due to miscarriages and that's why they were then using drugs etc. And I've listened to those problems. So then when the police are labelling me as gang affiliated, I'm thinking, I'm trying to do this in the nicest way possible, but I don't want to be involved. So I knew I couldn't turn to the police about the problem.

I knew I couldn't stress mum and dad out any more than they already was. So I accepted my fate. And I found myself in a routine of going to work at seven o'clock in the morning, finishing at half two, and then biking around until quite late at night. Now we'd also had lockdown come into pose at this stage, it was probably about 2020. And that's when everything went horrifically for me. But then I was able to actually say to mum and dad that I was working night shifts to make them not worry.

So then at this point, I'm now out and about all night long, getting little to no sleep, staying at mates for as long as possible. Mum and dad are very worried, they're starting to see through my lies. And things were hell during this point of my life, you know. Well, I mean, I guess between 16 and 19, things were awful. But at this stage, I'm giving the gang all of my apprenticeship money. I'm biking around all night, I'm not eating properly, I'm not sleeping properly. I'm losing a lot of weight. I've got drug users constantly trying to rob me. I've got people whacking bottles around my head and seeing awful things, you know, people overdosing. At this stage, I've got some of my associates going to prison for really long periods of time. So I guess the biggest problem at this stage as well with my mental health was really, really severe. So yeah.

[00:42:57 on the podcast]

Natalie: I have no words really, Adam, to say how horrendous that sounds and the toll it must have been taking on you, keeping up with all that work and the lies and the pressure and trying to keep it from your family and the beatings. And yeah, I just I can't even begin to imagine what you, what you went through. I believe you managed to get most of the money together and you were going to pay them one night and you thought that was going to be the end of it.

Adam: Yes, yes. I will just quickly highlight another thing that you just said. Living that double life can be really, really tough. And I think if any young people listen to this are potentially involved, I think would relate to that. Being out and about, seeing horrific things, having to do things that you really don't want to do, and then having to come home, put on a brave face and be like, yeah, you know, things are fine. That can really take a toll.

But yeah, so I'd managed to get some of the money. I didn't really know what I was paying them each month. Every penny I could get my hands on just went straight to these people. But yeah, I've received phone calls saying that I owed them £3,000 and that was all that was left. So I was thinking, oh my God, this is amazing. I can get my apprenticeship money, work really, really hard for the next couple of months and get the money together. And that's exactly what I've done. I remember sitting there having this £3,000 thinking, okay, I'm about to escape. Went to bed that night. Next day, I tried calling them up. No answer. I think it's a bit weird. If you know anything

about county lines, the phones are constantly ringing. My phone weren't ringing that day. They weren't answering their phone. Everything was a bit odd.

But I went out and about, had a normal day, walking home quite late at night and it's October, cold, dingy. And I'm walking through a big alleyway and now I get grabbed from behind, thrown to the ground. And I won't use the exact words, but you know, someone repeatedly says to me, “I know you've got it on, you give it to me.”

I look up at him, see something in his hand, realise that it's some sort of weapon, grab hold of it, turned out to be a blade. And then I ended up getting a couple of blows to the leg. I think I got another blow to the side of the arm with what I presume to be a knife. Like they hurt, they wasn't life threatening or anything like that. But the bigger problem that day was the £3,000 being gone.

Because obviously the trauma of that incident was high, but actually the trauma that I'd suffered to pay off that £7,000, to get that £3,000 was a lot higher than that 15, oh, probably weren't even 15 minutes, like five-minute interaction with the bloke robbing me. So that really broke me, but I knew I couldn't stop. I knew I had to get on with it.

So I managed to kind of patch myself up that day. And the very next day I was straight back onto it and biking around. And again, every bike turn absolutely killed. Once again, I'd managed to pay off a decent amount of the three grand remaining. A period of time went on, a couple of months, and I was then sent to a different area of the town to go and drop off a large quantity of weed, something I was quite familiar with. And as I'd done so, oh, I'm sorry, I missed out a crucial point.

