



## COMMUNITY SCRUTINY COMMITTEE REVIEW

<b>REVIEW TITLE</b>
Child Exploitation and 'County Lines' in Cannock Chase District
<b>SCOPE OF THE REVIEW / TERMS OF REFERENCE</b>
<p>Members of the Community Scrutiny Committee wish to examine the following questions in the 2018/19 Municipal Year:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. What is the scale of child exploitation in Cannock Chase with particular reference to 'County Lines' drug related activity?</li> <li>2. What is the relative position of Cannock Chase in relation to the above when compared to other District / Borough / LPT areas in Staffordshire?</li> <li>3. Are there any issues that the District Council need to consider to support existing and future action on child exploitation in the District?</li> </ol>
<b>REASON FOR SCRUTINY</b>
<p>Members of the Committee debated the issue at the meeting on 17 July 2018 and determined that this is an important issue for the District. The Committee can ask questions, ask partner organisations for evidence and views and can make recommendations.</p>
<b>MEMBERSHIP OF THE REVIEW GROUP</b>
<p>The whole Committee will be involved but there may be a need to establish a smaller sub group of the Committee and this was agreed in principle on 17 July 2018 as necessary.</p>
<b>KEY TASKS / REVIEW PLAN</b>
<p>Initial key task is to understand the scale of the issue in Cannock Chase District; to that end, representatives of Staffordshire Police and Staffordshire County Council Children's Social Care will be invited to the next Committee meeting in November to present and to answer any questions that Members may have. Once the scale of the issue is understood, the Committee will make further decisions about the Review Plan.</p>
<b>SOURCES OF EVIDENCE</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Key literature on child exploitation / County Lines will be identified and circulated to all Committee Members to read as background.</li> <li>- Staffordshire Police</li> <li>- Staffordshire County Council Children's Social Care</li> <li>- National and local statistics</li> <li>- National and local Action Plans</li> </ul>
<b>TIMESCALE</b>
<p>The 2018/19 municipal year – review to be completed by May 2019. The review will form the Annual Report of the Community Scrutiny Committee to Council.</p>

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What is county lines?

FROM Childrens Society Website - <https://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/what-is-county-lines>

(accessed on 18 July 2018)



Criminal exploitation is also known as 'county lines' and is when gangs and organised crime networks exploit children to sell drugs. Often these children are made to travel across counties, and they use dedicated mobile phone 'lines' to supply drugs.

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## How many young people are affected by 'county lines'?

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No one really knows how many young people across the country are being forced to take part, but The Children's Commissioner estimates there are at least 46,000 children in England who are involved in gang activity. It is estimated that around 4,000 teenagers in London alone are being exploited through child criminal exploitation, or 'county lines'.

Tragically the young people exploited through 'county lines' are often seen by professionals such as police and social workers as criminals.

However, we want these vulnerable children to be recognised as victims of trafficking and exploitation. We want them to receive the support they need to deal with the trauma they have been through.

## How are children being exploited?

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Gangs are deliberately targeting vulnerable children – those who are homeless, living in care homes or trapped in poverty. These children are unsafe, unloved, or unable to cope, and the gangs take advantage of this.

These gangs groom, threaten or trick children into trafficking their drugs for them. They might threaten a young person physically, or they might threaten the young person's family members. The gangs might also offer something

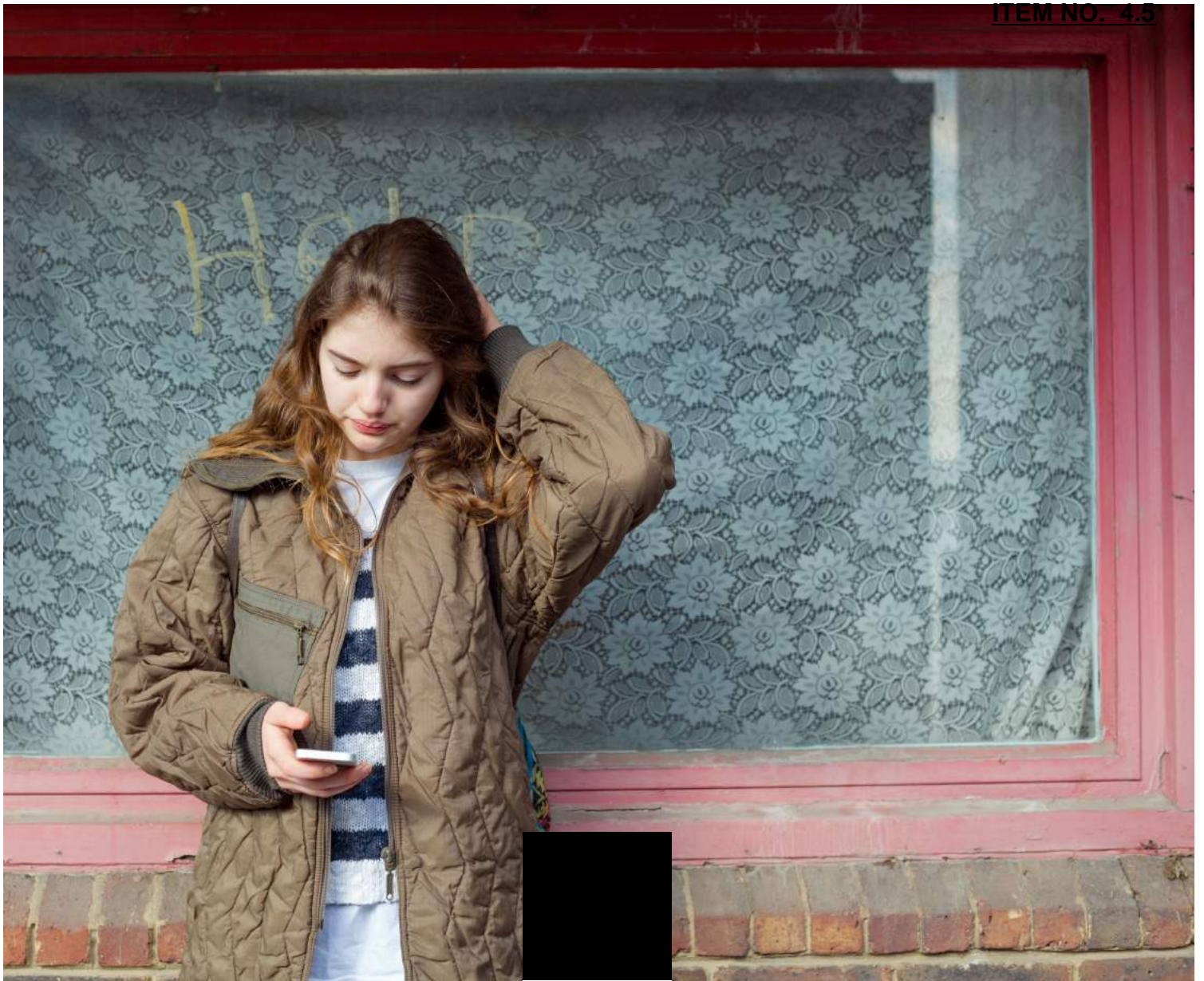
in return for the young person's cooperation – it could be money, food, alcohol, clothes and jewellery, or improved status – but the giving of these gifts will usually be manipulated so that the child feels they are in debt to their exploiter.

However they become trapped in county lines, the young people involved feel as if they have no choice but to continue doing what the gangs want.

## What are the signs of criminal exploitation and county lines?

- Returning home late, staying out all night or going missing
- Being found in areas away from home
- Increasing drug use, or being found to have large amounts of drugs on them
- Being secretive about who they are talking to and where they are going
- Unexplained absences from school, college, training or work
- Unexplained money, phone(s), clothes or jewellery
- Increasingly disruptive or aggressive behaviour
- Using sexual, drug-related or violent language you wouldn't expect them to know
- Coming home with injuries or looking particularly dishevelled
- Having hotel cards or keys to unknown places.

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The  
Children's  
Society

**Criminal exploitation and County  
Lines:  
A toolkit for working with children and  
young people**

**December 2017**



**Toolkit for working with children and  
young people trafficked for the  
purpose of criminal exploitation in  
relation to 'County Lines'**

**December 2017**



**OFFICE OF THE POLICE & CRIME  
COMMISSIONER FOR NORFOLK**





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## **Acknowledgements**

This guidance has been produced by The Children's Society as part of the National CSE/A Prevention Programme for England and Wales, in partnership with Victim Support.

We would like to say thank you to all staff at The Children's Society who contributed to this guidance and also the kind input from the Contextual Safeguarding team at the University of Bedfordshire.

**Please note that this toolkit is based on our current understanding and the evidence picture of criminal exploitation as we currently see it and therefore this document will remain a living document and subject to change.**

**Version 1: December 2017**

## **Introduction & Definition**

The term 'county lines' is becoming more widely recognised and used to describe situations where young people may be internally trafficked for the purpose of criminal exploitation. What is often less understood is the experiences a young person faces and the potential for them to be harmed through various forms of abuse and exploitation as a result. This toolkit hopes to address some gaps in knowledge and offer suggestions for supporting young people who are at risk of, or being trafficked for the purpose of criminal exploitation.

There is currently no legal definition of county lines or criminal exploitation and also very little guidance. Currently, the criminal exploitation of children and young people is often not fully understood by services working with young people which can impact on the response that a young person receives. Trafficking and criminal exploitation are forms of abuse and therefore should be afforded a safeguarding response. Often the visible symptoms of this abuse are responded to, meaning that many young people receive a criminal justice response and their safeguarding needs can be overlooked as a result.

According to the recent National Crime Agency briefing on County Lines Violence, Exploitation and Drug Supply, two in three police forces reported that exploitation of children was identified in relation to 'county lines' activity, with one in four reporting that children involved in county lines were experiencing sexual abuse. However, the latest report also acknowledged that although the exploitation of children continues to be reported, the true scale of abuse remains an intelligence gap in many parts of the country.<sup>1</sup>

Criminal exploitation interlinks with a number of multiple vulnerabilities and offences including the child being exposed to and/or victim of physical and emotional violence, neglect, sexual abuse and exploitation, modern day slavery and human trafficking, domestic abuse and missing episodes.

The risk to a young person, and their family and friends, as a result of experiencing criminal exploitation can include but is not limited to:

- Physical injuries: risk of serious violence and death
- Emotional and psychological trauma
- Sexual violence: sexual assault, rape, indecent images being taken and shared as part of initiation/revenge/punishment, internally inserting drugs
- Debt bondage- young person and families being 'in debt' to the exploiters; which is used to control the young person.
- Neglect and basic needs not being met
- Living in unclean, dangerous and/or unhygienic environments
- Tiredness and sleep deprivation: child is expected to carry out criminal activities over long periods and through the night
- Poor attendance and/or attainment at school/college/university

Knowsley Safeguarding Children's Board uses a definition of criminal exploitation that has been adapted from the commonly used definition of child sexual exploitation

which helpfully demonstrates how young people can be trafficked for the purpose of criminal exploitation:

*Criminal Exploitation involves exploitative situations, contexts and relationships where young people (or a third person or persons) receive 'something' (e.g. food, accommodation, drugs, alcohol, cigarettes, affection, gifts, money) as a result of them completing a task on behalf of another individual or group of individuals; this is often of a criminal nature. Child criminal exploitation often occurs without the child's immediate recognition, with the child believing that they are in control of the situation. In all cases, those exploiting the child/young person have power over them by virtue of their age, gender, intellect, physical strength and/or economic or other resources. Violence, coercion and intimidation are common, involvement in exploitative relationships being characterised in the main by the child or young person's limited availability of choice resulting from their social/economic and/or emotional vulnerability.<sup>ii</sup>*

The context within which this type of criminal exploitation often happens is in relation to county lines. The Home Office define 'County Lines' as:

*The police term for urban gangs supplying drugs to suburban areas and market and coastal towns using dedicated mobile phone lines or "deal lines". It involves child criminal exploitation (CCE) as gangs use children and vulnerable people to move drugs and money. Gangs establish a base in the market location, typically by taking over the homes of local vulnerable adults by force or coercion in a practice referred to as 'cuckooing'.<sup>iii</sup>*

Lambeth Safeguarding Children's Board's definition expands on this to describe how:

*Gangs typically recruit and exploit children and vulnerable young people to courier drugs and cash. Typically, users ask for drugs via a mobile phone line used by the gang. Couriers travel between the gang's urban base and the county or coastal locations on a regular basis to collect cash and deliver drugs. Gangs recruit children and young people through deception, intimidation, violence, debt bondage and/or grooming. Gangs also use local property as a base for their activities, and this often involves taking over the home of a vulnerable adult who is unable to challenge them.<sup>iv</sup>*

The Children's Society's Youth Experts describes 'county lines' as:

*Invisible borders that separate a person's hometown from where they are sent to "work" (selling drugs, sex, firearms etc) for older members of a gang or crew. Young people are usually sent in twos or threes for intimidation purposes and "backup". A young person will typically spend less than 2 weeks away from home, keeping in regular contact with their 'olders' via burner phones.*

**Please see the Criminal Exploitation of children and vulnerable adults: County Line Guidance produced by the Home Office, July 2017.<sup>v</sup>**

It is important to remember that young people being exploited in this way are likely to be being trafficked as they are having their travel *arranged or facilitated for the purpose them being exploited*.

It is helpful to draw on the definition of human trafficking in the Modern Slavery Act 2015 to understand this:

- A person commits an offence if the person arranges or facilitates the travel of another person (“V”) with a view to V being exploited.
- It is irrelevant whether V consents to the travel (whether V is an adult or a child).
- A person may in particular arrange or facilitate V’s travel by recruiting V, transporting or transferring V, harbouring or receiving V, or transferring or exchanging control over V.
- A person arranges or facilitates V’s travel with a view to V being exploited only if— the person intends to exploit V (in any part of the world) during or after the travel, or the person knows or ought to know that another person is likely to exploit V (in any part of the world) during or after the travel.
- “Travel” means- arriving in, or entering, any country, departing from any country, travelling within any country.

In cases of criminal exploitation we know that powerful, adult gang members recruit and arrange or facilitate the travel of children (and vulnerable adults) for the purpose of them selling drugs, firearms or sex on their behalf. This is exploitation and can fall under the Modern Slavery Act’s definitions of exploitation as:

- *Sexual exploitation*
- *Securing services etc by force, threats or deception*
- *Securing services etc from children and vulnerable persons*

Where there are reasonable grounds to suspect a child to be a victim of trafficking:

- This should be reported to the police in order for them to investigate the offences committed (i.e Modern Slavery and trafficking offences)
- A referral should be made to Children’s Social Care as trafficking and exploitation means a child could be at risk of or experienced significant harm and Child Protection processes need to be followed.
- A referral should be made to the National Referral Mechanism (NRM) directly. The Police and Children’s Services First Responders, who are able to make this referral; however other agencies can and should support this referral to ensure it provides a full picture of the young person’s experience to help the assessment.
- Following this you should expect a strategy meeting to be convened in order assess the information known, identify gaps and to discuss a plan for the

child; this should not solely focus around intervention for the child and family. Contextual safeguarding is a key approach to understanding and responding to young people's experiences of significant harm beyond their families.

<https://www.contextualsafeguarding.org.uk/assets/documents/Contextual-Safeguarding-Briefing.pdf>

- It is important to consider disruption of the exploitation and that practitioners and police work together to identify the perpetrators, locations and networks associated to the exploitation and develop plans to disrupt these.

This process of reporting and referring young people is often not followed and can be considered contentious to some professionals who may view the children and young people as willing participants in the exploitation and in need of criminal justice responses. This is a view that was previously held in relation to children and young people who experienced sexual exploitation and recent Serious Case Reviews have demonstrated the need to intervene and protect children and young people from exploitation. Until there is clear guidance to suggest otherwise we recommend that the steps suggested above should be followed in order to initiate appropriate investigations, safeguarding and support is provided for young people who are suspected to have been trafficked for the purpose of criminal exploitation.

It can also be considered contentious because The Modern Slavery Act 2015 provides a statutory defense for victims of child trafficking and slavery accused of certain offences. This reflects the international principle of non-prosecution of trafficked children arising in a number of international instruments and the UK's obligations under the Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings 2005 and the EU Directive on Trafficking.

Contrary to some understanding this does not mean children should be simply 'let off' of any crimes that they commit but that the impact of the trafficking and exploitation be taken into consideration when making criminal justice decisions. In some cases it may be appropriate not to pursue criminal proceedings, but this should be assessed on an individual basis.

