



Leicestershire
Police

Protecting our communities

COUNTY LINES

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County Lines Information & Awareness

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Introduction

Drugs are present within all our communities and it is estimated that **nationally the illicit drugs market is worth in excess of £9.4 billion a year**. Drug related deaths are at an all-time high and the drugs market is becoming increasingly violent. Including health harms, the cost of crime and wider societal impacts, the total cost of drugs to society is over £19 billion.

The drugs market is driven by profit, with the organised gangs that control the majority of the supply increasingly adapting to evade detection and prosecution. In recent years this has led to the rise of what are known as County Lines.

The County Lines method of drug supply relies upon the exploitation of children and society's most vulnerable to operate. Whilst this is a large-scale national issue, we can all play a part in reducing the harms caused by county lines and safeguarding those most at risk of exploitation.

We are asking you as an organisation, business or community partner to help by ensuring you and those you work with have an understanding of this form of drug supply, can spot the signs of county lines and know how you can report any concerns.

County Lines Terminology:	
Exploitation:	Gangs will often recruit and force children (sometimes as young as 12) to carry drugs between locations, and sometimes also sell them. They will often intimidate, use violence and sexually exploit them to maintain control,
Sexual Exploitation:	Young girls can be groomed and forced into relationships with gang members often being made to perform sexual acts.
Going Country:	The act of travelling to another city or town to deliver or sell drugs.
Trapping:	The act of selling drugs. Trapping can refer to the act of moving drugs from one town to another or the act of selling drugs.
Trap House:	A building used as a base from where drugs are sold or manufactured. These houses are often occupied by someone (usually adult drug users but sometimes young people are forced to stay in trap houses).
Trap Line:	This refers to when someone owns a mobile phone specifically for the purpose of running and selling drugs.
Cuckooing:	Drug dealers take over the home of a vulnerable individual and use it as their base for selling/manufacturing drugs. Commonly, drug users are targeted and are offered "free" drugs in exchange. Though the elderly and disabled individuals are also targeted.

What are County Lines?

County Lines involves a **gang from a large urban area, travelling to smaller locations to sell Class A drugs**, usually Crack Cocaine and Heroin.

To establish the 'line', remove any potential competition from the area and maintain control, gangs will use coercion, intimidation, **extreme violence** (including sexual), and weapons including knives, corrosives and firearms.

The 'line' itself is a mobile phone, to which orders for drugs are placed, this will usually be controlled by a third party who is removed from the market (to minimise their own exposure to risk and harm), and will relay orders to a local supplier.

Routine operations are managed through the **exploitation of children & the vulnerable**.

It's not uncommon for children to be manipulated into joining a gang only to soon find themselves with what they perceive to be no way out, and **forced to travel to another part of the country to sell drugs** on behalf of the gang.

It's impossible to know how many young people across the country are being forced to take part in County Lines, but The Children's Commissioner estimates there are at least **46,000 children in England who are involved in gang activity**.

County lines activity and the associated violence, drug dealing and exploitation has a devastating impact on young people, vulnerable adults and local communities.

What is Child Criminal Exploitation (CCE)?

Child criminal exploitation is increasingly used to describe this type of exploitation where children are involved, and is defined as:

"Child criminal exploitation is common in county lines and occurs where an individual or group takes advantage of an imbalance of power to coerce, control, manipulate or deceive a child or young person under the age of 18. The victim may have been criminally exploited even if the activity appears consensual. Child criminal exploitation does not always involve physical contact; it can also occur through the use of technology."

Criminal exploitation of children is broader than just county lines, and includes for instance children forced to work on cannabis farms or to commit theft.

How does it affect young people and vulnerable adults?

