

## County Lines

### Introduction

‘County Lines’ are when individuals or gangs use children to transport and sell illegal drugs, primarily from urban areas into market or coastal towns or rural areas to establish new drug markets or take over existing ones. They also use children to transport and hide weapons and to secure dwellings of vulnerable people in the area, so that they can use them as a base from which to sell drugs (‘cuckooing’). County Lines involves [modern slavery and trafficking](#) as well as exploitation as the adults running the network are removed from the frontline activity of dealing and instead use children. Violence and intimidation are a common feature of County Lines. Increases in knife crime and youth violence can often be an indicator of a county line in a local area. A young person’s family could be threatened as a means of propelling them to ‘work’ for the drug network. 88% of police forces report county lines activity in their areas with approximately 1,500 county lines nationally.

County lines commonly involves the illegal distribution and dealing of seriously dangerous drugs from one city/town to another. The most common drugs involved are heroin and cocaine (crack and powder), but also MDMA, cannabis, amphetamines and spice. Gangs recruit and use children and young people to move drugs and money for them. Children as young as 11 years old are recruited, often using social media. They are exploited and forced to carry drugs between locations, usually on trains or coaches. They are also forced to sell drugs to local users.

Exploitation is an integral part of the county lines offending model with children and vulnerable adults exploited to move [and store] drugs and money. Offenders will often use coercion, intimidation, violence (including sexual violence) and weapons to ensure compliance of victims. Children can be targeted and recruited into county lines in a number of locations including schools, further and higher educational institutions, pupil referral units, special educational needs schools, children’s homes and care homes.

Children are often recruited to move drugs and money between locations and are known to be exposed to techniques such as ‘plugging’, where drugs are concealed internally to avoid detection. Children can easily become trapped by this type of exploitation as county lines gangs create drug debts and can threaten serious violence and kidnap towards victims (and their families) if they attempt to leave the county lines network.

One of the ways of identifying potential involvement in county lines are missing episodes (both from home and school), when the victim may have been trafficked for the purpose of transporting drugs and a referral to the National Referral Mechanism should be considered.

If a child is suspected to be at risk of or involved in county lines, a safeguarding referral should be considered alongside consideration of availability of local services/third sector providers who offer support to victims of county lines exploitation. Further information on the signs of a child’s involvement in county lines is available in guidance published by the Home Office.

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

No one really knows how many young people across the country are being forced to take part in county lines, but The Children’s Commissioner estimates there are at least 46,000 children in England who are involved in gang activity. 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’ can often be seen by professionals as criminals.

### **Modern Slavery and the National Referral Mechanism**

Modern slavery encompasses human trafficking and slavery, servitude and forced or compulsory labour. Exploitation can take many forms, including: sexual exploitation, forced labour, slavery, servitude, forced criminality and the removal of organs.

Further information on the signs that someone may be a victim of modern slavery, the support available to victims and how to refer them to the NRM is available in the Modern Slavery Statutory Guidance. Modern slavery: how to identify and support victims - GOV.UK ([www.gov.uk](http://www.gov.uk))

### **Who is vulnerable to county lines exploitation?**

County lines exploitation is widespread, with gangs from big cities including London, Manchester and Liverpool operating throughout England, Wales and Scotland. Gangs are known to target vulnerable children and adults; factors that heighten that vulnerability are:

- having prior experience of neglect, physical and/or sexual abuse
- lack of a safe/stable home environment, now or in the past
- social isolation or social difficulties
- economic vulnerability
- homelessness or insecure accommodation status
- connections with other people involved in gangs
- having a physical or learning disability
- having mental health or substance misuse issues
- being in care (particularly those in residential care and those with interrupted care histories)
- being excluded from mainstream education, in particular attending a Pupil Referral Unit

### **The impact of involvement**

County lines activity and the associated violence, drug dealing and exploitation has a devastating impact on young people, vulnerable adults and local communities. The risk to a child or young person, and their family and friends, as a result of experiencing criminal exploitation can include, but is not limited to:

- physical injuries, including risk of serious violence and death
- emotional and psychological trauma
- sexual violence, including sexual assault, rape, internally inserting drugs, indecent images

- being taken and shared as part of initiation, revenge or punishment
- debt bondage, where a child or young person and their families are “in debt” to the exploiters, which is then used to control the young person
- neglect and the child or young person’s basic needs not being met
- living in unclean, dangerous and/or unhygienic environments
- tiredness and sleep deprivation, where the child or young person is expected to carry out
- criminal activities over long periods and through the night
- poor attendance and/or attainment at school/college

Gangs sometimes use violence to threaten children and young people when recruiting them. Gangs also violently assault children and young people working for them if they find their drugs or money to be missing. Weapons such as firearms, knives, bats, acid are sometimes used to make violent threats.