For further guidance on the NRM please see: <https://www.ecpat.org.uk/the-national-referral-mechanism>

### **Context of criminal exploitation**

County Lines are illegal business models managed and operated by serious organised crime gangs who use their power and position within the gangs to groom, recruit and exploit young people for the purpose of criminal gain. As outlined in earlier definitions this often involves high levels of violence, threat and force, and it is important to understand the grooming process as this is evident within the recruitment of young people for criminal exploitation.

*Grooming is when someone builds an emotional connection with a child to gain their trust for the purposes of exploitation or trafficking. Children and young people can be groomed online or face-to-face, by a stranger or by someone they know - for example a family member, friend or professional. Groomers may be male or female.*

*They could be any age. Many children and young people don't understand that they have been groomed or that what has happened is abuse.<sup>vi</sup>*

For further information on how 'county lines' are established; site selection, establishing an operating base and marketing please see the National Crime Agency report: <http://www.nationalcrimeagency.gov.uk/publications/832-county-lines-violence-exploitation-and-drug-supply-2017/file>

- Both males and females can be exploited <sup>vii</sup>
- Children and young people are targeted and groomed for criminal exploitation either in major cities and trafficked into county areas, or children in the county authority
- Boys aged 14-17 are the most often targeted, however girls and children as young as often 10 are targeted too.<sup>viii</sup>
- Children and young people can be shown how or made to internally insert and carry drugs in their rectum or vagina
- Children and young people can often store 'wrapped' drugs in their cheeks which then can be more easily swallowed if approached by police
- The children and young people will be sent to 'trap' houses, or 'bandos' where they will be made to sell drugs for anything from a few days to 6+ weeks. These established bases can often involve exploitation of vulnerable adults. For further information on this please see: <http://www.nationalcrimeagency.gov.uk/publications/753-county-lines-gang-violence-exploitation-and-drug-supply-2016/file>
- Children and young people can receive money, mobiles, credit, expensive clothing, jewellery, new haircuts or other items/gifts in exchange.
- Children and young people can be vulnerable to targeting at pupil referral units, alternative education provisions, special education needs provisions and care homes/placements.
- Children and young people are often given targets to sell drugs, given modes of transport such as bikes or train tickets, weapons to protect themselves and a phone with drug user's contacts on it.

- Children and young people receive a small cut of money/clothes/status or are 'looked after' by 'older' i.e. taken to visit barbers and/or items of clothing/footwear given
- The phone lines can be worth thousands of pounds. There is monetary value in the selling of drugs and weapons, and also sexual exploitation related to this type of trafficking. This creates a place where perpetrators can have financial gain through the victimhood of children and vulnerable adults. Organised Crimes Groups have been known to 'set up' children and young people in robberies, meaning that the child believes they are in debt to the perpetrators. This is known as 'debt bondage'. The child believes they have to work for free to pay off the 'debt'. This can also apply if the child is actually robbed, or if they are arrested and have drugs, money or the phone confiscated by police.
- Children may be at risk of harm from the vulnerable adults who may also be being exploited by the gangs; such as using their homes as a trap house. Those adults often have their own needs; such as learning disabilities, substance misuse or mental health issues and there have been instances of harm to young people perpetrated by those individuals.

**Vulnerabilities & Indicators:**

There are some factors that can increase the vulnerability that a young person will be exploited by others. In order to understand these, it is helpful to draw on the contextual safeguarding circles shown below; helping us to think about the child or individual factors, home, peers, school and neighbourhood.<sup>ix</sup>

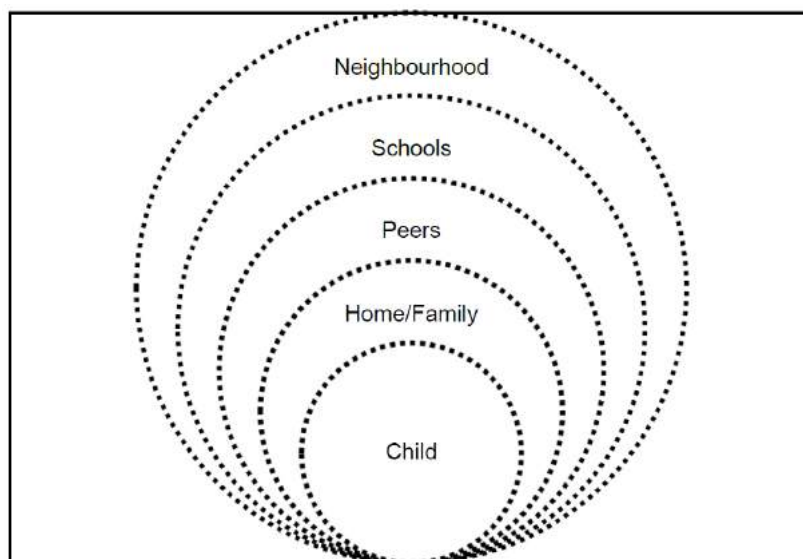


Figure 1: Contexts of Adolescent Safety and Vulnerability( Firmin 2013:47)

**Child/ Individual:** Looked after, learning disabilities, substance misuse, mental health problem.

**Home/family:** Neglect/abuse, exposed/experience violence, parental substance misuse, mental health and domestic abuse, poverty, lack of positive relationship with a protective, nurturing adult, homelessness or insecure accommodation status<sup>x</sup>

**Peers:** Exposed to other young people known to be exploited, exposed to or experienced peer on peer abuse,

**Schools:** Exclusion from school and not in education/training or employment, exposed of experience violent crime

**Neighbourhoods:** Exposed or experience violent crime, deprived neighbourhood

These vulnerabilities do not mean that a young person will be exploited but are factors that could increase the vulnerability that they could be exploited by someone.

**Warning indicators**

There are a number of indicators listed in the following table that could alert us to a young person being criminally exploited.

<b>Indicators</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Frequent missing episodes and been found out of area</li> <li>• Found with large quantities of drugs or weapons</li> <li>• Found with drugs inside rectum or vagina</li> <li>• Unexplained amounts of money, mobiles, credit, clothing, jewellery, new hair cut or other items/gifts</li> <li>• Returned from missing episodes with injuries, or dishevelled</li> <li>• Change in behaviour; more secretive / withdrawn/isolated from peers or not mixing with usual friends</li> <li>• Unexplained absences from, or not engaged in school/ college/ training/ work</li> <li>• Increasingly disruptive, hostile or physically aggressive at home or school Including use of sexualised language and language in relation to drug dealing and/or violence</li> <li>• Expressions around invincibility or not caring about what happens to them</li> <li>• Increased interest in making money</li> <li>• Reports being taken to parties, people’s houses, unknown areas, hotels, nightclubs, takeaways or out of area by unknown adults</li> <li>• Increasing use of drugs or alcohol</li> <li>• Fear of reprisal from ‘gang’ members or violence from young people or adults</li> <li>• Having multiple mobile phones, sim cards or use of a phone that causes concern - multiple callers or more texts /pings than usual</li> <li>• Possession of hotel keys/cards or keys to unknown premises</li> </ul>



- Disclosure of sexual/ physical assault followed by withdrawal of allegation
- Abduction or forced imprisonment
- Entering or leaving vehicles cars with unknown adults
- Receiving rewards of money or goods for introducing peers
- Self-harm or significant changes in emotional well-being
- Agencies unable to engage
- New peer groups and/or relationships
- Relationships with controlling /older individuals or groups <sup>xi</sup>
- Parental concerns <sup>xii</sup>
- Repeated STI's and/or pregnancy
- Increase referrals to agencies for other known peers
- Multiple referrals for incidents in the same location

### **Barriers to Engagement**

There are many factors that could influence how a young person engages with interventions and networks who may become aware of the risk of criminal exploitation. A few to consider include:

- Child criminal exploitation not being recognised and responded to as a safeguarding concern
- Professionals viewing criminal exploitation as a 'lifestyle choice' which can make a young person feel blamed for their exploitation or reinforce a young person's feeling of ownership of an untrue identity of autonomous drug dealer.
- Services not being consistent or persistent in their approach and closing due to 'non engagement'
- Young person fearful of repercussions towards themselves, friends or family if seen to be engaging with professionals
- Young person may still be being controlled by exploiters and have no ability or power to exit
- Even if the police are involved, young person still may not feel safe or protected from repercussions
- Young person may have distrust in services such as police and social care
- Young person may be fearful of getting in trouble with the police or be in breach of court order
- Children who have experienced previous abuse, fractured attachments and trauma, hold a deep mistrust of adults and services.<sup>xiii</sup>

- Young person may be made to feel they are in 'debt' to perpetrators and/or reliant on the 'exchange' i.e. money/substances- this is often referred to as 'debt bondage'
- Young person withdrawn from support network due to grooming process and unable to access services
- Structural inequalities related to race, gender, ethnicity, class, culture, education
- Young person may have experienced multiple professionals talking about concerns with them which again could lead a young person feeling frustrated/unable to engage
- Young person feeling embarrassed/ashamed of their experiences

It is important to remember that a young person might not relate to their experience as being abusive or exploitative. The young person may feel a sense of 'loyalty' and 'brotherhood' to the exploiters, they may feel emotionally fulfilled in a way they haven't experienced from parents, carers or professionals before. The young person may feel they have gained 'friends' or 'family' and that these people care for him or her. The young person may be receiving money or rewards that they have not had access to previously or the money may be supporting their family to cover basic needs. The young person may feel a sense of 'status' and 'power' that they haven't had before. The young person may see themselves as an autonomous drug dealer rather than a victim of exploitation at the bottom of a large organised crime structure.

This links in with the process of how an exploiter may target and groom a young person. This however also links in with barriers to engagement and why a young person may not relate to the term 'criminal exploitation'.

### **Practical Tips**

- Be interested, professionally curious, listen to what the young person is saying and hear it from a safeguarding perspective.
- Don't make judgements; especially in relation to their involvement in criminal activities. Remember they may appear to be willing participants but it is likely that their actions and choices are being controlled by perpetrators with more power than them.
- Advocate for the young person and for child protection processes to be followed; using the three steps outlined previously: report to police, refer to CSC and refer to NRM.

- Challenge professional views which are oppressive, judgmental, or rejecting the need for a child protection response.
- Explain what is happening and why you might need to share information. Keep the young person updated on any outcomes.
- Ensure the young person is given choices; throughout their experience of being criminally exploited they will have been working with parameters of little or no choice and therefore it is important that young person is given choice back
- As a starting point to explaining exploitation it can be helpful to talk about the long hours a young person is expected to carry out criminal activities as being exploitative in itself and can open up further discussion about what is going on for them.
- Exploring a young person's identity and creating a safe space to explore this
- Discussing relevant music and music videos can open up conversations around county lines, physical/sexual violence, status, power and control
- Building a young person's resilience; looking at strengths and future plans
- Be creative in your approach and ask what the young person wants or needs.

### Language

Similarly to sexual exploitation there is often inappropriate or unhelpful language used to describe young people's experiences of being criminally exploited and it is important that we use the right language in order to influence proper recognition and responses for the young people.

<b>Inappropriate terms</b>	<b>Suggested alternatives</b>
<i>Drug running</i>	Child criminal exploitation (CCE)
<i>He/she is drug running</i>	The child is being trafficked for purpose of criminal exploitation
<i>Recruit/run/work</i>	This implies there is a level of choice or control by the child regarding their exploitation and does not take into consideration the grooming, coercion, threats or intimidation. A more appropriate description would be that the child is being criminally exploited.
<i>He/she is choosing this lifestyle</i>	Again, this implies there is a level of choice or control by the child regarding their exploitation and does not take into consideration the grooming, coercion, threats or intimidation. A more appropriate description would be that the child is being criminally exploited.

<p><i>Spending time/associating with 'elders'</i></p>	<p>The young person says that they are friends with a person and there are concerns about that person's age, the imbalance of power, exploitation, offending.</p> <p>The young person has been groomed, exploited, controlled.</p> <p>If the 'elder' is under the age of 18 years old- this will also need to be considered using child protection processes</p>
<p><i>Offering him/her drugs seemingly in return for sex or to run drugs</i></p>	<p>Child is being sexually/criminally exploited</p> <p>Child is being criminally exploited through drug debt</p> <p>Concerns that the child has been raped</p> <p>Perpetrators are sexually abusing the child</p> <p>The child is being sexually abused</p> <p>The child's vulnerability regarding drug use is being used by others to abuse them.</p> <p>The perpetrators have a hold over the child by the fact that they have a drug dependency.</p>

**Services Available (Nationally)**

Criminal exploitation is not a new issue, and like sexual exploitation, is a child protection issue that has existed for a long time, however what is new is the emerging recognition of the impact and risk of harm to the child as a result of how they are being trafficked and exploited. Unfortunately, there are still very few services directly available to young people or professionals however those noted below are national services commissioned to support children and young people affected by criminal exploitation.

Name	Area	Age Range	Website	Contacts
<p>The Children's Society  Research/</p>	<p>National Charity  London Specific service called <b>Stride</b>. The</p>	<p>11-18</p>	<p><a href="https://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/">https://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/</a></p>	<p>Rhiannon Sawyer</p>

campaigns and policy work.  London Criminal Exploitation Service	project accepts referrals from Newham, Camden and Tower Hamlets.			
St Giles & Missing People-  County lines/ Criminal Exploitation Service	London & Kent- <b>Kent OT-1-1</b> support (Funded to 31/3/18)  <b>CLiC</b> - South Wales- 1-1 support  Nationwide telephone support for young people and parents- <b>Safecall</b>  (Funded to 31/3/18)		<a href="http://www.missingpeople.org.uk/">http://www.missingpeople.org.uk/</a>  <a href="http://site.stgilestrust.org.uk">http://site.stgilestrust.org.uk</a>	<a href="mailto:partner@missingpeople.org.uk">partner@missingpeople.org.uk</a>  <a href="mailto:info@stgilestrust.org.uk">info@stgilestrust.org.uk</a>

**Resources Available**

As noted above with regards to a limited number of services there are also still very few resources available; however the links below may be useful.

<b>Organisation</b>	<b>Title</b>	<b>Link</b>	<b>Area Specific</b>
Home Office	Criminal Exploitation of children and vulnerable adults	<a href="https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/criminal-exploitation-of-children-and-vulnerable-adults-county-lines">https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/criminal-exploitation-of-children-and-vulnerable-adults-county-lines</a>	This guidance outlines what county lines (and associated criminal exploitation) is, signs to look for in potential

	county lines		victims, and what to do about it
Trapped	Project Phoenix; It's not Okay: <a href="http://www.itstotokay.co.uk/professionals/trapped1/">http://www.itstotokay.co.uk/professionals/trapped1/</a>	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pLhGpS1f-F0">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pLhGpS1f-F0</a>	This is a short film clip showing a young person being criminally exploited.

**Research**

**National Crime Agency**

<http://www.nationalcrimeagency.gov.uk/publications/832-county-lines-violence-exploitation-and-drug-supply-2017/file>

<http://www.nationalcrimeagency.gov.uk/publications/753-county-lines-gang-violence-exploitation-and-drug-supply-2016/file> -2016

<http://www.nationalcrimeagency.gov.uk/publications/620-NCA-Intelligence-Assessment-County-Lines-Gangs-and-Safeguarding/file> - 2015

**The Children's Society**

<https://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/sites/default/files/appg-missing-gangs-and-exploitation-roundtable-report.pdf>

**Criminal Law & Justice Weekly**

<https://www.criminallawandjustice.co.uk/features/Running-County-Lines>

**Youth Justice Legal Centre**

<http://www.yjlc.uk/exploitation-children-county-lines-gangs-children-safeguarded-not-prosecuted>

**Ending Gang and Exploitation**

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/ending-gang-violence-and-exploitation>

**Preventing the Violent and Sexual Victimization of Vulnerable Gang-involved and Gang-affected Children and Young People in Ipswich. Andell & Pitts-University of Suffolk. August 2017.**

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### **Further information**

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Department  
for Education

# **Child sexual exploitation**

**Definition and a guide for practitioners,  
local leaders and decision makers  
working to protect children from child  
sexual exploitation**

**February 2017**

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## Introduction

Child sexual exploitation is a crime with devastating and long lasting consequences for its victims and their families. Childhoods and family life can be ruined and this is compounded when victims, or those at risk of abuse, do not receive appropriate, immediate and on-going support. The first response to children, and support for them to access help, must be the best it can be from social workers, police, health practitioners and others who work with children and their families.