They told me if I'd done this last deal, then that was me, I was done, I was out. So I went to drop off that, and then I was met with a chemical attack, sprayed all in my face. So during that point, it was quite common, and it is still quite common trade, but it's something called an ammo bottle [ammonia]. So you get a Lucozade bottle. And the reason why it's a Lucozade bottle is because the end of the nozzle when you squeeze it, it's really high pressure.

So you get that Lucozade bottle, you fill it up with ammonia, your kitchen drain cleaner, highly erosive chemicals, essentially. You mix it all into a bottle, and then you spray it in someone's face, and it almost immobilises them, because the ammonia takes away your breath in your lungs. You can't breathe. That's a horrible feeling. Then all the other chemicals are burning your eyes, your face, etc. And that was exactly what happened to me. So, yeah.

[00:47:12 on the podcast]

Natalie: Did you go to hospital after that, presumably you needed to?

Adam: No, no, actually, no. Again, because I'm living this...I can't even call it a double life at this stage. I'm living about 10 different lives all at once. It's ridiculous. So it was really hard to admit anything to anybody. I remember I went home that night, and my eye was all manky and face weren't great. And I think I said to mum that I came off my bike, and that I'd got a load of stuff in my eye. At this point, I was a little bit too familiar with lying and coming up with excuses. Far too familiar.

But unfortunately, the skin condition progressed over time. And then over time, I did have to tell my mum what had happened. We did have to go to hospital, doctors, stuff like that. But due to the nature of the incident, it was quite hard to treat. So, yeah.

[00:48:03 on the podcast]

Natalie: I'm assuming it was the gang that did both of those attacks to keep you in?

Adam: Yes, sorry. Yes, yes. That's what we're presuming. Yeah, my bad for missing out that very crucial point. But yeah, that's something we'd call debt bondage. I think what they'd really mastered with me, what probably they don't manage to master with a lot of young people, but they'd really embedded fear into me. So I did work really hard for these people, because I was simply so scared.

When I think some young people, when they're part of a county line or drug dealing network, being criminally exploited, sexually exploited, whatever, they put up this persona of a tough guy. They don't care or anything like that. But I wasn't really able to pull that off. So I did just look like a vulnerable person working very, very hard.

[00:48:53 on the podcast]

Natalie: You mentioned debt bondage. And I think you told a youth worker a little bit about what was going on, and that gave him enough information to put in a referral to the National Referral Mechanism, which is the framework for supporting and identifying potential victims of modern slavery. Were you shocked to learn that this was how you were being viewed?

Adam: My understanding of the National Referral Mechanism [NRM] when it was first introduced to me was incredibly limited. So I didn't actually understand it was part of a modern day slavery framework or anything like that. And because I was so desperate for help, I kind of just got along with whatever, essentially.

But the more that I learned about the NRM, modern day slavery framework, criminal exploitation, victim etc, the more that I was quite surprised, quite confused. I remember it took my legal team, my youth worker, my mum, a really long time to drill into me that I'm a victim. And I couldn't understand that because another one of my biggest barriers, and the reason why I wouldn't go to the police about a lot of these situations, was because at this point, I understood that I was supplying drugs. And I did understand that that was a criminal offence. So I thought, well, what do you do? Go to the police and go, "Excuse me, I'm a drug dealer, and I'm going to admit to my crime. I now need your help."

Like that, that just makes no logical sense in my brain. So then when people are then starting to explain to me that you can be a victim, and that is a thing called criminal exploitation, I remember almost being quite blunt, probably quite argumentative to a degree. Because I'm thinking, wait, I've seen poor old Dolly or whatever, overdose two weeks ago and you're now telling me I'm the victim. You know, I'm inflicting some awful, serious harms within the community and you're now telling me I'm the victim? No, no.

And because everybody had told me, you know, school and police had kind of told me that I'm this gang member, that I'm this scum of the earth. Well, I fulfilled that self-fulfilling prophecy. I'd came to terms with the language that everyone was using. And then all of a sudden, people are using this new language of NRMs, victims, county lines that had never been introduced to me whatsoever. So that was really difficult. And I know that my family found that quite frustrating, trying to help me understand that I'm a potential victim of modern day slavery.

