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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. 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.

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Risk factors

Victims of cuckooing are targeted due to their vulnerability. Common targets include those with drug or alcohol dependency, physical disabilities, mental health conditions, or learning disabilities. Other risk factors are:

- Recovery from substance dependency
- Neurodiversity or brain disorders (e.g. dementia)
- Financial and housing insecurity
- Loneliness and social isolation
- Ageing (e.g. older adults)
- Lone female parents facing emotional or financial strain
- Involvement in sex work
- Young people living independently for the first time
- History of neglect or abuse
- Associations with vulnerable individuals (e.g. homeless, substance users) or gang activities.

Cuckooing victims often live alone in deprived areas, typically in flats or houses with back alley access.

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Cuckooing Pathways

Perpetrators use various strategies to identify potential victims, such as:

- Visiting places where drug users gather (e.g. abandoned buildings) and discussing housing situations
- Claiming false debts to gain access (e.g. 'you owe us for last week's alcohol')
- Loitering in deprived areas to spot those with mental health issues
- Approaching people outside drug/alcohol treatment centres or pharmacies
- Regularly calling drug users to visit their homes
- Using knowledge of local vulnerable individuals ('local' cuckooing)

Other tactics include waiting in A&E for drug-seekers, engaging people at food banks or Jobcentres, and chatting with isolated individuals in cafes.

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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. Are carers eligible to assessments in their own right?

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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 entering the property when the victim is out to check who is there
- Avoid knocking on the door when you know that the victim is out to see who answers
- Avoid confronting, or attempting to forcefully remove, any visitors to the property
- Avoid using the threat of eviction to secure disclosure and/or compliance from the victim

Cuckooing

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Inside a cuckooed property

Drug-dealing equipment (e.g. scales, deal bags) and paraphernalia
 Individuals with large amounts of cash, expensive items and/or multiple mobile phones
 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
 Lack of access to rooms within the property / newly installed locks on internal doors (e.g. bedrooms)
 Piles of stolen goods
 Weapons

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Warning signs

The victim not being seen by neighbours for a while
 People remaining in the property while the victim is out
 Curtains or blinds being closed during the day
 Gardens becoming overgrown
 An increase in the number of visitors to a property, with visits being brief in duration and occurring around the clock
 External doors being propped open
 Damage to doors and windows
 An increase in reports of anti-social behaviour
 victim staying away from the property whilst an unknown person remains
 Suspicious new friendships / relationships (e.g. age difference, controlling behaviour)
 Presenting as angry, anxious, fearful or withdrawn