In *Putting Children First* (July 2016) the Government set out its ambitions to support vulnerable children to lead safe and positive lives, to become successful adults and to have the kind of happy childhood that we want for all our children. We want children and families to have confidence in turning to practitioners for help and protection from abuse, neglect and exploitation. This help and protection should be provided in a timely, enduring and flexible manner, and be the best it can possibly be. This requires children, parents and carers affected by child sexual exploitation to feel part of the solution and confident they will be believed. Practitioners should work together to reduce the immediate risk of harm to children and collaborate to develop long term strategies to improve children's life chances.

This applies as much to child sexual exploitation as to other forms of abuse or neglect. The hidden nature of child sexual exploitation and the complexities involved means professional curiosity, and always being alert to the issue, is vital.

## About this advice

This advice is non-statutory, and has been produced to help practitioners, local leaders and decision makers who work with children and families to identify child sexual exploitation and take appropriate action in response. This includes the management, disruption and prosecution of perpetrators.

This advice replaces the 2009 guidance *Safeguarding children and young people from sexual exploitation*. It should be read alongside *Working Together to Safeguard Children* (most recent updates available on gov.uk) which continues to provide statutory guidance covering the legislative requirements on services to safeguard and promote the welfare of children, including in relation to child sexual exploitation.

A child is anyone who has not yet reached their 18<sup>th</sup> birthday. Throughout this advice the terms 'child' and 'children' are used to refer to all those under the age of 18.

## Who is this advice for?

This advice is intended to help all those working with children, and their parents and carers, to understand child sexual exploitation and what action should be taken to identify

and support victims. The online annexes to this document set out work to tackle perpetrators, another critical element of an holistic response.

**Section A** is for everyone whose work brings them into contact with children and families, including those who work in early years, children's social care, health, education (including schools), the police, adult services and youth offending teams. This section sets out first the background to the nature of child sexual exploitation, followed by a series of guiding principles. It is relevant to those working in the statutory, voluntary or the independent sectors, and applies in relation to all children and young people irrespective of whether they are living at home with their families and carers or away from home.

**Section B** is for those in strategic and management roles who are planning responses to child sexual exploitation within local authorities and other agencies working in partnership. It is relevant for Local Safeguarding Children Boards and any new arrangements required in legislation. However, all practitioners may find this information useful to support effective front-line practice on child sexual exploitation.

This advice is not intended to be a 'step by step' approach to addressing child sexual exploitation. It sets out the definition of child sexual exploitation; highlights potential vulnerabilities and indicators of abuse; and sets out appropriate action to take in response, using professional judgment and curiosity. Although it focuses on child sexual exploitation, the principles outlined here are those set out in *Working Together* covering all forms of exploitation, abuse and vulnerability in childhood and adolescence. The signs of abuse rarely present in clear, unequivocal ways (The Munro Review of Child Protection, 2011). What is important is that those working with children and families understand the totality of a child's experience in order to assess the nature and level of risk faced by children and respond swiftly and proportionately.

## Section A – advice for all practitioners who work with children

### What is child sexual exploitation?

Child sexual exploitation is a form of child sexual abuse. Sexual abuse may involve physical contact, including assault by penetration (for example, rape or oral sex) or non-penetrative acts such as masturbation, kissing, rubbing and touching outside clothing. It may include non-contact activities, such as involving children in the production of sexual images, forcing children to look at sexual images or watch sexual activities, encouraging children to behave in sexually inappropriate ways or grooming a child in preparation for abuse (including via the internet).

The definition of child sexual exploitation is as follows:

*Child sexual exploitation is a form of child sexual abuse. It occurs where an individual or group takes advantage of an imbalance of power to coerce, manipulate or deceive a child or young person under the age of 18 into sexual activity (a) in exchange for something the victim needs or wants, and/or (b) for the financial advantage or increased status of the perpetrator or facilitator. The victim may have been sexually exploited even if the sexual activity appears consensual. Child sexual exploitation does not always involve physical contact; it can also occur through the use of technology.*

Like all forms of child sexual abuse, child sexual exploitation:

- can affect any child or young person (male or female) under the age of 18 years, including 16 and 17 year olds who can legally consent to have sex;
- can still be abuse even if the sexual activity appears consensual;
- can include both contact (penetrative and non-penetrative acts) and non-contact sexual activity;
- can take place in person or via technology, or a combination of both;
- can involve force and/or enticement-based methods of compliance and may, or may not, be accompanied by violence or threats of violence;
- may occur without the child or young person's immediate knowledge (through others copying videos or images they have created and posting on social media, for example);
- can be perpetrated by individuals or groups, males or females, and children or adults. The abuse can be a one-off occurrence or a series of incidents over time, and range from opportunistic to complex organised abuse; and
- is typified by some form of power imbalance in favour of those perpetrating the abuse. Whilst age may be the most obvious, this power imbalance can also be due to a range of other factors including gender, sexual identity, cognitive ability, physical strength, status, and access to economic or other resources.

Child sexual exploitation is a complex form of abuse and it can be difficult for those working with children to identify and assess. The indicators for child sexual exploitation can sometimes be mistaken for 'normal adolescent behaviours'. It requires knowledge, skills, professional curiosity and an assessment which analyses the risk factors and personal circumstances of individual children to ensure that the signs and symptoms are interpreted correctly and appropriate support is given. Even where a young person is old enough to legally consent to sexual activity, the law states that consent is only valid where they make a choice and have the freedom and capacity to make that choice. If a child feels they have no other meaningful choice, are under the influence of harmful substances or fearful of what might happen if they don't comply (all of which are common features in cases of child sexual exploitation) consent cannot legally be given whatever the age of the child.

**Child sexual exploitation is never the victim's fault, even if there is some form of exchange:** all children and young people under the age of 18 have a right to be safe and should be protected from harm.

One of the key factors found in most cases of child sexual exploitation is the presence of some form of exchange (sexual activity in return for something); for the victim and/or perpetrator or facilitator.

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 alcohol) and intangible rewards (such as status, protection or perceived receipt of love or affection). It is critical to remember the unequal power dynamic within which this exchange occurs and to remember that the receipt of something by a child/young person 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 child who engages in sexual activity to stop someone carrying out a threat to harm his/her family.

Whilst there can be gifts or treats involved in other forms of sexual abuse (e.g a father who sexually abuses but also buys the child toys) it is most likely referred to as child sexual exploitation if the 'exchange', as the core dynamic at play, results in financial gain for or enhanced status of, the perpetrator.

Where the gain is only for the perpetrator/facilitator, there is most likely a financial gain (money, discharge of a debt or free/discounted goods or services) or increased status as a result of the abuse.

If sexual gratification, or exercise of power and control, is the only gain for the perpetrator (and there is no gain for the child/young person) this would not normally constitute child sexual exploitation, but should be responded to as a different form of child sexual abuse.



## How common is child sexual exploitation?

The signs and indicators of all forms of abuse can be difficult to detect and child sexual exploitation is no exception. A variety of factors can make it difficult to accurately assess how prevalent child sexual exploitation is. Many children who are sexually exploited may have been victims of other forms of abuse; the grooming methods that may be used can mean that children who are sexually exploited do not always recognise they are being abused, which can also affect detection rates. What is clear is that child sexual exploitation can occur in all communities and amongst all social groups and can affect girls and boys. All practitioners should work on the basis that it is happening in their area.

## Who is vulnerable to child sexual exploitation?

**Any child, in any community:** Child sexual exploitation is occurring across the country but is often hidden so prevalence data is hard to ascertain. However, areas proactively looking for child sexual exploitation are uncovering a problem. All practitioners should be open to the possibility that the children they work with might be affected.

**Age:** Children aged 12-15 years of age are most at risk of child sexual exploitation although victims as young as 8 have been identified, particularly in relation to online concerns. Equally, those aged 16 or above can also experience child sexual exploitation, and it is important that such abuse is not overlooked due to assumed capacity to consent. Account should be taken of heightened risks amongst this age group, particularly those without adequate economic or systemic support.

**Gender:** Though child sexual exploitation may be most frequently observed amongst young females, boys are also at risk. Practitioners should be alert to the fact that boys may be less likely than females to disclose experiences of child sexual exploitation and less likely to have these identified by others.

**Ethnicity:** Child sexual exploitation affects all ethnic groups.

**Heightened vulnerability factors:** *Working Together* makes clear the requirements for holistic assessment. Sexual exploitation is often linked to other issues in the life of a child or young person, or in the wider community context. Practitioners should be alert to the fact that child sexual exploitation is complex and rarely presents in isolation of other needs and risks of harm (although this may not always be the case, particularly in relation to online abuse). Child sexual exploitation may be linked to other crimes and practitioners should be mindful that a child who may present as being involved in criminal activity is actually being exploited.

**Practitioners should not rely on ‘checklists’ alone but should make a holistic assessment of vulnerability, examining risk and protective factors as set out in the statutory guidance *Working Together*.**

Sexual exploitation can have links to other types of crime. These include:

- Child trafficking;
- Domestic abuse;
- Sexual violence in intimate relationships;
- Grooming (including online grooming);
- Abusive images of children and their distribution;
- Drugs-related offences;
- Gang-related activity;
- Immigration-related offences; and
- Domestic servitude.

The following vulnerabilities are examples of the types of things children can experience that might make them more susceptible to child sexual exploitation:

- Having a prior experience of neglect, physical and/or sexual abuse;
- Lack of a safe/stable home environment, now or in the past (domestic violence or parental substance misuse, mental health issues or criminality, for example);
- Recent bereavement or loss;
- Social isolation or social difficulties;
- Absence of a safe environment to explore sexuality;
- Economic vulnerability;
- Homelessness or insecure accommodation status;
- Connections with other children and young people who are being sexually exploited;
- Family members or other connections involved in adult sex work;
- Having a physical or learning disability;
- Being in care (particularly those in residential care and those with interrupted care histories); and
- Sexual identity.

Not all children and young people with these vulnerabilities will experience child sexual exploitation. **Child sexual exploitation can also occur without any of these vulnerabilities being present.**

## Potential indicators of child sexual exploitation

Children rarely self-report child sexual exploitation so it is important that practitioners are aware of potential indicators of risk, including:

- Acquisition of money, clothes, mobile phones etc without plausible explanation;
- Gang-association and/or isolation from peers/social networks;
- Exclusion or unexplained absences from school, college or work;
- Leaving home/care without explanation and persistently going missing or returning late;
- Excessive receipt of texts/phone calls;
- Returning home under the influence of drugs/alcohol;
- Inappropriate sexualised behaviour for age/sexually transmitted infections;
- Evidence of/suspicious of physical or sexual assault;
- Relationships with controlling or significantly older individuals or groups;
- Multiple callers (unknown adults or peers);
- Frequenting areas known for sex work;
- Concerning use of internet or other social media;
- Increasing secretiveness around behaviours; and
- Self-harm or significant changes in emotional well-being.

Practitioners should also remain open to the fact that child sexual exploitation can occur without any of these risk indicators being obviously present. Practitioners should also be alert to the fact that some risk assessments have been constructed around indicators of face-to-face perpetration by adults and may not adequately capture online or peer-perpetrated forms of harm. It is also important to remember that risk assessments only capture risk at the point of assessment and that levels of risk vary over time, and that the presence of these indicators may be explained by other forms of vulnerability rather than child sexual exploitation.

The first step for practitioners is to be alert to the potential signs of abuse and neglect and to understand the procedures set out by local multi-agency safeguarding arrangements. Those working with children and families should access training through those multi-agency arrangements to support them in identifying vulnerability, risk and harm. This will help practitioners to know what action to take and to develop a shared understanding about what best practice looks like.

## How are children sexually exploited?

Child sexual exploitation takes many different forms. It can include contact and non-contact sexual activities and can occur online or in person, or a combination of each.

The following illustrative examples, although very different in nature and potentially involving different sexual or other offences, could all fall under the definition of child sexual exploitation:

- A 44 year old female posing as a 17 year old female online and persuading a 12 year old male to send her a sexual image, and then threatening to tell his parents if he doesn't continue to send more explicit images;
- A 14 year old male giving a 17 year old male oral sex because the older male has threatened to tell his parents he is gay if he refuses;
- A 14 year old female having sex with a 16 year old gang member and his two friends in return for the protection of the gang;
- A 13 year old female offering and giving an adult male taxi driver sexual intercourse in return for a taxi fare home;
- A 21 year old male persuading his 17 year old 'girlfriend' to have sex with his friends to pay off a drug debt;
- A mother letting other adults abuse her 8 year old child in return for money;
- A group of men bringing two 17 year old females to a hotel in another town and charging others to have sex with them; and
- Three 15 year old females being taken to a house party and given 'free' alcohol and drugs, then made to have sex with six adult males to pay for this.

These examples are not exhaustive: other forms of child sexual exploitation occur and new forms continue to develop. Nor are they mutually exclusive – some children will suffer abuse across a range of scenarios, either simultaneously or in succession.

Most child abuse occurs within the home. In cases of child sexual exploitation the risk of harm is generally external or in the community.

Child sexual exploitation may occur without the child being aware of events, or understanding that these constitute abuse. Online exploitation includes the exchange of sexual communication or images and can be particularly challenging to identify and respond to. Children, young people and perpetrators are frequently more familiar with, and spend more time in, these environments than their parents and carers. Those who work with and care for children can struggle to remain up-to-date with the latest sites and potential connection points, so practitioners should always seek specialist support if unsure about online environments. Online child sexual exploitation allows perpetrators to initiate contact with multiple potential victims and offers a perception of anonymity, with children and young people, and perpetrators, potentially saying and doing things online they wouldn't do offline. Where exploitation does occur online, the transfer of images can be quickly and easily shared with others. This makes it difficult to contain the potential for further abuse.

## **Children can be perpetrators as well as victims**

Children can be both experiencing child sexual exploitation and perpetrating it at the same time. Examples might include a child who is forced to take part in the exploitation of another child under duress, or a child who is forced to introduce other children to their abuser under threats to their family's safety. These situations require a nuanced

approach that recognises and engages with the young person's perpetration within the context of their own victimisation.

Children who perpetrate child sexual exploitation require a different response to adult perpetrators. Responses may involve criminal justice pathways at times, however every child who displays harmful sexual behaviour should also have their safeguarding and welfare needs actively considered in line with *Working Together*.

Different agencies should work together to: (a) identify any prior victimisation and understand how this has contributed to the perpetration; and (b) map the environments and contexts in which peer-perpetrated child sexual exploitation occurs, looking at the social norms or power dynamics at play which may have influenced the perpetration of abuse. Dependent on the issues emerging, this will likely need both an individually-based response and wider work to address harmful social norms or power dynamics that enable the abuse to occur.

## **How does child sexual exploitation affect children?**

The long-term consequences of any form of child abuse can be devastating and early identification and providing support as soon as problems emerge is critical.

Child sexual exploitation damages children and like any form of abuse it can have long-lasting consequences that can impact on every part of a child's life and their future outcomes. Child sexual exploitation has been shown to affect:

- Physical (including sexual) and mental health and well-being;
- Education and training and therefore future employment prospects;
- Family relationships;
- Friends and social relationships, current and as adults; and
- Their relationship with their own children in the future.

Child sexual exploitation is complex and children are often reluctant to disclose experiences of exploitation due to misplaced feelings of loyalty and shame. Many may not recognise what they are experiencing as abuse or that they require support or intervention, believing they are in control or in a healthy consensual relationship.

Online annexes to this document set out in greater detail the context of adolescent development and risk.

## How to respond: working with young people

**Child sexual exploitation is never the victim's fault:** As stated above, all children and young people have a right to be safe and should be protected from harm.

*"What I want is staff who sit down and talk to you calmly and they don't judge you ... you want someone to understand why you did what you did"*

*"Instead of shouting at me and saying 'why did you do it?' ... [They should be] letting you get your point across first, then putting their point across and about how they see it differently, instead of just saying that was wrong" (young person cited in Warrington 2013)*

**Early sharing of information is key to providing effective help where there are emerging problems.** As above, it is essential to have in place effective child protection services and procedures for sharing information. For guidance on sharing information, which includes a myth-busting guide, see *Information Sharing: Advice for practitioners* providing safeguarding services to children, young people, parents and carers. Wherever possible practitioners should share confidential personal information with consent. However, where there are concerns that a child is suffering, or is likely to suffer, significant harm, practitioners should be willing to disclose information without consent where the public interest served by protecting the child from harm outweighs the duty of confidentiality. Section B below sets out the framework that is required to support effective practice.