Like other forms of abuse and exploitation, county lines exploitation:

- can affect any child or young person (male or female) under the age of 18 years
- can affect any vulnerable adult over the age of 18 years
- can still be exploitation even if the activity appears consensual
- can involve force and/or enticement-based methods of compliance and is often accompanied by violence or threats of violence
- can be perpetrated by individuals or groups, males or females, and young people or adults
- is typified by some form of power imbalance in favour of those perpetrating the exploitation

Whilst age may be the most obvious, this power imbalance can also be due to a range of other factors including gender, cognitive ability, physical strength, status, and access to economic or other resources. One of the key factors found in most cases of county lines exploitation is the presence of some form of exchange (for example, carrying drugs in return for something).

Where it is the victim who is offered, promised or given something they need or want, the exchange can include both tangible (such as money, drugs or clothes) and intangible rewards (such as status, protection or perceived friendship or affection).

It is important to remember the unequal power dynamic within which this exchange occurs and to remember that the receipt of something by a young person or vulnerable adult does not make them any less of a victim. It is also important to note that the prevention of something negative can also fulfil the requirement for exchange, for example a young person who engages in county lines activity to stop someone carrying out a threat to harm his/her family.

Case study (Suffolk Police)

A 16 year old male had been reported as missing from London and was considered at risk due to his age and link to gangs. He had recently failed to appear at court for his alleged involvement in a stabbing. He was found in possession of a 6-inch kitchen knife and 30 wraps of drugs.

Whilst in custody he was found to have significant burns to his body, on his stomach area, consistent with having been burnt by boiling liquid. He would not disclose further details; however it was suspected this may have been caused by those responsible for placing him in Ipswich to deal in class A drugs.



Who is at risk?

The national picture on county lines continues to develop but there are recorded cases of:

- children as young as 12 years old being exploited or moved by gangs to courier drugs out of their local area; 15-16 years is the most common age range
- both males and females being exploited
- white British children being targeted because gangs perceive they are more likely to evade police detection but a person of any ethnicity or nationality may be exploited
- the use of social media to make initial contact with children and young people
- class A drug users being targeted so that gangs can takeover their homes (known as 'cuckooing')

The County Lines gangs will groom children into trafficking their drugs for them with promises of money, friendship and status. Once they've been drawn in, these children are controlled using threats, violence and sexual abuse, leaving them traumatised and living in fear.

However they become trapped in criminal exploitation, the young people involved feel as if they have no choice but to continue doing what the criminals want.

Any child, young person or vulnerable person could be at risk of being criminally exploited by drugs or organised crime gangs. However, some are more vulnerable, including those who:

- Are experiencing domestic violence, parental drug abuse or criminality
- Have an unstable home life
- Have an economic vulnerability
- Are suffering from social isolation or social difficulties
- Have been excluded from mainstream education, particularly those attending a Pupil Referral Unit
- Suffering homelessness or living in insecure accommodation
- Have learning or physical disabilities and/or mental health issues
- Have associations with criminality
- Being in care (particularly those in residential care and those with interrupted care histories)

Why use young people?

There are several reasons why gangs will try to use young people in their criminal activities, including;

'Clean skin' - The term 'Clean Skin' refers to someone who is likely to be unknown to the Police or social services etc. In recent years there have been several reports of gangs targeting children from private schools or 'middle class' families, hoping that they won't fit any stereotype of a 'drug runner' or being affiliated with a criminal gang.

Reduced sentence from courts - Younger people are often treated less harshly by the criminal justice system, as there is a concerted effort to avoid the unnecessary criminalisation of children. Gangs will try to exploit this by ensuring it is younger people exposed to the greater share of the risk of their activities.

Cost to 'employ' is lower - Rather than cut into the profits of the drug dealing itself, children can be 'employed' with the offer of free drugs such as Cannabis or gifts such as food or clothing. Though any such payment won't be long lasting as the exploitation measures soon take hold.

Disposable - The business of transporting and selling drugs is an extremely risky one, should a young person be arrested by the police or attacked and possibly seriously injured or killed by a rival gang, they can soon be replaced.

Attract less attention - A child in a park or cycling down a street attracts far less attention than a stereotypical adult drug dealer, reducing the risk of detection.