[00:51:27 on the podcast]

Natalie: Yes, I mean, that makes sense. The gang's infiltrated your mind so, so well, hasn't it? It must have been so hard to switch that around. Going back just a little step, you said you were

trying to make sure your parents didn't know what was going on. But by this time, you've been arrested a couple of times, you've been stabbed, you've had the acid attack. And there must have been a noticeable difference between 13-year-old you and 16- to 17-year-old you, physically, emotionally and mentally. When did your parents start suspecting something was really seriously wrong? And what did they do?

Adam: Yeah, it's a brilliant question, to be honest with you. I think from 13, they knew something was seriously wrong. Their guts were telling them there was something seriously wrong. But unfortunately, I was my biggest barrier. What I was really good at doing to even like my youth worker and stuff like that, I knew there was a language barrier between my understanding of drug supply and their understanding. So even when we take into context the arrest at age 14, I go, "Yeah, I was involved, you know, things have gone really wrong. I've now managed to get myself out of it."

And then I'd get arrested again and go, “Yeah, they've dragged me back into it, but I've got myself out of it.” Or, you know, "they won't get me supplying 'white' [crack cocaine] and 'b' [heroin]" and using those sort of terms. And then, because I think it was so much for them to fathom, oh my God, my son's just been arrested, he's talking about all this terminology that they've got no clue about and then I'm going, “It's okay, it's fine.” And I'm really great at putting on a brave face. I was always known as this smiley kid. Even sometimes people get a little bit frustrated with me. I can talk about really dark things with a smile on my face. It's an awful skill to have. So because I was presenting with a smile on my face, because I was opening the door ever so slightly, letting people in for a very small degree, and then going, "It's fine". It was like this yo-yo effect.

But then it did get to about 16 after that arrest. Again, I tried using those same sort of excuses, but mum wasn't having it at this stage. And she really started to understand things were really wrong. I'm really lucky that I've got an amazing legal team. And my mum and that legal team were then able to start processing some of the information and actually unpicking the timeline of evidence that had occurred over this point, you know, from doctors' reports, to school reports, to police reports, to youth justice reports, social services reports. And between all of them, they were able to see, okay, things are really, really bad. And that solicitor was then able to start mentioning words like 'victim' and 'county lines' and stuff like that to mum.

But if it wasn't for that legal team, then mum would have just been playing catch up 24/7, because there's so much to learn about this topic. And this is why the exploiters are so great at it, because there's such an educational barrier between the language they use, how they operate, to how your typical member of society, and their understanding. So they had to work really hard to narrow that gap. And I'm very lucky that they did get an understanding.

[00:54:39 on the podcast]

Natalie: So by the time your 18th birthday arrives, you'd been trying for months to leave the gang and turn your life around. You promised yourself that this birthday was going to be a fresh start. But sadly, that's not what transpired. In fact, you ended up being arrested on your birthday. So what happened?

Adam: Yeah, yeah, for sure. So it was after the chemical attack, my mental health was all over the place, you know, I've really just, but to be brutally honest, I probably might need to have a bit of a trigger warning. But this was the first point I tried killing myself. I really wanted to plead guilty, because at this stage, I was pleading not guilty and preparing for trial, because of the backlog, three years delay to even get it to trial.

So I thought if I have my 18th birthday, see my friends, see my family, have a big celebration, and then I'm going to go behind my family's back and actually plead guilty at court, get my prison sentence over and done with and try and restart. Got to my 18th birthday, I wake up, I'd got some texts from some unknown numbers. So I kind of had a bit of a feeling that things might not go quite to plan. But wake up, there's a knock on the door, mum answers the door. It's one of the gang members, one of the key gang members from London, asking where I am etc. He kind of briefly threatened my mum.