**Safeguarding children is everyone's responsibility.** As above, all practitioners should assume that in the course of their work with children they will encounter children at risk of sexual exploitation. All practitioners working with children and families need to **know where to get help:** Local multi-agency safeguarding arrangements will set out the process for referring concerns about the welfare of children to local authority children's social care. Anyone can make a referral and ask for advice. If a child is considered to be in immediate danger the police should be contacted.

**Any practitioner working with a child who they think may be at risk of child sexual exploitation should follow the guidance set out in *Working Together* and share this information with local authority children's social care. You should refer any concerns about a child's welfare to local authority children's social care. If you believe a child is in immediate risk of harm, you should contact the police.**

Managers of services should ensure they are facilitating this type of sharing culture within their agencies and across their local multi-agency partnerships.

- All practitioners working with children and families should respond in ways that are:
- **Child-centred:** recognising children and young people's rights to participate in decisions about them in line with their maturity, and focusing on the needs of the child. Other considerations, such as the fear of damaging relationships with

children or adults, get in the way of protecting children from abuse and neglect. Practitioners should view a referral as the beginning of a process of inquiry, not as an accusation. Victims may be resistant to intervention and some may maintain links with their abusers, even after attempts to help protect them;

- **Developed and informed by the involvement of a child’s family and carers wherever safe and appropriate:** a holistic assessment will take account of the wishes and feelings of children and the views of their parents/carers;
- **Responsive and pro-active:** everyone should be alert to the potential signs and indicators of child sexual exploitation, as well as other forms of abuse, and exercise professional curiosity in their day to day work. It is better to help children and young people as early as possible, before issues escalate and become more damaging;
- **Relationship-based:** practitioners should establish and maintain trusting relationships with children and young people, and continue to exercise professional curiosity and create safe spaces for disclosure; and
- **Informed by an understanding of the complexities of child sexual exploitation:** it is important to avoid language or actions that may lead a young person to feel they are not deserving of support or are in some way to blame for their abuse.

*“All young people can be worked with. It’s about finding the right worker..[and the professional] staying strong, staying tough and going along the roller-coaster ride with the young person...The worker needs to always be there to support you whenever you need it...It doesn’t go away overnight. It takes time.” (young person quoted in the consultation exercise for this advice, 2016)*

## What does the particular nature of exploitation mean for practice?

**It is important that continued contact is not misinterpreted as informed choice or an indication of absence of harm.** Practitioners should maintain their relationships with children and young people, and continue to exercise professional curiosity and create safe spaces for disclosure. Continued contact with perpetrators should be seen as part of the complex power dynamic of the abusive relationship, similar to that in some situations of domestic abuse. Practitioners should continue to reach out to victims and not make the offer of services dependent on formal disclosure. Many victims are only able to disclose after the provision of support, often months or even years down the line.

*“I was throwing hints to people an all. I was throwing hints ‘cause I didn’t want it comin’ out of my own mouth. I wanted people to work it out ... I was getting myself drunk so I could come out with it, ‘cause I couldn’t say it when I was like sober. I was like ‘I can’t say it’” (young person cited in Beckett 2011)*

Parents/carers, teachers, youth workers, other professional workers or, as is often the case, a mixture of the above may have a valuable perspective to add. This will inform the contextual understanding and help to identify changes that represent something more than adolescent behaviours (see online annexes covering adolescent development) and make sense of the range of vulnerabilities the child or young person may be facing. As *Working Together* makes clear, it is important all such perspectives, alongside that of the child/young person, are incorporated in all risk assessments.

### **Working with families**

Parents and carers can feel excluded in work with children and young people who are, or who are at risk of being, sexually exploited by perpetrators external to the family. Where assessment shows it is safe and appropriate to do so, parents and families should be regarded as a part of the solution. It is crucial to work with them not only to assess the risks of harm faced by the young person or child but to help them understand what the young person has experienced, the risks they face and how they can be supported and protected. The parents may need direct support and help to improve family relationships and keep their child safe.



## Section B – advice for managers and strategic leaders

Local authorities have overarching responsibility for safeguarding all children in their area. Their statutory functions under the 1989 and 2004 Children Act(s) include specific duties in relation to children in need and children suffering, or likely to suffer, significant harm (under sections 17 and 47 of the Children Act 1989).

Local agencies, including the police and health services, also have a duty under section 11 of the Children Act 2004 to ensure they consider the need to safeguard and promote the welfare of children and young people when carrying out their functions.

Under section 10 of the Children Act 2004, these agencies are required to cooperate with local authorities to promote the wellbeing of children and young people in each local authority area. Practitioners are responsible for ensuring they fulfil their role and responsibilities in a manner consistent with the statutory duties of their employer.

**An effective local multi-agency plan to combat child sexual exploitation requires clear leadership, guidance and support, delivered according to the overarching *Working Together* principles.** It requires contributions from all multi-agency partners in accordance with local multi-agency arrangements. The effectiveness and implementation of multi-agency plans and arrangements to tackle child sexual exploitation should be monitored by the Local Safeguarding Children Board or its successor body. This should include ensuring joint-agency training is available.

Those planning an effective local multi-agency response to child sexual exploitation should follow the process for managing risk of harm to children and putting their needs first, as set out in *Working Together*.

Specifically, an effective response is one that:

- Is collaborative and multi-agency (including statutory, voluntary and community sectors) with clear roles and responsibilities and clear lines of communication and accountability;
- Has clear and purposeful leadership across local safeguarding partners;
- Is locally informed and based on an up-to-date understanding of the local problem profile, but also informed by national learning;
- Is underpinned by effective information sharing and intelligence sharing. All multi-agency partners should follow the guidance set out in *Working Together*, for example taking part in strategy discussion and child protection conferences;
- Locates child sexual exploitation within a wider context of risk and harm, and moves beyond a case by case response to identify wider patterns of concern;

- Encompasses preventative, protective (immediate safeguarding) and responsive approaches, focusing on both victims and perpetrators (and recognising the potential for overlap between the two);
- Provides help and ongoing support that is responsive to individual need, strengths-based in approach and available over the longer-term (recognising that disclosure, resilience-building and recovery can take time);
- Supports staff to ‘work with risk,’ where required, in order to support a young person to become an active partner in their recovery and reintegration and achieve longer term meaningful change rather than temporary enforced compliance;
- Provides a response to children and young people with harmful sexual behaviours that recognises their vulnerabilities and needs, is holistic and provides early help and specialist services to these children and young people and their parents/carers; and
- Provides a system for flagging or applying appropriate markers on to systems in order to ensure effective record keeping and retrieval and assist information sharing (this should be based on the policy definition of child sexual exploitation and not just the criminal offences of that name).

## **The child sexual exploitation context**

- **Viewing child sexual exploitation within a wider continuum of exploitation, violence and abuse:** Child sexual exploitation is not a catch all category for all forms of sexual harm in adolescence. It should therefore be viewed within the wider continuum of sexual abuse and other relevant issues such as trafficking, modern slavery, domestic abuse and other gendered violence and going missing. The necessary focus on child sexual exploitation should not overshadow a focus on other manifestations of abuse.
- **Abuse outside of families:** Though child sexual exploitation can occur in the family, in most cases the response to exploitation may require services to consider a broader perspective than intra-familial child abuse. The response may need to address risk of harm posed outside the family home and draw in partners such as local businesses, licensing authorities, and other sectors. This reflects the context in which perpetrators are operating.
- **Agencies should move beyond a reactive approach:** (one that removes the individual from harm) to one that also addresses the existence of harm and/or proactively prevents that harm.
- **Local understanding:** Every area should have its own data and intelligence, of which child sexual exploitation should form a part. Local multi-agency plans should be based on an inter-agency assessment of the local profile of perpetration. This

requires effective local arrangements for sharing and collating intelligence and other information about communities, environments, perpetrators and victims.

- **Engaging with diversity:** The evidence base demonstrates that some cohorts of children and young people – males, children with disabilities, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and/or Transgender and Black and Minority Ethnic children, for example – may be less likely to have their abuse identified or responded to. Local areas should ensure responses are accessible, relevant and sensitive to the needs of all children and young people.
- **Cross-area working:** Cases of child sexual exploitation frequently cross local authority, police force and even country boundaries in terms of the movement of both perpetrators and victims. A singular area focus cannot therefore adequately capture patterns of harm and risk.
- **Inter-agency working:** While significant progress has been made here, challenges remain. Important areas for improvement include:
  - the practical implementation of information sharing guidance;
  - common risk assessment processes, as set out in *Working Together*, that follow an evidence-based model which looks at risk factors, vulnerability, protective factors and resilience and which prioritises professional judgement and does not rely on simplistic scoring;
  - clarity about professional roles and thresholds for action across universal, targeted and specialist services;
  - more effective sharing and recording of intelligence;
  - better co-ordination of statutory and voluntary sector services; and
  - more streamlined management of multiple agencies' engagement with victims and their families.
- Enhancing children's and young people's **resilience and strengthening the protective factors** around them are critical strands of prevention. Resilience is about being able to overcome adversities and avoid negative consequences. It is not a character trait; it involves both internal capabilities and external resources. Resilience is therefore never a substitute for support.
- **Openness to learning and improvement:** There has been considerable learning in recent years around how better to identify and respond to child sexual exploitation. Sources of support and how to access learning in this area can be found in the online annexes.

## Prevention

The harmful effects of child sexual exploitation are serious and far-reaching for victims, their families and wider communities. The ideal is therefore to prevent the abuse happening in the first place. This section focuses on how we can protect children and young people through awareness-raising and resilience-building work.

A local multi-agency plan should:

- Educate all children and young people about the nature and risks of child sexual exploitation and other forms of related harm (both online and offline) and how to access support;
- Recognise that children and young people can be both victims and perpetrators of child sexual exploitation;
- Promote the resilience of children and young people and their families and strengthen the protective factors around them;
- Identify and support those settings, such as schools and colleges, in which children and young people can form healthy and safe relationships;
- Supplement universal initiatives with targeted work with groups of particularly vulnerable children and young people, such as those in care, whilst being careful not to stigmatise specific groups;
- Provide complementary messages to parents and carers about risks to their children (online and offline) and how to access support if they have concerns.
- Consider the levels of knowledge and understanding of the wider workforce, so that everyone working with children and young people can play their role in prevention; and
- Educate the wider community so they can identify and report concerns and seek support.

Although messages and methods of delivery will vary according to the nature and needs of the audience, all education and awareness raising initiatives should:

- Be grounded in an evidence-based understanding of child sexual exploitation (both online and offline);
- Challenge myths and misconceptions about who is perpetrating and experiencing this form of abuse;
- Send a clear message that all forms of child sexual exploitation are abuse;
- Recognise the potential overlap between victims and perpetrators;
- Challenge any victim-blaming and promote the rights of all victims to protection and support;

- Provide information on where and how to report concerns and access support; and
- Be inclusive and accessible to the intended audience, in terms of language and delivery methods and ensure information is tailored and relevant to diverse groups such as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Black and Minority Ethnic and/or deaf or disabled children and young people.

## **Educating practitioners**

- **Readiness of the professional workforce:** *Working Together* recognises that everyone who works with children has a responsibility for keeping them safe – that includes all those those who work in social care, adult services, education, health settings, early years, youth work, youth justice, the police, and voluntary and community workers. Local safeguarding arrangements should provide high-quality training and other learning and developmental activities that are rooted in evidence, tailored to different professional groups and responsive to local learning needs.
- **Staff support and supervision:** Creating the right organisational environment and ensuring good quality professional leadership and practice supervision are essential for developing and sustaining effective practice. Supervision can help to:
  - ensure progress and actions are reviewed so cases do not ‘drift’;
  - maintain focus on the child or young person;
  - test the evidence base for assessment and intervention;
  - address the emotional impact of the work on the practitioner; and
  - support reflective practice and help practitioners recognise where personal values and attitudes might be leading to risky practice, assumptions or ‘blind spots’.

All practitioners working with children and young people, whether in specialist or universal roles, should:

- Ensure they are aware of local multi-agency protocols in relation to child sexual exploitation;
- Recognise learning and development around this as an essential part of their role;
- Discuss learning needs in relation to child sexual exploitation with their supervisor or manager;
- Identify and access training opportunities that reflect their professional role (online annexes provides an overview of key messages that training should cover);
- Reflect on learning from training and other activity with their manager, and consider how it will impact on practice;

- Review their learning needs over time, striving to continuously improve their knowledge, skills and understanding; and
- Actively engage in supervision and use it as an opportunity to test out thinking, have practice constructively challenged and discuss support needs.

Professional training and local protocols should clearly outline the roles and responsibilities of different practitioners in safeguarding children from harm (see *Working Together*). Training should address the complexities of identifying and responding to child sexual exploitation, emphasising:

- Practitioners' safeguarding responsibilities and local reporting routes;
- Child sexual exploitation is a form of child sexual abuse;
- Child sexual exploitation can take many different forms (online and offline) and affect any child or young person;
- All under 18s are entitled to protection and support and that safeguarding duties do not depend on a child or young person's desire to be safeguarded;
- The need to understand the impact of trauma on behaviour and presentation;
- The need to look beyond presenting behaviours and exercise 'professional curiosity';
- The need to apply professional judgment, supported by effective supervision and robust tools, in decision-making and practice;
- The power of professional reactions to facilitate or close down access to support and protection;
- The practical implementation of information sharing guidance where there are concerns about child sexual exploitation; and
- The development of practical skills in facilitating conversations with children and young people, and with their parents/carers.

Training alone is not sufficient to ensure a skilled and confident workforce, however. Training should be accompanied by:

- Opportunities to learn from other practitioners – for example, shadowing, co-working and peer observation;
- Ongoing high-quality supervision;
- A focus on reflective practice to help practitioners navigate complexity; and
- A recognition of the emotional impact that such work can have on practitioners, and access to support in order to manage this.

## Educating children and young people

Although there is not as yet any proven blueprint for the most effective means of communicating messages around child sexual exploitation to children and young people, the evidence base highlights some important principles:

- **The need for early and continuous education:** We are increasingly learning about cases of child sexual exploitation that involve younger children, particularly in the online sphere. If children and young people are not educated about the risk of child sexual exploitation (and other forms of sexual abuse) before perpetrators approach them, they are left unprotected. Schools may want to consider how to build in effective, age-appropriate education, which sensitively supports younger children on these issues and which forms part of a planned programme of study across key stages. This should be accompanied by wider resilience-building work.
- **Use all potential avenues of communication:** Schools, colleges and other educational settings have a critical role to play. Personal, social, health and economic (PSHE) lessons are an obvious route for educating children and young people about the risks of child sexual exploitation and other forms of harm, as are pastoral services and school nurse services. Consideration should also be given to how messages can be delivered outside mainstream education, for example, in youth clubs, community settings or the family home.
- **Adopt a holistic approach:** Risk of child sexual exploitation should be addressed as part of a wider programme of work on sexuality and sexual development, choice and consent, healthy relationships, harmful social norms and abusive behaviours and online safety. This should build on existing initiatives (around online safety for example) and ensure messages dovetail across these different programmes of work. Educative work should engage both boys and girls and should address both risk of perpetration and risk of victimisation (and the potential for overlap).
- **Contextual considerations:** Messages around child sexual exploitation should be delivered within a safe non-judgmental environment, by credible individuals who are confident discussing the issues and able to challenge unhelpful perceptions. Where specific vulnerabilities are identified (going missing, gang-association or drug/alcohol misuse, for example) more targeted educative work should be undertaken, while taking care to avoid stigmatisation or labelling. Accessible and appropriate support should be immediately available should any issues of concern be identified during education activity.

## Educating parents and carers

Parents and carers have a critical role to play in helping to protect children and young people from child sexual exploitation. They can educate their children about sex, healthy relationships and abuse, enhance resilience, provide a safe base and ensure open

channels of communication. They are also well placed to support early identification by identifying emerging vulnerabilities or potential indicators of abuse and seeking support before risks escalate. In order to support them, practitioners should ensure that parents/carers:

- Understand the risks of both online and offline child sexual exploitation and recognise this as something that could affect their child;
- Know the potential indicators of child sexual exploitation;
- Know where and how to access support;
- Are reassured that services will, as appropriate, work in partnership with them to try to protect their child;
- Have support to manage the emotional impact of child sexual exploitation on their child, themselves and on family relationships; and
- Have support that is tailored to their specific circumstances and needs, for example, support that recognises their culture or faith, and are helped to overcome any barriers such as language.

