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One Minute Guide: County Lines

What are 'county lines'?

'County Lines' is a term used by government departments, law enforcement agencies and local authorities to describe the use of dedicated mobile phone 'lines' by gangs or criminal networks, for the sale of drugs. These are used where gangs are looking to extend their drug dealing activities into locations outside of their urban home area as the market for drugs in major cities, particularly London, Birmingham and Manchester gets swamped. Targeted areas for expansion are more rural areas and coastal towns resulting in the phrase, 'going country', used by young people. Each gang markets its own product through a telephone number or 'line' and establish new bases for the storage and distribution of drugs, and sometimes weapons. The [National Crime Agency \(NCA\)](#) estimated in 2017 that there were at least 283 lines originating from London alone.

Why is this a children's safeguarding issue?

'County lines' and other related activities are managed through the exploitation of vulnerable people, often children and young people, groomed and then used as 'runners' or in forced labour, transporting class A drugs, often concealed internally, weapons and money many miles from where they live. Those involved are at risk of a wide range of different harmful activities compromising their physical, sexual, and emotional health and wellbeing and being criminally exploited. They are exposed to becoming addicted to drugs themselves, getting embroiled in gang life, at risk of being stabbed, shot, or burnt by acid, going missing or trafficked, sexually exploited and used in different forms of modern day slavery. The young people themselves may not actually recognise that they are being exploited or at least not until it is too late and they are unable to extricate themselves from the situation. Any challenge they may make is likely to be met with physical assault or even rape. Children are used as they are vulnerable due to their age to grooming, can go under police radar and are seen as replaceable by the gang. 'County lines' is a form of human trafficking and the children and young people that fall victim to this essentially lose their liberty and any chance of leading the lives that they are entitled to.

What children and young people are at particular risk?

'County Lines' like other forms of exploitation can effect children and young people from all demographics. Those at particular risk though are those already involved with gangs or have peers with gang affiliations, regularly go missing, are exploited in other ways e.g. child sexual exploitation. Poor attendance at school or college, or being looked after outside of a family environment, having a mental health condition or a learning disability can also increase vulnerability. Whilst children as young as 12 are being groomed by county lines gangs with promises of money, friendship, gang allegiance and respect, current data identifies that the majority of children recruited by county lines networks are males aged 15 - 17. What they experience is being used as drug mules, being trafficked to remote areas and forced to deal drugs in dangerous situations.

What are the signs to look out for?

The signs that a child or young person is being used to run county lines are similar to those suffering from other forms of exploitation. They may frequently go missing, either for several hours or a number of days, become disengaged with education, not attend health appointments, experience drug addiction, have two or more mobile phones, and unexplained money or high-value goods. In some cases, young people may appear to be acting fairly normally, for example, obeying curfews, at the request of the gang master in order to avoid questions or detection. In some cases, families may be aware of the exploitation but take no action through fear, or because they are benefitting financially or may even be involved in the organisation of the criminal activities themselves.

What is being done about it?

There are a number of pieces of legislation that the Police can and do use to prosecute those responsible, for example, the [Modern Slavery Act 2015](#). However those controlling the gangs running county lines are often able to remain under the radar. The Government have introduced new telecommunications restriction orders. Sharing of data in relation to missing children is helping to identify the scope of the issue and plot those children that may be at future risk. Prevention is encouraged through raising awareness through education, work with young people by voluntary and community groups offering alternative opportunities to gang involvement, as well as identifying those children and young people who are at risk due to increased vulnerability and their peer network.

How can I find out more?

There are a number of different resources available which provide additional information including data, new and emerging trends, and the scale of the issue:

- [Criminal Exploitation of children and vulnerable adults: County Lines Guidance, Home Office, July 2017](#)
- [County Lines Violence, Exploitation & Drug Supply 2017, National Briefing Report, November 2017, National Crime Agency \(NCA\)](#)

The issue of county lines was discussed in the House of Commons (HoC) on 17 January 2018. A transcript of the debate is available on the [Parliament website \(Hansard Volume 634\)](#). There are a number of useful films on [YouTube](#), including a [news report](#) which features case studies and a [Radio 4 – File on 4 Programme – Crossing the Line – Britain’s Teenage Drug Mules](#).

For parents or carers that are concerned that their child is being groomed to join a gang, there is guidance available from the organisation [Gangfree.org](#)

What should I do if I believe a child participating in county lines or at risk of being groomed by a gang?

Contact the Local Authority Child Protection and Assessment Team (CPAT) via CPAT.Referrals@redbridge.gov.uk or by calling 020 8708 3885 (or the Emergency Duty Team (EDT) on 020 8708 5897 at evenings and weekends). In cases of immediate danger, also contact the Police on 999. If the child or young person is already known to Children’s Social Care, contact their Social Worker, Personal Advisor or Family Support Worker. As a ‘first responder’, Children’s Social Care will complete the [National Referral Mechanism \(NRM\)](#), a requirement in all cases identified of modern slavery.