And then I was just bombarded with texts, videos of him and some other people from another organised crime group sitting in the car outside my house, taking photos of the family car. I think they sent me a photo of like a petrol can. And they said, look, unless I get them six grand that day, then they were gonna blow up the family car, they will attack my mum, attack my dad, and things will get really bad for me. And of course, like always, and hopefully you guys will see the pattern here, but they always got an alternative. And this time the alternative was, "You pick up some drugs, you get back on the road, you get back to supplying, and you work off that six grand."

I mean, I weren't even sure where this six grand debt came from, because the last time I'd seen them, I only owed them like 800 quid or something like that. And then they said to me that every single week that I hadn't answered my phone, that they'd put £500 on to that debt. So I went out and about that day, I was about for, you know, like an hour or whatever, police try and stop me. I tried to escape. Lots of police came from all directions.

And I was arrested in a really high profile arrest. And it was put all in the papers, you know, 'Suspect drug dealer arrested on 18th birthday'. And yeah, I found myself in custody that day. I remember the police kept saying to me, they did annoy me a little bit, I don't do this work to slag anyone off, but it's quite a good point to prove that use of language is really important when you're a professional.

But I just remember them constantly saying to me in custody, "This is a birthday you will never forget." And it really annoyed me like really, yeah, it broke me. And it's funny because obviously now I talk about my 18th birthday probably on a weekly basis and I clearly haven't forgotten about it and there was an element of truth to what they were saying, was slightly frustrating. But yeah that day, once again, yeah tough is an understatement.

Once again I did try and commit suicide and once again I couldn't do that right really, again, annoyed the hell out of me. But then I thought you know what I've run out of options here, like I truly have, and I've actually got nothing else to lose whatsoever. So I can't really remember exactly how it went, but I remember I arranged for my youth worker to come round, I sat down mum, dad, we all sat around this table and I told them everything, I didn't hold back whatsoever.

It was quite a mix of emotions, a real mix of emotions and you know lots of different levels of understanding within that room from my brother and dad really having a different perspective to mum and the youth worker. And the guilt really destroyed me that day, really did, having to tell my mum and dad that they're in potential danger and we could get seriously hurt any second was a really tough conversation.

But it was definitely the best thing I've ever done, by far, it really, truly is. And I was very fortunate – I wasn't assigned to that youth worker at that stage but he always gave me the time of day. That's why my project's called The Long Game because he continued to play the long game with me and so did my family.

They stuck it out for the whole six years and yeah I told them everything and I was very privileged in the sense that I'd actually inherited £6,000 on my 18th birthday. I'm not a particularly religious man but you can't help but think how can you be threatened and told that you have to pay six grand and then you inherit six grand all within 48 hours or whatever? So there was certainly a sense of maybe someone is looking out for me. And we withdrew that money and we paid them.

Unfortunately that's not the end of my story, things did continue, demands kept coming through, threats kept coming through, but we then dealt with it as a family and I no longer had to deal with it as an individual. It was an incredible feeling but, of course, I'm very privileged that I had my family that day, I'm very privileged in the sense that I inherited that money that day and I'm sure there will be people that listen to this and think well what do we do about the ones that haven't got my family, that haven't got six grand or anything like that?

And for me, I remember, also sorry another point I've missed out but I think it was the day after my 18th birthday, got a conclusive grounds for the NRM. But actually realistically if I'd got that NRM earlier I now understand that there's I believe there's a 45-day window the Home Office, statutory services and the government have a duty of care and essentially the government are the ones that are responsible for you within that 45 days so they look at rehousing, relocation, extra support for family, any financial supplements that might be needed or anything like that.

So again for the people that are listening to this, well if these young people haven't got families like mine or haven't got funds or whatever it might be, I'm trying to highlight the importance of getting the NRM sorted out as quickly as possible, getting that conclusive grounds or wherever it might be done as soon as possible, because I think actually in that 45-day window – whatever it is exactly – potentially would have saved me.

I remember constantly thinking to myself before my 18th, I just want to be relocated. I want to be out of this town. I want to put it all behind me and that's not always the answer and it's not always what I would suggest but I think it's a good option to have for sure.