## **Educating communities**

**Harnessing the wider community:** Those who do not necessarily ‘work with children’ also have a contribution to make to tackling child sexual exploitation. Hoteliers, taxi drivers, park wardens, refuse collectors and retail workers (amongst others) may hold vital information about the movement of victims and perpetrators. Emergency services, including the Fire and Ambulance Services, and local community and religious groups can also play a key role. Educating those who work in local services and businesses (including the night-time economy) about what to look for, and how to report concerns, can significantly enhance local disruption and protective capabilities.

This focus should also include members of the wider local community who may observe concerns within their areas – for example, those living near a party house location who may see victims coming and going. Educating people about child sexual exploitation, the things to look out for and where to report concerns, will significantly enhance the protective capabilities of our communities.





Department  
for Education

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# County Lines Gang Violence, Exploitation & Drug Supply 2016

0346-CAD National Briefing Report

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Organised Crime Command**

## Introduction

- This report seeks to inform the six refreshed priorities of the **Ending Gang Violence and Exploitation (EGVE)** programme, following transition from the Ending Gang and Youth Violence initiative. In particular, this report supports the key objective of 'Tackling County Lines'.
- The report recognises distinction between gang crime within urban hubs and the export markets established by urban origin gangs in county lines markets. The report focuses almost exclusively on county lines gangs and markets. In June 2015, the Home Office produced statutory guidance that defined a gang as "having one or more characteristics that enables its members to be identified by others as a group".
- Section 34(5) of the Policing and Crime Act 2009 defines gang-related drug dealing activity as "the unlawful production, supply, importation or exportation of a controlled drug which occurs in the course of, or is otherwise related to, the activities of a group that:
  - a) consists of at least 3 people; and
  - b) has one or more characteristics that enable its members to be identified by others as a group."
- For the purpose of this report, a county lines gang features these additional criteria:
  - The gang / gang members are based or have origin within an urban city location.
  - They have established a market in a rural town, into which they supply drugs.
  - They utilise a mobile phone number to facilitate drug orders from and supply to customers in the county town.
  - Their criminality systematically exploits young and vulnerable persons.

## Key Findings

- The supply of class A drugs, from urban hubs to county towns, continues to be a widespread feature of gang activity and the key driver for the criminality highlighted by this report.
- Violence, incidents of kidnap, use of weapons (including firearms) and ruthless debt control prevail as a consequence of county lines markets.
- County lines gangs pose a significant threat to vulnerable adults and children, upon whom they rely to conduct and/or facilitate this criminality. Exposure to gang exploitation has the potential to generate emotional and physical harm.
- Gang members and those they exploit continue to be transient between urban hubs and county markets, but with an emerging trend for some to settle within the community in which the county lines market is established.
- The use of mobile phones, to maintain 'deal lines' between customers in county markets and gang member suppliers, remains a key feature.
- While gangs from London continue to dominate the activity described by this report, it is noteworthy that there has been an increase in reports from other counties, highlighting the emergence of gangs in the North West functioning with the same modus operandi.

## Purpose

- This report provides insight of the current national situation, as generated by gang violence and exploitation linked to county lines class A drug supply.
- This report aims to refresh an understanding of the threat since the original assessment in 2014 and reports current scope and scale, across counties in England and Wales, also highlighting significant changes and new or emerging trends.
- The report informs the cross-Government 'Ending Gang Violence & Exploitation' initiative, Home Office, police and wider partners, with a combination of national overview and regional / local context.

## Information base

This report draws on returns from UK police forces.

**The intelligence collection period for this report is January to June 2016.**

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## 1. Typical county lines methodology

- 1.1 This report focuses on gangs committing criminality within county locations. This is based on the revised statutory guidance published by the Home Office in 2015 which states that 'a gang is defined as having one or more characteristics that enables its members to be identified by others as a group'.
- 1.2 Whilst there is no official definition, typical county lines activity involves a gang (usually made up of young males) from a large urban area travelling to smaller locations (such as a county or coastal town) to sell class A drugs, specifically crack cocaine and heroin. The majority of these gangs function with a degree of affiliation and loyalty. They may challenge an existing group from the local area or another county lines enterprise, which often causes incidents of violence.
- 1.3 Gangs tend to communicate with drugs users via a mobile phone number, commonly given a brand name which we refer to as the line. Traditionally this line is kept away from the area where drugs are being sold and a relay system is used to contact those acting as the dealers in the county location.
- 1.4 Gang members travel between the urban and county locations on a regular basis to deliver drugs and collect cash. They tend to use a local property, generally belonging to a vulnerable person, as a base for their activities. This is often acquired by force or coercion and is referred to as cuckooing.
- 1.5 Gangs typically exploit children to deliver drugs from the urban to county location using intimidation, violence, debt bondage and/or grooming. Adult drug users (often addicts) and vulnerable females are also exploited for their properties or to assist with dealing within the county market.

## 2. Scope and scale of county lines

- 2.1 The NCA circulated a request for information to police forces in England and Wales. 71% of police returns reported established county lines activity, whilst a further 12% reported an emerging picture (within the last 6 months).
- 2.2 It is not possible to confirm how many of these gangs were impacting multiple police areas. It is also noted that gang size varies, as does levels of violence and volumes of drugs being supplied. There is a realistic possibility that a police area with a smaller number of gangs may still be equally or more affected by this criminality.
- 2.3 The motivators behind setting up county lines markets remain unchanged. They include a receptive customer base, less capable or intimidated local suppliers, limited access to drug supplies (compared to the urban location) and an assessment that competition may be low or easy to overcome. As the criminal use of firearms in urban hubs tend to be more prolific (particularly regarding criminal gang culture), supplying drugs outside of urban hubs reduces the likelihood of being a target of a firearms discharge.

- 2.4 Gang members operating outside of their home borough or city environments are less likely to be known by local police or be identified by competitors. This affords a degree of anonymity.
- 2.5 The methods through which gangs choose a county location appears to vary. Some will send members to a prospective location in order to assess the market. Approved accommodation in a county area can also be a catalyst. Familial links in county locations have been identified as a possible connection.
- 2.6 There have been reports of a number of gang nominals settling down in county areas, establishing roots through residency or relationships. This occurs in areas that have experienced county lines activity over a long period. We assess this to be natural evolution that may become more widespread in the future.

### **3. Gang origins**

- 3.1 85% of areas encountered gangs from London and 25% were solely affected by London groups. Other gangs were reported to have travelled from Liverpool, Manchester, Birmingham, Reading and Essex, however - with the exception of Liverpool - these were in the minority. London remains the largest export location for county line groups.
- 3.2 35% of areas highlighted the presence of Somali gangs from London. Most of these areas are in the Eastern region, suggesting it is a particular stronghold for Somali gangs. We assess that Somali gangs may be more widespread than reported, as some submissions did not identify the first generation nationality origin.

### **4. Common themes and characteristics**

- 4.1 Despite gangs often consisting of larger groups, only a small number of members will be present in each county location at any given time, usually 2-4 individuals. A number of areas stated that gang members would be rotated between county locations to try and evade detection. The presence of larger groups would usually be in response to conflict, as a show of strength.
- 4.2 Gang members are generally in their late teens to mid-twenties; however some areas reported members in their early thirties. Gangs from London were predominantly Black British or Afro Caribbean. However, all of the intelligence we received stated that gangs from Liverpool and Manchester were made up of White British or European males. Gangs travelling from Birmingham tended to be ethnically Asian and often family members or close associates and have close links to the areas they are operating in.
- 4.3 Gang members are usually known to law enforcement in the urban location from which they originate and often have reputations for violence and weapons, including firearms. County line gang members are often associated to an urban street gang linked to their home borough. This additional affiliation can cause enhanced tensions amongst rival gangs in county locations and includes violent incidents generated by feuds in the home borough.



## 5. Drug markets and supply

- 5.1 All the gangs highlighted in the returns were selling crack cocaine and heroin, and 70% stated groups were solely supplying these drugs. Some areas reported that groups were also selling powder cocaine and cannabis, however this was usually a smaller part of their enterprise.
- 5.2 Gangs are now reported to be selling drugs to county lines markets 24 hours a day, in contrast to reporting in 2014, which indicated activity was almost exclusive to the day time market. The line is assessed as having an influence upon 24 hour access.
- 5.3 Some areas reported gangs are selling high purity drugs. We assess this to be an indication that:
  - they have access to higher volume supplies, direct from imported drugs;
  - it is a tactic not to dilute (by bulking) their drugs, to maintain reputation and market dominance; and
  - the market within which they operate has a demand for high quality drugs.
- 5.4 Some gangs supply bags of heroin over the usual weight supplied by the local dealers. Many gangs advertise offers whereby users are discounted for buying larger amounts encouraging them to club together when making a purchase.
- 5.5 Gangs are making an average of GBP 2000 a day from drug supply into a single market. NCA data demonstrates that 1 ounce (28 grams) of heroin has a likely street value, when sold as GBP 10 (0.1 gram) bags, of approximately GBP 2800. The cost to buy an ounce of heroin equates to approximately GBP 800 as a single unit, but potentially as low as GBP 600 when split from the cost of a kilogram (36 drug deal ounces).
- 5.6 A common tactic is for runners in the county location to make cash deposits into bank accounts registered to associates or family members of nominals in the urban location. Once the money is deposited, cash withdrawals in the urban location are made swiftly. Two areas highlighted the use of businesses to launder profits.

## 6. Establishing a base and the exploitation of vulnerable of adults

- 6.1 Gangs must establish a base in the county location to develop a market. All of the returns confirmed groups take over addresses of local vulnerable adults by force or coercion. Typically this involves the home of a class A drug user, who is supplied with drugs to initiate a relationship.
- 6.2 Gangs quickly establish control as users fall into debt, being told they must continue to make their property available and/or work to pay the debt back. This is often referred to as debt bondage. 90% of areas saw drug users acting as runners or dealers on behalf of county line groups.

- 6.3 Debt bondage is a common and widespread theme, as is the use of force and coercion to exploit vulnerable adults. In some instances victims have become homeless, being forced to leave their address in fear of violence from gang members. Gangs typically also move to and/or between different addresses in an effort to evade detection. Vulnerable adults with premises are often exploited repeatedly by different gangs, sometimes within a short period of time.
- 6.4 A number of areas reported that groups utilise alternative addresses when required. This is primarily hotels but some use hostels, associates' homes and addresses of females, including those of girlfriends.
- 6.5 We have identified the targeting of adults with mental health problems as a new trend, however it is unsurprising considering the established link between drug users and poor mental health. Other vulnerable groups include adults with physical health problems, those recently released from custody and the elderly, however these are considered exceptions.
- 6.6 We assess that effective interventions by local multi-agency collaborations is essential to safeguarding vulnerable adults and their properties. We judge that safeguarding must be an equal priority to operational targeting and that a well engaged strategy, combining both elements, will generate more effective disruption outcomes.

## **7. Exploitation and the role of adult females**

- 7.1 90% of areas reported that gangs are utilising consenting adult females to assist criminal activities.
- 7.2 The most common form of assistance provided by females is allowing the use of their address, followed by holding and running drugs. Females are also employed to book hotels and hire cars, identify local addresses for cuckooing, act as drivers and, on occasion, act as an enforcer.
- 7.3 The issue of consent is questionable as many of the females involved have been targeted because they are vulnerable, often class A drug users. One region highlighted that, although females initially appeared to be consenting, this quickly progressed to being coerced and controlled through threats and intimidation.
- 7.4 Females who have entered into relationships with gang members are often controlled and subject to domestic abuse.
- 7.5 In some instances where females had allowed gangs to use their property, it was unclear if this was due to a genuine relationship or through gang members having set out to exploit them for their home. Some females have also been supplied with discount price drugs, affording gangs greater control over them.
- 7.6 In some areas, females had been sexually assaulted or threatened with sexual assault. Instances of females being prostituted for sexual favours in payment for drugs have also been reported.

- 7.7 Although 90% of areas reported the use of females by gangs, the majority of law enforcement activity remains focused on male gang members. However it is clear that gangs utilise females due to their belief that women are less likely to be suspected of, or stopped and searched for, dealing drugs.

## 8. Exploitation of children

- 8.1 Children (under 18) continue to be exploited by county line gangs. Children from urban areas are recruited by gangs to courier drugs and money to the county location, often via train but also in cars or on coaches.
- 8.2 Children are reported to have stayed in very poor conditions at cuckooed addresses that generally belong to class A drug users. Many children are also used by gangs to deal drugs within the county markets. This includes local children and those travelling from urban hubs.
- 8.3 We assess that gangs utilise vulnerable children because they are a relatively inexpensive resource and easily controlled.
- 8.4 80% of areas saw the exploitation of children by gangs. The ages ranged from 12-18 years, with 15-16 being the most common age range. It remains a challenge to provide accurate figures for the number of children who have been exploited.
- 8.5 As numerous areas were unable to confirm accurate figures it is likely that many more children go undetected by law enforcement. This means we do not know the true scale of child exploitation by gangs and it is likely that many children fail to be safeguarded.
- 8.6 Despite the intelligence picture being incomplete, returns from 2016 indicate a considerable increase in law enforcement awareness of the use of children by gangs since the 2014 assessment. The majority of police forces are able to provide anecdotal evidence, pointing to a fairly consistent national picture, which is supported by research undertaken by Catch 22<sup>1</sup>.
- 8.7 A very positive aspect of the returns was that 90% of areas stated they are actively working with local partners to safeguard both vulnerable adults and children.
- 8.8 Whilst male children are most commonly exploited, almost half the areas also reported the use of female children. Some areas highlighted that children appear to be groomed by gangs, either with gifts or promises that they will earn money.
- 8.9 Most commonly children from poor backgrounds engaged in offending behaviour, facing difficulties at home or in care of social services are amongst those most vulnerable to gangs. They are often listed as a missing person and/or have poor school attendance.

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<sup>1</sup> Catch 22 Report 'Running the Risk: The link between Gang Involvement and young people going missing July 2015'.

- 8.10 It is not always clear how gangs recruit children, however one police force highlighted a gang that targeted young males from homeless hostels. Social media is also used to make initial contact with children and young persons.
- 8.11 One area stated that local children are more likely to be White British because groups believed they are less likely to be targeted by law enforcement.
- 8.12 Some children engage with gangs in circumstances where the potential threats or likelihood of encountering harm is not initially apparent. However, a number of areas reported that children have been assaulted or threatened with violence. A small number of areas stated children had been controlled under debt bondage and one area reported a child had been abducted.
- 8.13 Many young people are perceived to be consenting despite being coerced by intimidation and violence. All parties engaged in tackling county lines must ensure rigorous assessment of the circumstances where children are identified as being involved.
- 8.14 An emerging picture in some areas highlights the presence of young children who reside at cuckooed addresses belonging to vulnerable adult females. Numerous areas highlight gangs entering into relationships and utilising the addresses of vulnerable females. This generates a risk that young children will be increasingly exposed to county lines class A drug dealing.

## **9. Links to Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE)**

- 9.1 The sexual exploitation of young females linked to county line gangs was not widely reported, although some areas highlighted young females who were assessed as at risk of sexual exploitation being transported to county locations. One force reported that females, as young as 14 and missing from home, have been found in hotel rooms used to store drugs. Some young females were also reported as entering into relationships with gang members.
- 9.2 Although CSE is not the driving factor in county line gangs exploiting children, a clear link between county lines exploitation and child sexual exploitation exists. Girls who are being exploited to hold and deal drugs are vulnerable to becoming more accessible to gang members wishing to sexually exploit them. It is conceivable that gangs or gang members use county line drug dealing as an opportunity to also target young females for sexual exploitation. Appropriate measures for safeguarding young females from sexual exploitation should be a high priority within any county lines strategy.

## **10. Violence**

- 10.1 All areas reported gangs using violence in order to establish and maintain a county line. Generally, levels of violence in an area rise when gangs are establishing and then maintaining a presence.
- 10.2 Most areas report violence directed towards drug users who had failed to pay their debts, been accused of stealing from the gang, or refused to comply with their demands. Violence and intimidation are also common tactics utilised to

cuckoo addresses. Instances of firearms being kept visible at cuckooed addresses to intimidate victims were reported, as well as drug users being seriously assaulted or even tortured as a show of strength to other users and gangs.