Easier to groom and maintain control - Gangs keep children in their service by enforcing drug debts which will often be inflated or simply made up, and by threatening family members to ensure their obedience. Many young people involved in these gangs won't even see themselves as victims and will fully embrace their perceived status as a respected gang member, oblivious to their own exploitation.



The risks to young people

The risks which young people are exposed to within County Lines are numerous, and very real. The gangs will enforce their will and maintain control through fear and violence, which can often be extreme.


Threats will often be directed towards the young persons family, and they will be told of the dire consequences which they and their loved ones will suffer should they stop 'working' for the gang.

The required commitment to the gang and often the fact that young people will be transported to other parts of the country to run/deal drugs for weeks or months at a time means their usual commitments such as friends, family and education will suffer.

The threat of violence from rival gangs and drug users themselves is ever present, as is the very real possibility of arrest, conviction and a criminal record.

Case study (Humberside Police)

A male's hand was severed and both legs broken. The victim is believed to be part of a county lines network with the offenders being a local drug line. It's suggested to be a punishment attack by the persons the victim was running drugs for, for having used drugs/spent proceeds himself.



Physical injuries,
risk of serious
violence and death

Emotional and
psychological
trauma

Sexual violence

Debt bondage

Poor attendance
and/or attainment
in school

Arrest and
conviction

Knowing & spotting the signs

There are many signs which may indicate involvement within County Lines, and whilst the presence of one of these indicators doesn't guarantee a young person's involvement, they are to be a consideration;

- **Found with a large quantity of drugs, cash or weapons**
- **Unexplained amounts of money or other items/gifts**
- **Unexplained injuries or dishevelled appearance**
- **Change in behaviour; secretive and withdrawn**
- **Unexplained absences and not engaging**
- **Increasingly disruptive, hostile or physically aggressive**
- **Increasing use of drugs and alcohol**
- **Having multiple mobile phones or sim cards**
- **Excessive receipt of texts / phone calls**
- **Getting agitated if unable to answer any calls**
- **Self-harm or significant changes in emotional well-being**
- **New peer groups and or relationships**

Whilst they're travelling...

- **They might seem unfamiliar with the local area or not have a local accent**
- **They could be traveling during school hours or unusual hours**
- **Are they travelling the same route on a regular basis**
- **Receiving excessive texts or phone calls**
- **Are they deliberately avoiding authority figures such as police officers**
- **Are they with older individuals**
- **A child sometimes as young as 12 travelling alone**
- **Are they travelling long distances**
- **Are they travelling to locations and asking you to wait for just a few minutes**
- **Are they paying in cash for these journeys**

If you have concerns about a child or vulnerable adult, share this information with any organisational safeguarding lead, following local guidance. Those with access to the Leicestershire Police Intelligence Portal can also submit any information there.

IF THERE IS A RISK OF IMMEDIATE HARM, CONTACT THE POLICE.

Further information and guidance on county lines exploitation can be found from The Children's Society. NSPCC and Childline also offer sources of support for young people. Mind is a source of help for those suffering with mental health issues.

How you can help

We are seeking to raise awareness of what county lines are and the impact they have upon our communities, particularly encouraging education around 'knowing the signs', what people should be looking out for, when, what and how to report to the police.

Please give consideration to refreshing any internal training or awareness initiatives amongst Staff relating to County Lines.

There is also an ongoing local effort to raise awareness of County Lines, amongst the wider general public. Messages are frequently published via Leicestershire Police social media accounts using the following hashtags;

#CountyLines

#KnowTheSigns

We would ask that those in a position to do so support the promotion of any content or utilise resources to create their own County Lines messaging where appropriate, such as the Children's Society's 'Look Closer Digital Pack' which is enclosed within the original e-mail which contained this resource.

For further information, please refer to the links below:

[Home Office County Lines Guidance and Resources](#)

[Children's Society County Lines Information, Advice and Resources](#)

[Crimestoppers County Lines County Lines Information and Resources](#)

[Leicestershire Police County Lines Information](#)

[National Crime Agency County Lines Information](#)