[01:01:44 on the podcast]

Natalie: Absolutely. And for those who don't know, a positive conclusive grounds decision from the National Referral Mechanism means that on the balance of probabilities, there's sufficient information to conclude that you were more likely than not a victim of modern slavery.

Three years after your arrest, the court case was dropped, finally, when you were 19. I mean, Adam, your story involves so much trauma, threats to yourself and your family, the violence you witnessed, the attacks on you, the way you were treated by the police each time as a criminal rather than a victim, and then having to wait with the uncertainty of whether you would go to prison or not. How did you cope during these years?

Adam: Awfully, in the simplest of terms, you know, every time that I felt like I'd made a step forward I kept thinking I'm going to prison, you know, I'm going to prison. Even if I get myself out of this, I'm going to prison, it's all I kept thinking.

There were points where I'd want to have a girlfriend or maybe try and change jobs or actually work out maybe if I could just move away myself, maybe, but then it always came back to the same thing: I'm going to prison. So building positive relationships was next to impossible over that three-, four-year period. That's a ridiculously long time to wait to find out the fate of the rest of your life essentially.

So being able to move on was next to impossible. And then also the other thing that a lot of people don't take into consideration, which really frustrates me, but when people question are young people willingly doing this or are they being groomed or whatever, or they've got aspirations for it. But I remember being 15 and watching everyone go to prom, that was quite tough knowing I wouldn't go to prom; people celebrating their GCSE results and having GCSE parties and people doing really well at college, people going on to do great things at university.

So I remember one summer watching all of the people I was in mainstream school with, all at festivals together, all building these amazing friendships that would last lifetimes, but instead I'm sitting in the trap house. To me, there's no comparison what you'd rather do. Obviously it's every kid's dream to have a social life, to be able to go to prom or college or university or, well I mean they're not necessarily every kid's dreams right, but even just the social aspect is more what I think a lot of young people are looking for and you certainly can't get that from a trap house or drug dealing environment or anything like that. So I really struggled with that and I still struggle with that more than anything now, actually, is how much I've missed out on and having to grow up so quickly and you know having to almost be this adult very early on. So I certainly struggle with that.

Natalie: It sounds like they robbed you of a lot of things, basically.

Adam: For sure, exactly. And then I remember even the day that I found out that I'd got a no further action and basically the court case was dropped and I remember mum and dad being so excited for me and even to be honest it's probably one of the only parts of my story that actually gets me a little bit emotional. But they were so excited that my court case was over and I was so annoyed, I was so heartbroken because I thought, wait, I've had to come to terms with the fact that I'm going to prison and all of a sudden someone's just gone, nah don't worry about it anymore, drop the case, over and done with.

And I ended up in hospital that day because I couldn't fathom things, I couldn't deal with it just being over just like that; mum and dad being so happy and I had the complete opposite feeling. And it's still a feeling that I certainly try and process: how it can just be dropped just like that and your life's on hold for so long and you've got such mental and physical impact of just the court case – forget all the criminal exploitation and all of that – just the court case, just for someone to go, yeah it's done don't worry about it, you're innocent, you're good to go. And I certainly struggled with that decision, yeah.

[01:05:59 on the podcast]

Natalie: Did you want your day in court? Did you want to be found innocent by a court? Do you think that would have actually helped you rather than having to wait for so many years and then just, like, I don't get a say in this, it's over sort of thing? Is that what it was?

Adam: I think so, yeah definitely, and it was just yeah there was definitely that, the fact that there was no proper trial or anything like that, I didn't get to have a proper say. But it was just, there was just so much mental preparing you have to do, thinking you're going to prison. There's so many long nights of being up all night long thinking, "I'm going to prison, I'm going to prison, I'm going to prison", and it's not just the second that someone says you're not going to prison, "Oh, it's fine, I'm not going to prison." You've then got to unpick everything that you've prepared for. You've almost had to change your personality thinking, I'm gonna need to be tough when I go to prison, for that just to be unpicked.