- 10.3 70% of areas reported violence used towards other members of the gang, usually runners, when they made mistakes or were accused of stealing. If drugs or profits are lost by a gang member due to being robbed or arrested they will be held responsible for the loss and take on that debt, which can have serious consequences for the individual.
- 10.4 The type of violence adopted by gangs changed across police areas, being dependent upon the prevalent gang and their chosen style. Knives are the most common weapon. Homemade weapons, bats, hammers, Tasers, boiling water and acid are also noted.
- 10.5 The use of Tasers and acid is a developing trend and was not highlighted in the 2014 assessment. Gangs carrying bottles of ammonia has also been reported.
- 10.6 Many areas reported that county lines gangs are linked to firearms, with other areas highlighting access to firearms when required. However the use of firearms was typically to make threats, with most areas stating they have never been discharged or that it was very rare.

## **11. Telephone Lines**

- 11.1 The traditional modus operandi of a county line gang is for the deal line phone to be held outside the county location, usually under the control of a senior member in the urban location i.e. London.
- 11.2 Gangs use a relay system, whereby customers place orders via the line. Another phone is then used to contact the runner in the county location, providing instructions on where and when the deal will take place. Usually this number will be long standing, representing a brand that signifies trust, value and quality to its customers.
- 11.3 Some of these numbers have been active for years and there are instances where they are sold between gangs, transferring the customer base.
- 11.4 This traditional method remains in over half the reporting areas, however a number of areas stated that some gangs are now keeping the phone line in the county location.
- 11.5 A significant change of trend since the 2014 assessment entails the use of multiple lines within a single market, under the control of the same gang, combined with a willingness to change the deal line number.
- 11.6 Regardless of the actual tactic, we assess that the lines are providing an efficient communication platform, upon which gangs can anonymously acquire the key tool in their strategy, with little to no audit trail that specifically identifies them. Each mobile phone number has the potential to interact with hundreds of

customers and facilitate thousands of deals. This creates distance between gang hierarchy and the market place and affords users 24 hours a day access to class A drugs. The frequency and volume of supply this generates is assessed as a key driver for why so many young and vulnerable persons are exploited to achieve effective drug distribution.

## **12. Transport**

- 12.1 Rail networks and cars continue to dominate the travel methods utilised by county line gangs. Gangs also continue to use taxi firms within county locations.
- 12.2 A small number of areas noted private cars being used, however the majority of gangs use hire cars. Hire cars are commonly booked for gang members by adult drug users or female associates, often presenting as intended drivers. In some examples, these individuals will drive the vehicles.
- 12.3 Reporting suggests a decline in the use of coaches.

## **13. Conclusion**

- 13.1 Since the 2014 assessment, county lines gang related drug dealing has remained a threat across multiple police regions, impacting upon numerous county towns.
- 13.2 Through developed insight, we can identify numerous potential triggers:
  - Towns within which prisons are located, to which gang members are sentenced; leading to visitors identifying new market opportunities.
  - New networks developing between gang members meeting in prisons.
  - Drug users travelling into county markets to buy from gangs – revealing their home town as a new potential market.
  - Gangs co-operating (against traditional feuding) reducing competition and opening free enterprise within nearby markets.
  - The provision of local housing authority accommodation for gang members, associates or associated vulnerable persons facilitates opportunities for gangs to branch out into new towns and markets through third party introductions.
  - A new trend is noted within existing county lines markets for gang members to become settled in relationships and permanent accommodation, extending the urban hub to a satellite location and, in doing so, extending the hub part way to a new market.
- 13.3 Heroin and crack cocaine remain the principal drugs supplied, with 70% of areas stating gangs are solely supplying these drugs. 30% of areas saw gangs selling powder cocaine and cannabis, however this was typically a significantly smaller part of a group's enterprise.
- 13.4 Despite long standing deal lines being held in the urban location continuing to prevail, the emerging trend of changing the number or holding the line within the county market is noted.

- 13.5 The taking over of addresses (cuckooing) and exploitation of vulnerable adults remains a key threat.
- 13.6 There has been an increase in awareness of the roles played by adult females, with 90% of areas reporting gangs utilising / exploiting women.
- 13.7 Since initial reporting, there has been an increase in awareness of the use of local and urban children to convey drugs into and supply them throughout county lines markets. This poses many risks to children, not least violence, intimidation, unhygienic and unsafe practices, falling into class A drug use and in some cases child sexual exploitation.
- 13.8 Groups continue to use violence and the fear of violence to establish and maintain a county line, with an increase in incidents towards competitors occurring when groups enter a new market or fight for territory. As the density of gangs seeking to assert county market dominance increases, so will the likelihood of violent feuds and escalation of violent methods such as Tasers and acid.

## **14. Legislation and alternative considerations**

- 14.1 The 'Sentencing Council - Drug Offences Definitive Guidelines' identify a list of aggravating features, some of which are highly pertinent to gang related exploitation linked to facilitating drugs supply. These should be highlighted to courts to ensure the aggravated nature of a particular scenario attracts the most appropriately informed sentence. Examples include:
- Using or permitting an under 18 to deliver a controlled drug
  - Drug supply conducted within proximity of a school
  - Targeting premises used to accommodate vulnerable persons
  - Presence of others – especially children
  - Presence of a weapon, when not charged separately
  - Established evidence or community impact
- 14.2 The 'Sentencing Council – Drug Offences Definitive Guidelines' also provide mitigating examples, reducing the seriousness of being concerned in drug supply offences, including:
- Involvement due to pressure, intimidation or coercion, falling short of duress
  - Offenders' vulnerability was exploited
  - Age and/or lack of maturity where it affects the responsibility of the offender
  - Mental disorder or learning difficulty
- 14.3 These examples are often present and at the core of gangs targeting vulnerable persons to assist drug supply.
- 14.4 Anecdotal evidence suggests that a drugs conviction is often seen as an occupational hazard within gang culture, and at times even a badge of honour,

whereas the potential to be convicted for modern slavery is reported to have attached stigma.

- 14.5 The Modern Slavery Act 2015 creates opportunity to consider the circumstances of a county line – particularly those where significant exploitation of the young and vulnerable has prevailed.

## **15. Observations**

- 15.1 County lines gang activity generates considerable harm at both the urban core and within the county market location, generating a need for multi-agency responses, with safeguarding at the very fore of priorities. One of the key features of a county line is the unrelenting recruitment, coercion and exploitation of young and vulnerable persons. Having a capacity to protect these individuals is key to delivering an effective response.
- 15.2 The most positive safeguarding outcomes to date have involved a truly collaborative approach, with the police engaging local multi-agency safeguarding partners, housing authorities, town councils, public health, charities and the media. This level of engagement is recommended at local levels.
- 15.3 Successfully pursuing criminal gang activity is informed by knowing which gang members are where and who they are affiliated to, and ensuring individuals are appropriately safeguarded. It is recognised that an individual has the potential to be exploited in one county market and be the exploiter in another.
- 15.4 It is essential that criminal justice decisions correctly focus on issues of 'aggravating or mitigating' circumstances, leading to the appropriate disposal and/or safeguarding of a person in custody – from the moment they are encountered.
- 15.5 Non-contract mobile phones remain central to county line market domination, customer communication, supply tactics and logistics. It is common for the holder of the 'deal line' to operate with anonymity and distance from the market. We assess that disrupting this criminal tactic would have a significant impact upon gang related class A drug supply and associated exploitation.
- 15.6 In the continued response to the threat posed by urban street gangs engaged in county lines criminality, we assess that multi-agency safeguarding coupled with law enforcement intelligence and operations are essential for the protection of young and vulnerable persons, while generating criminal justice outcomes.





# County Lines Violence, Exploitation & Drug Supply 2017

National Briefing Report

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**Drug Threat Team, Commodities**

## Introduction

This briefing report provides a national overview on the threat of 'county lines' drug supply, violence and exploitation. It supports Home Office, NPCC and wider stakeholder priorities including those of the Ending Gang Violence and Exploitation (EGVE) programme. In particular, this report contributes towards the EGVE objective of 'Tackling County Lines'.

It is the third annual NCA report on this threat, following an initial assessment in 2015 and subsequent update report in 2016. The report also forms part of the NCA's briefing requirement to the quarterly Gangs Inter-Ministerial Group (IMG).

For the purposes of this report, a typical county lines scenario is defined by the following components:

- a. A group (not necessarily affiliated as a gang) establishes a network between an urban hub and county location, into which drugs (primarily heroin and crack cocaine) are supplied.
- b. A branded mobile phone line is established in the market, to which orders are placed by introduced customers. The line will commonly (but not exclusively) be controlled by a third party, remote from the market.
- c. The group exploits young or vulnerable persons, to achieve the storage and/or supply of drugs, movement of cash proceeds and to secure the use of dwellings (commonly referred to as cuckooing).
- d. The group or individuals exploited by them regularly travel between the urban hub and the county market, to replenish stock and deliver cash.
- e. The group is inclined to use intimidation, violence and weapons, including knives, corrosives and firearms.

This report does not address wider drug markets or supply issues and has sought to distinguish county lines from more conventional drugs supply methodologies.

The information assessed for this report was provided by 43 territorial forces across England & Wales (100%). British Transport Police and Police Scotland also provided information, but this has not been included for statistical analysis in order to be consistent with the two previous NCA reports on county lines, plus Police Scotland have their own threat assessment and BTP's perspective is different from that of regional police forces.

This report adopts the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child definition of a child, which is everyone under the age of 18.

## Key Findings

1. County lines groups have a proven ability to adapt their operating methods and practices, including changing their use of phones, transport, accommodation or vulnerable people. This is to evade law enforcement intervention as well as strengthen their criminal enterprise.
2. County lines groups impose high levels of violence, including the prevalent use of weapons and firearms to intimidate and control members of the group and associated victims.
3. Although the exploitation of children continues to be reported, the true scale of abuse remains an intelligence gap in many parts of the country. It is often difficult to assess accurately, requiring focused and systematic data capture, as well as multi-sector collaboration to develop and maintain reliable data. A clear national picture cannot be determined currently.
4. County lines groups continue to pose a significant threat to vulnerable people and explore a range of opportunities to identify potential new victims. Victims are exposed to varying levels of exploitation including physical, mental and sexual harm, with some over protracted periods. Some vulnerable individuals are trafficked into remote markets to work whilst others are falsely imprisoned in their own homes, which have been taken over (cuckooed) using force or coercion.
5. Whilst London continues to be the dominant urban source of county lines offending, a number of other export hubs are now being reported across the country, reflecting the threat's growth and evolution.
6. The use of anonymised mobile phones remains an essential feature of county lines, as well as other forms of drug supply. However county lines groups increasingly operate more than one branded line. Some use multiple telephone numbers which all connect back to the core deal line, whilst other groups use cloned phones, which mimic the identity of the main county line phone number. This increases the resilience of the criminal groups to law enforcement intervention.

## **Information base**

This report draws on returns from UK police forces (including Police Scotland and British Transport Police).

The intelligence collection period for this report is Oct 2016 to Jun 2017.

## **Purpose**

This report aims to inform the response to gang violence and exploitation linked to county lines drug supply and provide insight into the current national situation.

This report is the third of three, which refreshes the understanding of the threat, identifies new trends and maps the scope of the issue across England and Wales. It builds on the 2015 and 2016 assessments, with specific focus on highlighting significant changes and new or emerging trends.

The report informs the cross-government 'Ending Gang Violence & Exploitation' initiative, as well as the work of Home Office, police and wider partners, with a combination of national overview and regional / local context.

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## **1. County Lines Methodology**

1.1 This report focuses on the specific method of drug supply commonly referred to as county lines. County lines relates to the supply of class A drugs (primarily crack cocaine and heroin) from an urban hub into rural towns or county locations. This is facilitated by a group who may not necessarily be affiliated as a gang, but who have developed networks across geographical boundaries to access and exploit existing drugs markets in these areas.

1.2 A key feature of county lines drug supply is the use of a branded mobile phone line which is established in the marketplace and promoted throughout the existing customer base. Group messages are sent out periodically to the customer base to advertise the availability of drugs and orders are placed back to this line in response. A relay system (another phone) is then used to pass orders onto dealers in the rural marketplace. The branded phone line is generally controlled by senior group members who are traditionally located in the urban hub. However, we are increasingly seeing incidents of the phone being held closer to the rural marketplace. Some phones are reported to move periodically between these market locations.

1.3 The exploitation of young and vulnerable persons is a common feature in the facilitation of county lines drugs supply, whether for the storage or supply of drugs, the movement of cash, or to secure the use of dwellings held by vulnerable people in the rural marketplace (commonly referred to as cuckooing).

1.4 County lines groups use high levels of violence and intimidation to establish and maintain markets, whether that's forcing existing suppliers out, as a means to enact some form of retribution, controlling vulnerable individuals or as a general show of strength. Levels of violence vary considerably but it often includes the use of knives, corrosives, firearms and other weapons. It may also include sexual violence and sexual exploitation.

1.5 The group, or individuals exploited by them, travel regularly between the urban hub and the rural marketplace, to replenish stock and deliver cash. This movement is not unique to county lines drug supply but is generally more frequent and in smaller deal amounts compared to most other drug supply methods.

## **2. New & Emerging County Lines Trends**

2.1 23% of forces (10) report county lines groups using accommodation other than that acquired by cuckooing in the rural marketplace. This includes the use of serviced apartments, holiday lets, budget hotels and caravan parks. This could indicate groups are beginning to move away from using cuckooing in its traditional form. County lines groups prefer to pay cash where possible and often use network associates to arrange these facilities, as a means of distancing themselves from the criminality.

2.2 County lines networks are increasingly operating from more than one phone number. This can indicate the emergence of a new spin-off line (separately branded line run by the same county lines network) but generally it involves the use of different phone numbers which all relate to/work for the same branded county line. 26% of

forces (11) note evidence of county lines groups changing phone numbers/deal lines, including some on a regular basis. There is some indication of regional variation here; reporting indicates that Liverpool-based lines tend to change frequently whereas London lines tend to stay the same for longer.

2.3 18% of force returns (8) reference potentially complicit companies providing services to county lines groups, including taxis, fast food outlets and car hire firms. Most concern suspicions of complicity rather than confirmed reports. Such facilitators would generally be used to distance the group from criminality i.e. to hide travel patterns, methods and the identity of county line nominals.

2.4 Traditionally a stash house is established in the rural area to facilitate efficient supply. However, at least one force reports that drugs are increasingly being kept by various people at different addresses in the rural marketplace. Drugs are often transported frequently in small quantities i.e. batches of wraps, but the number of wraps being transported seems to vary considerably.

2.5 30% of force (13) reports include references to 'plugging' (concealing drugs internally) with both males and females involved. Historically, the plugging of drugs is a common tactic used for the transport of drugs between the urban hub and rural marketplace, but plugging is also now commonly used for the storage of drugs as well. This poses significant health risks, as those concealing the drugs will often do so for extended periods of time. This is often in unhygienic and unsafe conditions with the individuals who are secreting the drugs also potentially being subject to violence and intimidation.

2.6 There is some indication that county lines nominals are aware of law enforcement seizure requirements and limitations, so will do all they can to factor this into their practises. County lines suspects often utilise a little and often approach to the supply of drugs and movement of cash and will vary and limit their use of bank accounts, ensuring proceeds are cashed out in the urban hub soon after being deposited.

2.7 The replacing or rotating of county lines operatives in rural marketplaces is referenced in 12% of forces (5). This is done to prevent these individuals becoming known to local police.

2.8 The widespread and frequent use of violence and carrying of weapons is noted in 2017 returns. This is either as a mechanism to enforce recovery of drug debts, to obtain retribution for drug losses or to settle turf wars. Knives, baseball bats, ammonia/corrosives and other weapons are used to enforce these threats. There is also notable evidence of firearms being seen or used to threaten in connection to county lines activity.

'County line networks often bring their own nominals into the rural marketplace in pairs. They will stay for a month or so before returning home and being replaced by others -this is done to hinder police detection and/or familiarity with these nominals.' - NPCC force.

2.9 13% of forces (6) note the emergence of county lines groups conducting franchise style operations, renting county lines and customer contacts to other criminal

groups. In some cases, the line owners also facilitate the supply of drugs to these groups. There is also some reporting of lines being up for sale or sold.

2.10 Some local drug users offer their services to a number of different county lines networks, offering to run drugs to and from the urban hub for payment in money or drugs. 58% of forces (25) report that local drug users are used to transport drugs. However, this figure does not differentiate between those who are complicit and those who are coerced.

'Once a vulnerable young person becomes sufficiently embedded in the criminality and begins to act on their own volition, their affiliation to a defined London gang sometimes becomes blurred with them often crossing over and dealing for multiple gangs who are active in their county.' - NPCC force.

2.11 Some county lines groups use existing criminal families/networks located within the rural marketplace as a means of assisting the group to conduct their activity and to open up a network. Others are reported to take over existing local drug supply lines and turn them into county lines.

2.12 County lines groups are able to adapt their methods with ease and frequency. Changeable methods include their use/exploitation of:

- Transport; including method, route, frequency, payment, person travelling
- Phones; including changing handsets, SIM cards, numbers (sometimes frequently), varying the line's location and those who control it
- Accommodation; including the exploitation of a wider set of vulnerable people, use of hotels, holiday lets, serviced apartments, caravans
- Children; including 'clean skins' (those without a record), missing persons, children in care, children exposed to broader vulnerable issues
- Vulnerable; including drug users, those with mental health issues, those with physical health issues, those at a point of crisis
- Complicit individuals; including different businesses or individuals
- Money laundering; including running cash, depositing proceeds into bank accounts of multiple network associates.

### **3. Scope and Scale of County Lines**

3.1 There is evidence of county lines activity in 88% of force returns (38). 12% of forces (5) report no evidence. 81% of forces (35) report as definite importers of county lines and 30% of forces (13) report as definite exporters.

3.2 43% of forces (19) provided data on the actual numbers of county lines in their area. From this, and on the basis that there must be at least one line present in each force that reported evidence of county lines activity, a conservative estimate is that there are at least 720 lines across England and Wales. The actual number may well be considerably higher, as many of these areas are likely to have more than one line. It



should also be noted that there was evidence, albeit limited, of lines closing, therefore it is possible that not all of these lines will necessarily remain running long term.

3.3 We estimate that there are at least 283 lines originating in London. Again, this number should be considered as a conservative estimate given that some forces were not able to confirm sufficiently detailed or accurate data on the total number of county lines in their area.

3.4 Forces were asked whether lines were established or had emerged in 2017. For the majority of lines (371 of the 720) this information was not provided, often citing a lack of sufficiently detailed coverage or resource to monitor the changing picture to this extent. For the forces that did provide this data, 172 lines were established and 177 were emerging. The high proportion of emerging lines may indicate that county lines activity is increasing. However, with limitations around the data i.e. the difficulties distinguishing between a county line and 'conventional' drug supply lines, and lack of more detailed and accurate information, it is not possible to confirm that assessment at this time. The data does indicate that county lines markets can change considerably from year to year.

3.5 33% of forces (14) reported having established lines in their area, 19% of forces (8) reported having emerging lines and a further 49% of forces (21) reported having county lines activity but could not distinguish whether it was established or emerging.

3.6 Motivating factors for setting up / utilising the county lines methodology include huge profits, reduced competition from other drugs OCG's, receptive customer bases, less intimidation or resistance from local dealers and a lesser risk of being known by local police.

3.7 Not all county lines operate 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. Some operate more sporadically, such as when they have a commodity to sell. One perpetrator was reported to save up money in the rural market before moving back to the urban hub to spend the proceeds.

3.8 The Metropolitan Police force area is mentioned as the exporting hub of county lines going into 65% of other forces (28). Merseyside is the second highest exporter affecting 42% of forces (18) nationally. County lines originating from London predominantly impact forces in the south and east but some also affect forces further north. County lines originating from Merseyside have a greater impact on forces in the north west but also impact forces in the south east.

3.9 The true scale of county lines activity is difficult to determine with accuracy as its nature is fluid and the intelligence surrounding the threat is not always clear, nor is it recorded consistently. Elements of county lines drug supply are likely to exist in all forces across England and Wales. It is also likely that the number of forces with exporting lines will increase as more criminal groups adopt the county lines methodology.

## 4. Drugs

4.1 The most commonly reported drug being supplied via the county lines methodology is heroin, with 79% of forces (34) reporting it being sold. This is followed by crack cocaine, with 70% of forces (30) recording it being supplied. This aligns to the traditional county lines model which predominantly catered to the addicted daytime economy drug markets supplying heroin and crack cocaine. However, some force returns noted evidence to suggest groups were now targeting different drugs scenes, including the night time economy (club scene) and selling other class A drugs. This could indicate an evolution of the model. Alternatively it could indicate that other types of drugs line have been incorrectly included in the data capture for this report.

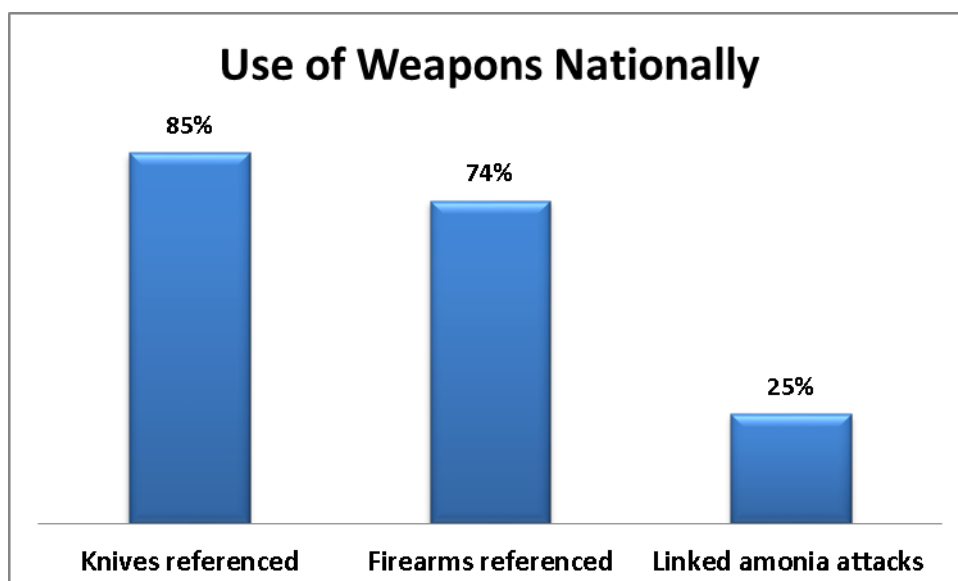
4.2 The synthetic cannabinoid commonly referred to as Spice was reported by 9% of forces (4) as being supplied by county lines groups. One force also mentioned new psychoactive substances (NPS) being supplied.

4.3 More than a third of forces (35%) reference the supply of cannabis by county lines groups. However, this is generally referenced as a secondary drug and there is some suggestion that it is supplied by runners as an independent supplementary side-line to generate additional income.

## 5. Violence and Weapons

5.1 Virtually all forces that reported county lines activity also referenced that the individuals responsible were involved with carrying weapons. Knives were mentioned by 85% of forces (35) and firearms were mentioned by 74% of forces (32). Approximately a quarter of forces reported intelligence relating to the use of firearms to threaten, however there were no reported incidents of guns being discharged in relation to county lines activity.

Figure 1. Graph outlining the use of weapons nationally.



5.2 Other violence-related crimes reported by forces included kidnapping, robbery, assault, and aggravated burglary. There were also reports of exploited victims being forced to strip and then being scalded with boiling water.

5.3 The use of acid or ammonia was noted in the 2016 NCA County Lines report as a potential emerging trend. This year, 25% of forces (11) reported evidence of possession or use of acid, corrosives, noxious substances in relation to vitriolage (acid throwing attacks), with one force reporting potential evidence. About half of the cases referred to ammonia rather than acid as the substance used.

'Over 50% of the acid attacks could be attributed to county lines activity. Nearly 70% of these acid attacks also involved other forms of violence ie GBH, stabbing etc.' NPCC force.

5.4 42% of forces (18) mentioned homicide in their returns. These relate to a total of 19 separate deaths including two homicides which were mentioned by one force. However, it is often not clear whether these homicides were directly connected to county lines activity. Deaths were referenced by two other forces, although it's not clear if these were killings or not. Our judgement is that there are definite connections to county lines in at least 21% (9) of the cases reported.

5.5 'Taxing' is a newly-reported term which describes the infliction of violence in order to obtain control i.e. the marking or injuring of a gang member who has done wrong, as a show of strength to others. It is thought to be used in a similar way to the

'A male's hand was severed and both legs broken. The victim was male, with intelligence supporting that the incident was a drug taxing. 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.' - NPCC force.

term 'debt bondage' i.e. the creation of a drugs debt, perhaps through fake robbery, which the victim then has to pay off. Evidence of taxing was reported by 35% of forces (15) with a further 5% of forces (2) noting potential evidence.

5.6 5% of forces (2) reported the discovery of numerous knives, generally kitchen knives, being hidden in various places throughout properties being used for supply. They were generally out of plain sight but concealed amongst furniture in different rooms for ease of access if required.

5.7 Although a number of forces have anecdotally reported an increase in violence and knife crime (including the presence of knives and knife wounding), there is little evidence or detail in the returns to confirm either the raw data which reflects such 'increases', or the sufficiently detailed reporting to confirm attribution to county lines activity.

5.8 Numerous incidents of serious violence have been reported and often describe the slashing, stabbing, beating and breaking bones of victims. There are also reports of limbs being severed, skull fractures and attacks by numerous gang members simultaneously. Sexual violence was referenced by 21% of forces (9), often with female drug users being forced into sex to pay off drug debts, or nominals being raped as a form of punishment.

5.9 58% of forces (25) reported county lines related turf wars occurring in the past year. These include violent and destructive conflicts between rival groups/lines competing for market dominance, using violence and intimidation to force rival groups out and impose control. Anecdotal reporting suggests these turf wars are a major cause of the increasing incidents of violence in rural areas. However, more focused and detailed analysis of related incidents would need to be carried out before this could be confirmed.

5.10 Reasons given for the use of violence were diverse but included competition between county lines groups and local dealers, revenge violence (often due to robbery or intimidation of runners) and robberies to enforce/create drug debts. They also included violence due to unpaid drug debts, a general show of strength, to intimidate individuals into working for the line, to obtain control over an address (cuckooing) or to punish unacceptable behaviour e.g. consuming drugs rather than selling them.

5.11 Whilst the statistics highlighted in this report around the use of violence and weapons to facilitate county lines activity are very concerning, it is necessary to build a better understanding around the real causes behind this apparent propensity for violence. More proactive prevention work is required to stop young people becoming involved in this criminality. Conventional judicial outcomes are not only challenging and resource intensive for law enforcement, victims are often not willing to assist in the prosecution through fear of further reprisals.

## **6. Cuckooing**

6.1 In 2017, 77% of forces (33) documented incidents of cuckooing that were associated to county lines activity. Cuckooing clearly remains the dominant method of obtaining access to suitable premises to operate and deal from. Virtually every force that reported the presence of a county line end-point reported cuckooing. The vulnerable adults targeted are predominantly class A drug addicts but also include the elderly, those with mental or physical health impairments, female sex workers and single mothers.

6.2 County lines groups will target new premises by pursuing vulnerable individuals who attend recovery groups, dependency units and areas associated with those experiencing problems. They are seeking to establish relationships with vulnerable individuals for access to their homes. Once they gain control over the victim, whether through drug dependency, debt or as part of their relationship, groups move in. Once this happens the risk of domestic abuse, sexual exploitation and violence increases. In some instances, drug users may appear to be complicit in allowing their home to be used, however the issue of true consent is questionable, as many drugs users will not necessarily see themselves as being vulnerable.

6.3 It is common for county lines networks to have access to several cuckooed addresses at any one time. They will move quickly between vulnerable peoples' homes and will stay for just a few hours, a couple of days or sometimes longer. This helps groups evade detection, especially as intelligence gathered by law enforcement is often unclear and is quickly out of date. Conversely, some forces also mentioned that

individuals from the urban hub appeared to have settled down in the rural marketplace.

6.4 There is an emergence of cuckooed addresses being used by multiple county lines groups simultaneously. This scenario is

'This cuckooing model was initially used by county lines groups originating from London. County line dealing 'franchises' then spread throughout the country, taking the cuckooing model with them. However, due to the success of this method, cuckooing has now been adopted by other drug supply networks.' - NPCC force.

described in a number of returns but there is insufficient detail to confirm how complicit or collaborative groups might be. What is worthy of note is that there were no reports of violence in these cases. County lines run by a mixture of subjects from different urban hubs have also been referenced, although it is not known whether this is an anomaly or an emerging model.

6.5 The victims of cuckooing are most commonly class A drug users, however there have been numerous cases of victims with learning

difficulties/mental health issues and, to a lesser extent, those with physical disabilities. Victims will often also suffer from other forms of addiction i.e. alcohol.

6.6 The use of premises associated to sex workers by county lines groups is reported in 33% of force returns (14). There were also reports of sex workers being used as recruiters for further business, forced prostitution and acting as drug couriers.

'Some police forces have a well-documented success rate of engaging with known vulnerable drug users and carrying out Misuse of Drugs Act warrants at problematic addresses. This persistent approach may have contributed towards the emerging use of alternative addresses i.e. hotels.' - NPCC force.

6.7 23% of forces (10) report county lines groups using other forms of accommodation in the rural marketplace to facilitate their business. This includes the use of serviced apartments, holiday lets, budget hotels and caravan parks. One force reported that as county lines groups have begun to work more remotely, the use of violence has reduced. There was insufficient detail in the return to confirm if this was as a direct result of moving away from cuckooing.

'The group were consuming and selling drugs from within the property and prevented the victim from leaving the address or going to the toilet areas.' - NPCC force.

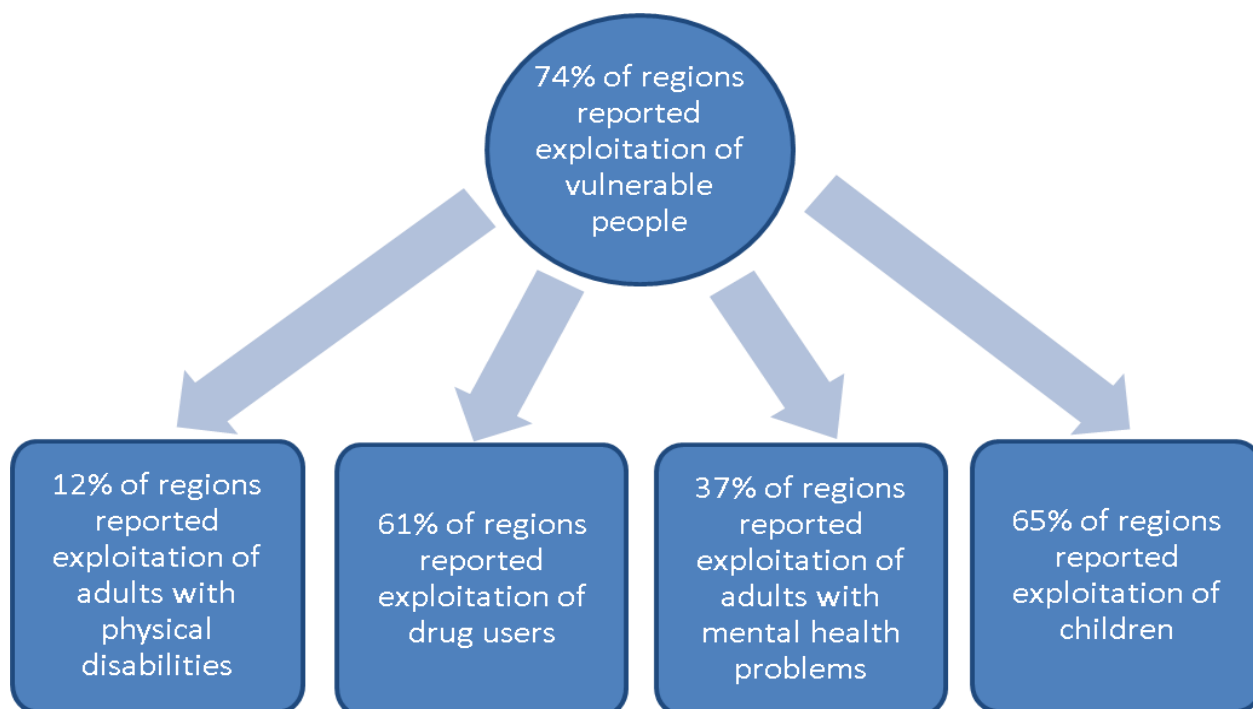
6.8 Of the 33 forces which reported incidents of cuckooing, 21% (7) reported possible instances of imprisonment/modern slavery, where vulnerable people were detained against their will and/or denied access to areas within their home. Some vulnerable adults even take the extreme measure of leaving their own property, making themselves voluntarily homeless, and leaving the network free reign over their accommodation. Although, as one force reported, there is likely to be an element of

forced labour (drug running to pay off debts) or forced imprisonment (cuckooing) in relation to every county line.