[01:06:57 on the podcast]

Natalie: It's a lot to deal with. I'm sorry.

Adam: No, please, don't be. And hopefully some good can come out of doing work like this.

Natalie: So much good has come out of this. One thing I did want to ask was, because you are now using your story publicly in training, have any of the gang tried to get back in touch with you?

Adam: Yeah, it's a great question. No short answer, no not really. There's been a couple of bits and bobs, nothing major. But I do try and keep quite a low profile doing this sort of work on purpose, fully aware that actually from being a public speaker you can get a lot of public attention. But I really try and minimise that and obviously I don't do the work for public attention or anything like that, so I try and be a bit of a ghost within the scene and feed the right people the right information so they can actually go public with it and they can be more of the front-facing figure.

[01:07:51 on the podcast]

Natalie: And did you have any social work involvement during these years?

Adam: Yeah, so we had a home social services assessment done. So they came to the family address, made the assessment to see if the family were fit to take care of me, to see if the house was in an adequate order. But, of course, being from the background that I'm from, they walked in, they went, “Ah, you've got lovely parents, you've got a lovely house, case closed, we don't need to have any involvement whatsoever.”

And for anybody that's listened to my full day's training, I constantly talk about contextual safeguarding. I'm a massive, massive fan of Carlene Firman, the person that created contextual safeguarding and introduced the framework because actually what I think social workers and all statutory services should be doing is, if they're seeing that the home life's great, well what factors are going on outside the home? How can they do better to safeguard that young person in the community or vice versa? And unfortunately that did not happen for me.

And I think as well like, yes, I had a youth worker, youth justice worker but you get one for six weeks, eight weeks, maybe 10 weeks if you're lucky and quite often that's case closed. So where's the long-term support? Who's playing the long game? And, for me as well, again, like I said earlier I don't do this job to undermine anyone because I think that's half the problem, people are too quick to throw each other under the bus.

For anybody that is working with families in a professional capacity, I strongly urge if you have got engagement with a family just mention to them: Do you know what county lines is? Do you know what sexual exploitation is? Do you know what criminal exploitation is?

Even if you've got no concerns about those young people being involved in any of that, I think as a professional when we're engaging with these families, members of the community, it's our role to actually say – well, do you know about these different harms? Can we educate you on these different harms? It may never happen to your young person, but the more knowledge you have around it, god forbid if it ever happened, hopefully you'd have good understanding and then you'd be able to turn to us and actually help that young person or individual.

[01:10:07 on the podcast]

Natalie: That's such good advice. Do you think a social work intervention at this point would have helped, or was there anything else that might have helped you escape earlier than you did?

Adam: Not me but it's my family that needed the help more than anything. It was my family that needed support, it was especially mum that needed support having to try and look after dad, grandad, me and my brother. And she was constantly having to try and learn about cancer, behavioural needs with my brother, you know, educational needs with my brother and then drug dealing, county lines etc with me. So, actually, a social worker would have been really well fitted to support mum to do a – I don't want to say a better job, because she's done an incredible job – but to be able to support a little bit better. But, yeah, I phrased that wrong.

Natalie: It would have helped her help you, I guess.

Adam: Exactly, exactly that. When it was a solicitor that done that job. We were just so lucky that we had a solicitor that I could call and mum could call any day of the week almost 24/7 and answer all of our questions. But actually is that the role of a legal team? I'm not too sure.

[01:11:20 on the podcast]

Natalie: You've mentioned some of the language before, like trap house. How important is it that professionals know the language that is used by county lines gangs? Can you explain some of them? And what misconceptions around county lines, child criminal exploitation and modern slavery do you think social workers and other professionals need to be aware of?

Adam: Yeah, definitely, so language is one of the biggest barriers to supporting young people and their families, for sure. One of the examples I can give, I remember speaking to different professionals and saying, "Look I'm smoking a bit of bud or loud" and different phrases like that. And the professionals then going, “Sorry what's bud, what's loud?”