## 7. Exploitation of Vulnerable People

7.1 74% of forces (32) noted exploitation of vulnerable people. 37% of forces (16) reported exploitation of persons with mental health issues and 12% of forces (5) reported exploitation of persons with physical health issues. 65% of forces (28) reported that county lines activity was linked to exploitation of children.

Figure 2. Exploitation of people with different vulnerabilities



7.2 In 2017, 58% of forces (25) mentioned vulnerable people dealing drugs as part of county lines enterprises. Vulnerable people are also coerced into running errands on behalf of county lines groups, acting as street dealers or runners, arranging accommodation, hiring cars, booking train tickets etc. One force mentioned that vulnerable individuals were exploited for money laundering purposes, including one person who had £22,000 in drug revenue put through his account. Victims can often become scared and may not wish to continue working for the group but do not want to involve the police for fear of self-incrimination or retribution by the perpetrators. 28% of forces (12) report victims are coerced through debt enforcement/debt bondage.

'Children assessed as vulnerable due to missing episodes do appear to be more regularly linked directly or through association to drug networks operating in the areas they reside.' - NPCC force.

7.3 Methods used to recruit children and vulnerable adults are not fully understood, but it appears many children are lured by the promise of earnings and/or valuable assets (designer clothing/jewellery). One reported method involves a member of the gang attending drug rehabilitation centres to seek out potential drug users who could be utilised by the network as runners or for their home address. Young women are often involved in recruiting other young women and county lines groups are often

deliberately targeting vulnerable people in crisis. There is also intelligence indicating that social media is being used to recruit members into the group. Some forces mentioned a cycle of exploitation in which exploited individuals went on to recruit other vulnerable people to be exploited.

7.4 The use of missing persons (MISPERs) is a commonly reported feature of county lines activity with many being encountered during police stops and warrant searches. Many of those encountered are children, but it is often very difficult to get young missing people to engage with the police or partner agencies. The true correlation between missing persons and county line drug dealing is reported by many forces as an intelligence gap, as it has not yet been fully established or understood.

7.5 The exploitation of vulnerable people is an essential aspect of county lines drugs supply. The actual numbers of victims being exploited is difficult to assess due to a lack of sufficiently detailed intelligence, although we expect it to be significant, given 72% of forces reported exploitation of the vulnerable. Methods of exploitation do not appear to have changed significantly; however, with more groups adopting the county lines model, the risk to these individuals of further and more serious forms of exploitation is high.

7.6 Another factor is that intelligence relating to vulnerable individuals, children and MISPERs is held on a range of systems across a variety of different partner agencies. A more coordinated and collaborative approach is required, where information and intelligence can be shared efficiently and effectively by relevant stakeholders. This will ensure that the appropriate identification and safeguarding of vulnerable individuals can be achieved soon after they are encountered.

## **8. The use of Children**

8.1 65% of forces (28) reported the exploitation of children. This broadly covers all types of exploitation i.e. drug running, child sexual exploitation (CSE) and human trafficking. 42% of forces (18) specifically reported evidence of children 'running' (moving drugs/money) on behalf of drug lines. The youngest reported child was 12 years old. Many forces quoted them being as young as 14, although some younger children (including pre-school) were found residing at addresses believed to have been cuckooed by county lines nominals.

'Vulnerable young people aged between 13 to 18 years are being recruited to be drug runners/dealers. Most of these young people have accrued drug debts and the networks are using fear tactics, threatening them with violence in order to force them into working for the line.' - NPCC force.

8.2 County lines groups tend to use younger members to identify and target other children, either through personal or social media links. They focus on those who are particularly vulnerable or at a crisis point in their lives. They are groomed and enticed by gang members to work within the drugs distribution network. Further infiltration can happen through drug debts which are often inflated or staged in order to coerce young people into further county lines activities. Groups will sometimes threaten family members of new recruits, using violence and intimidation to ensure engagement and

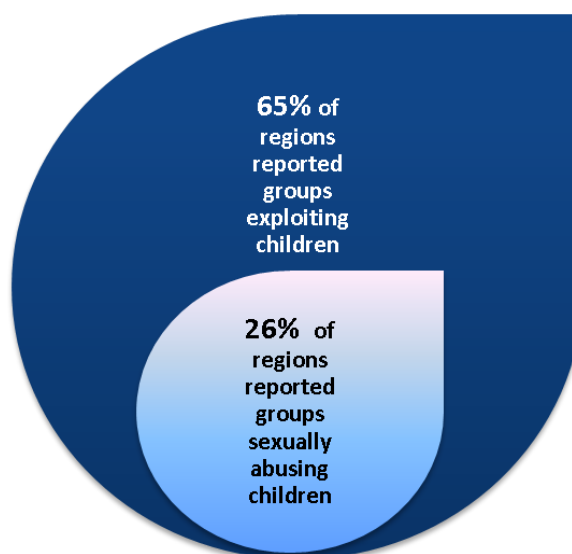
cooperation with the network. Young males are often used as 'watchers,' with some being given small quantities of drugs to deal.

8.3 The majority of children being recruited by county lines networks are 15-17 years old and are male. Anecdotal evidence suggests children are often used for supply and to run drugs/money between the urban hub and rural marketplace. This is because they are less likely to be known to police and more likely to receive lenient sentences if caught.

8.4 A number of the children used are vulnerable, not only because of their age. Many have also been identified as having broader mental health issues, coming from broken homes, experienced chaotic/traumatic lives, or have been reported as missing. They may also be drug users. Almost half the forces mentioned that individuals involved with county lines came from care homes and 15% (3) of those had evidence relating to care homes being actively targeted by county lines nominals for the recruitment of vulnerable individuals.

8.5 Not all forces reported the use of children as part of county lines activity. 5% of forces (2) reported no exploitation of children. One force reported that 1% of OCG associated nominals were under 18, whilst another force reported that there were no obvious signs that children were routinely used by county lines networks. However, 19% of forces (8) reported the exploitation of children as an intelligence gap.

8.6 There are some significant information gaps around the level of exploitation in children. One reason for this is that there is often no consistent or proactive way of identifying if a vulnerable person/child has entered another force or region. Safeguarding opportunities rely on the child being subject to a stop check or being present when warrants or safeguarding visits are conducted, which could be too late to adequately protect the child. Elements of the picture will be held on a range of different partner agencies systems, therefore there is scope for increased intelligence sharing and coordination to improve the collaborative response.



## 9. Sexual Exploitation

9.1 Although class A drugs continue to be the main driver of this criminality, sexual exploitation can be highlighted as a significant risk factor associated to county lines. It is used either as a means of control/exploitation, for the gratification of gang nominals, or even as a commodity to be sold. 35% of forces (15) reported some evidence of sexual exploitation in relation to county lines, and a further 9% of forces (4) had possible evidence that was unconfirmed. 26% of forces (11) reported evidence of child sexual exploitation and a further 7% of forces (3) reported possible child sexual



exploitation. It is unclear exactly how victims begin their association with those who exploit them, but once girls become accessible to gang members the risk of sexual exploitation and trafficking becomes significantly higher.

9.2 Grooming can take place in local communal areas such as parks, where prospective victims are given alcohol and drugs to establish their 'relationship'. Groups then exploit them sexually and coerce them to take and deal drugs. There are also reports of young women being pimped out by their partners to settle drugs debts.

9.3 2017 returns identified the first possible example of the sexual exploitation of a young boy, where a 17 year old runner of a line from Liverpool is suspected to have been sexually abused by the group. The level to which boys are exploited for sexual purposes is unknown, nor is the extent to which it is being considered, i.e. if boys are treated as potential victims and offered an appropriate opportunity to disclose sensitive/personal information.

9.4 Sexual exploitation continues to be a significant risk factor associated to county lines. There are numerous reports of 'girlfriends' being offered to and abused by other gang members for their gratification. One force reported that a county lines group had filmed a female victim being sexually assaulted by multiple male group members. The footage was then used to humiliate the male partner of the victim. Girls who are being exploited to hold and deal drugs are vulnerable to becoming more accessible to gang members wishing to sexually exploit them.

9.5 It is difficult to confirm an accurate threat picture regarding the level of sexual exploitation of victims as part of county lines activity, predominantly due to the lack of intelligence. Victims may initially present as part of the criminal network and may appear to be a potential perpetrator of harm i.e. by carrying a weapon. Therefore they may not always be given the best opportunity to disclose their vulnerability. Also, they may not feel they could be adequately protected from the perpetrators if they did report to police.

9.6 Better education is needed to provide children with an awareness of what grooming is, what it might look like and how they might be at risk. It is important to demystify some of the hype and arm children with the necessary skills to identify what might be happening and how to respond effectively and positively.

## **10. Money**

10.1 58% of forces (25) provided some information on the amount of money that is associated with county lines in their area. However this information was not consistent and many forces indicated that the figures provided were estimates only and that intelligence was generally limited in this area.

10.2 The amount of revenue obtained from a county line will vary significantly depending on the size of the market and the level of competition. However reporting indicated a typical line can make in the region of £3,000 per day with some more prominent lines possibly making in excess of £5,000 per day.

10.3 The accounts into which the criminal cash deposits are made are often held by persons in the originating county line force area and are frequently family members or associates of the group. Proceeds are often cashed out by senior group members in the urban hub, soon after the deposits are made. This distances the key nominals from the money trail and has the additional benefit of runners not needing to carry large amounts of cash whilst travelling, minimising the risk of being robbed, or having the cash seized if identified by police.

10.4 In terms of assessing the value of a county line, one force reported that a 'drug line/customer base' had been sold for £50,000, whilst another indicated a 'cocaine supply line' was purchased for £30,000. There was also a report of a county line network which appeared to be leasing a drug line at a cost of £10,000 a month, promoting a potential revenue stream of around £5,000 per day.

10.5 Specific details regarding the laundering and movement of county lines proceeds remains an intelligence gap for many forces. One force reported a potential emergence around the use of virtual currency cash machines. However this was not corroborated by any other force.

10.6 Much of the reporting regarding the money associated to county lines is inconsistent and/or based on anecdotal reporting. Very little is known about how money is laundered, or what senior county lines members do with the proceeds. Money generally changes hands quickly and is therefore difficult to trace, often being moved on a little and often basis. This restricts the impact potential and likelihood of law enforcement intervention.

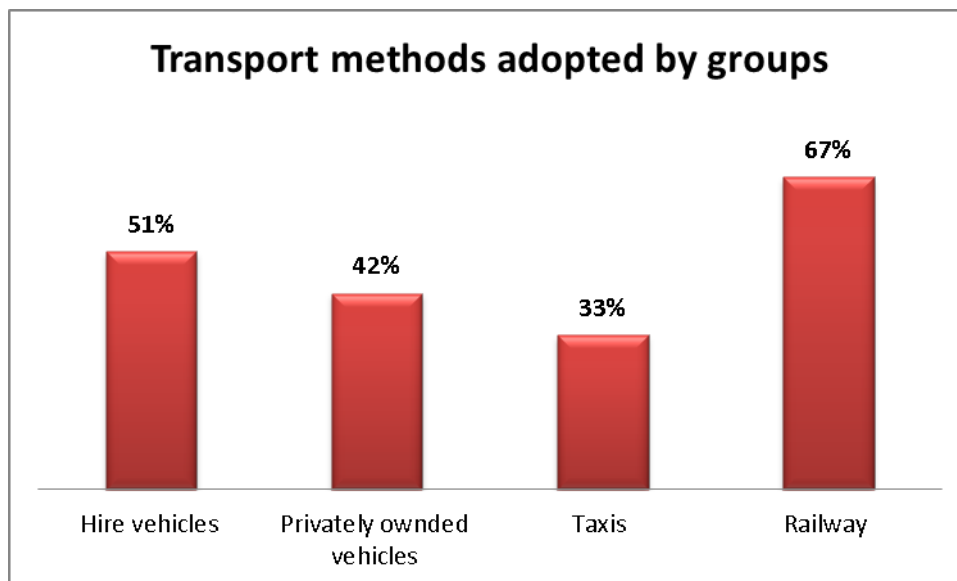
10.7 County lines drug supply generally involves regional (mid-market) to local (retail) supply, at levels which are commonly measured in ounces or grams rather than kilos. The profit margins are such that the cost (price paid) of seizure to county lines groups can be recovered quickly by profits from subsequent supply deals. The groups will also impose a debt associated to the loss of profit (resale value) from the seizure onto the individual who was holding the drugs at that point, which they will be forced to pay or work off over time.

## **11. Transport**

11.1 In terms of the mode of transport being used by county lines groups, 67% of forces (29) reported use of rail, 51% of forces (22) reported use of hire vehicles, 42% (18) reported owned vehicles being used and 33% (14) reported use of taxis. Two forces reported the use of stolen cars and one reported the use of a coach. Four forces also reported that the use of hire cars was increasing. (See figure 3)

11.2 The full extent to which those involved in county lines use the railway is not yet fully understood. British Transport Police (BTP) remain reliant on force and wider stakeholder intelligence and collaboration to contextualise and fully understand railway incidents involving individuals and groups believed to be involved in county lines.

Figure 3. Chart reflecting the extent to which differing methods of transport are used:



11.3 Cars belonging to group members, associates, girlfriends or vulnerable individuals are frequently used. Pool cars registered in fake names or in the details of local residents, who may not be well known to police, are also reported.

11.4 Both the rail and road networks remain components in the facilitation of county lines drug supply, used to transport drugs and money between the urban hub and rural marketplace. Both methods present significant risks due to the associated levels of violence, use of weapons and the exploitation of young and vulnerable people. Challenges include the identification of those travelling, assessing if those encountered are vulnerable, a perpetrator of harm or potentially both, and confirmation of potential links to county lines activity.

11.5 Effective responses often involve the close collaboration between different forces and the effective use of monitoring techniques such as ANPR and CCTV to identify, track and potentially interdict potential county lines suspects.

## 12. Ethnicity

12.1 The information supplied about the nationality/ethnicity of county lines individuals was extremely mixed. In general, most forces who provided information, suggested that county lines nominals' ethnicity (as opposed to cuckoo victims) varied according to their urban origin. London county line nominals were mostly black, whereas nominals from Liverpool and Manchester were mainly white. Asians were mentioned predominantly in relation to lines from Birmingham.

12.2 The most common non-British nationality mentioned was Somali, which was referenced by 33% of forces (14). These were predominantly forces with lines originating in London, but not in all cases. Somalis were also mentioned in relation to lines from Manchester.

12.3 Reports of Western Balkan crime groups being linked to county lines drugs supply were referenced in 9% of force (4) returns but only one group was believed to

meet the essential criteria for a county line, albeit they may only deal in powder cocaine.

12.4 Although the ethnicity of county lines nominals may provide some indication as to the upstream origins of their supply chain, it is important to acknowledge that this may not necessarily be accurate. The changing more diverse nature of drugs supply networks means that it is perhaps more worthwhile to maintain a focus on urban origins, potential gang affiliations and possible collaboration between different groups.

### **13. Challenges**

13.1 One key challenge acknowledged in a number of the returns is the difficulty involved in confirming whether the identified criminality is a county line rather than another form of drug supply. Those encountered often provide false details to officers; some may claim to be acting alone, others fall silent for fear of self-incrimination or reprisal by the county lines group.

13.2 Although the Home Office has a definition for county lines, there appears to be some variation in the application of this definition. This causes a potential blurring of the county lines threat picture and may account for some perceived discrepancy in activity.

13.3 The use of mobile phones, the use of children, the crossing of geographical boundaries to access a marketplace and the supply of class A drugs are all common features of different forms of drug supply methods. However the presence of these features alone is not sufficient to confirm the presence of a county line.

13.4 There needs to be a more consistent approach to capturing and utilising county lines intelligence to ensure it can be accessed by relevant stakeholders in a more efficient and effective way.

13.5 The limitations of this report predominantly relate to data capture and the impact this has on analysis and the resulting picture of threat. Force returns referenced a general lack of capacity/resource to conduct full data collection on county lines given the volume of potential intelligence and challenges around relevant data retrieval i.e. complexity of potential search terms that could be used, and limitations of data storage system to conduct searches.

13.6 Another challenge in assessing the true scale of a county line problem lies in the fact that it can often only be measured by the perceived and actual impact on the community, and resulting policing response. For example, police may be unaware of problems until one or more of the indicators are triggered, which is often sometime after the event has occurred and associated harms are initiated.