And you're going, “Oh well, that's weed.” So every time you're getting into the flow of making that disclosure, when you've got somebody going, “Wait, hang on a sec, what's that, what's this, what's that?” at some point you're gonna go “this is too hard work”, you know, so we've got to make it as easy as possible for those disclosures to take place.

So you've got to be really, really clued up on all of the slang. But actually the drug terminology, you know, you've got ‘white’ for crack cocaine, sometimes cocaine, but mainly crack cocaine. You've got 'b' for your ‘brown’ otherwise known as heroin. A really popular drug at the moment is ketamine, people call it ‘special k’, ‘kezza’, lots and lots of different terminology around that's really important to understand as well.

And even words like where a lot of young people identify themselves as 'trappers' that means being a drug dealer, which could be quite ironic because you're trapped within trapping, right. So I always think that's an interesting word that they use but, yeah, I think language is so, so important to make sure that those disclosures are happening. I remember constantly thinking – and I know some of my peers have told me – that when you're involved in this, you just don't think that anybody has any understanding or any clue what it's like. So you're looking for someone to relate to. You almost want somebody to go, “I get what you're going through right now. I've seen a trap house or I've seen those drug users out and about in the community. I understand how scary they look, so let me try and understand what your world looks like currently.”

I think that that's basically the sentence I really wanted to hear, when instead on making these disclosures and "What's that like, what's this like?" and you're having to explain everything. So that was the first part around language and then I remember you asking a couple of other bits and bobs?

[01:13:55 on the podcast]

Natalie: Yes, sorry, I shouldn't have asked them together. It was around the misconceptions around county lines, child criminal exploitation and modern slavery, and what social workers and other professionals need to be aware of.

Adam: So there's a lot of misconceptions: number one, that you have to come from really deprived backgrounds, that you had no opportunities or anything like that, where that is just simply not true. Number one of the reasons behind that is these exploiters are fully aware that a lot of the young people that come from really deprived backgrounds unfortunately are already known to statutory services so they're not known as 'clean skin'. And 'clean skin' means you're not known to the police, you're not known to social services, youth justice etc.

So these exploiters don't typically want these young people although sometimes they can be easier to groom. A lot of professionals think that this is something that only impacts boys but to be honest with you, from what I'm seeing, I think girls are actually more at risk currently and the crossovers between criminal and sexual exploitation is absolutely huge. And again just simply isn't being flagged whatsoever.

And then I think the final misconception is that people think a lot of these young people do have stacks of money underneath their bed or hidden in their bedroom or wherever it might be. But quite often, again, that's not usually the case but it can be, and a lot of these young people are actually drug users themselves as well, so I think that they're probably some of our biggest misconceptions.

Also around like I previously mentioned a lot of people think that all drug dealing is county lines now which does frustrate me slightly because there's a real difference between county lines and local level drug dealing. One example that I think is actually quite relevant to bring up but in my professional capacity these days I'm a youth worker, I work in schools and I'm an inclusion manager and stuff like that and I remember working with one young person that was trying to sell AirPods. He bought them quite cheap, he was trying to make a couple of quid off it – personally I didn't see massive harms around it because a lot of it was being sold on Ebay so no actual connection – but the school found out, police found out and they labelled it as county lines – supplying Airpods on Ebay.

You've just given a 14-year old kid a label of a county lines drug dealer. There was no benefit there whatsoever. There is a lot more knowledge around it now and so you've completely stressed out those parents. You've then just told the kid that he's part of county lines when all he's trying to do is make a couple of quid in a fairly legitimate manner.

So, I think it's actually really important that we don't throw around this label of county lines, county lines, county lines and, yes, I think a young person supplying cannabis may be part of county lines but actually more times they're part of a local level drug dealing network, they're part of a local OCG [organised crime group].

County lines is that phone coming from a major city into a more rural area and it is a group of people actually travelling into that area. They're not people that have always lived in that area –

and you've always had drug dealers in every single town in the whole country, right – but they're local level drug dealers, they're not county line drug dealers.

So it's really important that we're at an understanding of the difference between the two. And also, one last point and I'm sure we need to move on, but the reason why county lines is so heavily spoken about is these drug dealers originate from major cities where the demand is a lot higher but also the competition is a lot higher.

So these drug dealers are used to inflicting serious levels of violence; they've probably seen, you know, more guns, they've seen harsher weapons, they've seen probably torture techniques and stuff like that. So then when they're coming into the more rural areas, these local level drug dealers they've never had to hold a gun, they've never really ever had to stab anybody and that's why the county line gangs are so ruthless, because they're used to putting up that fight constantly.

[01:18:08 on the podcast]

Natalie: And I think that's a really important distinction to make, Adam, thank you. That sort of leads into the next question because, as we speak, the Crime and Policing Bill is making its way through Parliament. It's going to introduce a new offence of child criminal exploitation. Are you hopeful that this will stop the criminalisation of young victims?

Adam: Yeah, in short terms, I'm really pleased and actually quite excited about this legislation. I think it holds the exploiters to account and will hold them better to account for sure and, yeah, I'm hoping it will move away from targeting these young people so much. The only slight issue around it is, you know, I think the legislation does mention that there will be more support for those that are involved under the age of 18 and it's more recognised that you're being criminally exploited under the age of 18. But even if you look at my case, well on my 18th birthday things went really, really wrong. So, actually, because I got arrested on my 18th birthday all of a sudden would I be labelled as an exploiter? So I think it's really important that we don't go into that territory. But it's a step in the right direction for sure.

[01:19:18 on the podcast]

Natalie: So finally, Adam, unlike many, you did manage to escape, and you have really successfully turned your life around. You're now 22, and you've devised The Long Game, as we mentioned earlier. How did this come about? And what other work are you doing now?

Adam: For sure, so I'm very privileged in the sense that I was introduced to an organisation called Leaders Unlocked [a social enterprise that empowers young people to influence decisions affecting their lives by giving them platforms to voice their experiences and ideas in areas like education, policing, health and justice and work with organisations to create better systems and services], they quite literally saved my life actually I think it's safe to say. You know they're one of the major factors to why I'm the reason why I'm today.

They helped me set up The Long Game, they helped me go to parliament, meet with MPs, multiple different professionals across the whole sector. So they were a real big support for me, for sure, so professionally now I am a public speaker almost in my spare time, it's a bit of a hobby I think at this stage, right. But I try and make as much awareness as possible around peer-on-peer grooming, debt bondage, criminal exploitation, gangs and sexual exploitation, contextual safeguarding and all of these sort of things.

We've just hit I believe about 11,000 people that we've managed to speak to, I'm quite proud of. But of course you don't do this work for the numbers, I just hope that it's had an impact and changed somebody's life out of that 11,000. And day-to-day, I work in an alternate provision as an inclusion manager supporting some of the high needs young people within the county that I live in so yeah, yeah things professionally can be quite busy for sure, but it works.

[01:20:54 on the podcast]

Natalie: You should be so proud of that, Adam. That's an amazing number of people. And I've heard you speak publicly, and you are one of the most inspiring people I've ever heard at an event. You're an incredible example of what you can do when you have the help to turn your life around in this situation. So thank you for being so honest and brave. And you've achieved so much at just 22, it's astonishing.

I really think your story will open people's eyes to how county lines gangs operate and, more importantly, how they target children and young people and what needs to be done to combat that.

This is the last episode of season two, but we'll be back with season three in July. Meanwhile, you can tune into all our Learn on the go episodes on Inform Adults on a range of topics, including the adult legacy of childhood trauma, working with fathers in child protection, and overcoming the barriers to exiting prostitution. Community Care Inform subscribers can access all our podcast episodes with written transcripts on the Inform sites. And if you're listening to this on any podcast app, you can find all past episodes and subscribe to the series there. We'd like to remind you to practise self-care and use supervision and peer support if you've been affected by this episode.

So that leaves me just to say thanks once more to Adam for such a powerful message. And thanks to you for listening. Goodbye.