### **Signs to look out for**

Here are some signs to look out for that can suggest that a child or young person might be involved in county lines activity.

- Are they often going missing from school or their home?
- Are they travelling alone to places far away from home?
- Do they suddenly have lots of money/lots of new clothes/new mobile phones?
- Are they receiving much more calls or texts than usual?
- Are they carrying or selling drugs?
- Are they carrying weapons or know people that have access to weapons?
- Are they in a relationship with or hanging out with someone/people that are older and controlling?
- Are they socially isolated from their peers?
- Do they have unexplained injuries?
- Do they seem very reserved or seem like they have something to hide?
- Do they seem scared?
- Are they self-harming?
- Are they using terms that could suggest involvement with county lines, such as cuckooing or trapping?

The Essex Safeguarding Children Board webpage on criminal exploitation notes: As many people look forward to things ‘going back to normal’, after COVID-19 it is important to recognise that traditional signs of exploitation are now blended with new ones. No longer are we only looking for things such as new trainers, more money, getting taxis everywhere; we need to be aware of signs such as online commodities – receiving game currency and other gifts within games. In today’s world a child could be working for a gang with no need to ever meet anyone or leave the house.

For many young people who have been criminally exploited, there are ‘reachable moments’, circumstances when a child is more likely to take up offers of support. These include being arrested or seriously wounded. Professionals should capitalise on these moments to effectively safeguard the young person.

## Recognise these terms?

Here are some words/terms that are commonly used when describing county lines activity. If you hear someone using these words then they might be involved in or might know of county lines activity.

**Cuckooing** is when drug gangs take over the home of a vulnerable person through violence and intimidation, using it as their base for selling/manufacturing drugs. Signs:

- An increase in people coming and going
- An increase in cars or bikes outside
- Litter outside
- Signs of drugs use
- You haven't seen the person who lives there recently or when you have, they have
- been anxious or distracted.

## Going country

This is the most popular term that describes county lines activity. It can also mean the act of travelling to another city/town to deliver drugs or money.

## Trapping

The act of selling drugs. Trapping can refer to the act of moving drugs from one town to another or the act of selling drugs in one.

## Trap house

A building used as a base from where drugs are sold (or sometimes manufactured). These houses usually are occupied by someone (usually adult drug users but sometimes young people are forced to stay in trap houses) location.

## Trap line

This refers to when someone owns a mobile phone specifically for the purpose of running and selling of drug.

## A useful case study – Ben's story - can be found on the Stop the Traffik website

<https://www.stophetraffik.org/puzzle-piece-case-study-county-lines-bens-story/>

## Why a child or young person may not recognise the abuse or exploitation

It is important to remember that a child or young person might not relate to their experience as being abusive or exploitative:

- They may feel a sense of loyalty and brotherhood to the exploiters and they may feel emotionally fulfilled in a way they haven't before experienced from family or professionals.
- The child or young person may feel that they have gained “friends” or “family” and that these people care for him/her.
- The child or 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 child or young person may feel a sense of status or power that they haven't had before. They may see themselves as an autonomous drug dealer, rather than a victim of exploitation at the bottom of a large organised crime structure.

## **What to do if you are concerned**

Anyone working with a vulnerable child or young person who they think may be at risk of county lines and/or criminal exploitation should follow their local safeguarding guidance and share this information with local authority social care services. If you believe a child or young person is at immediate risk of harm you should contact the police. In a primary school staff might be aware of older siblings being at risk of / involved in county lines, therefore raising the risk for their younger brother or sister, as well as themselves.

**As a member of staff in school, your first step will be to discuss your concerns with your designated safeguarding lead. The DSL has the responsibility for linking in with social services and the police.**

As ever, information may form a small part of a bigger jigsaw and so is relevant to share with police. If you have any information that you think a child or young person is involved with gangs or at risk from criminality this should be shared with the police using the Partner Information Submission Form (available on the EPHA website) Send completed forms to: [IntelligenceAIUinbox@essex.pnn.police.uk](mailto:IntelligenceAIUinbox@essex.pnn.police.uk). If you need assistance with the completion of the form, please contact Essex Police Intelligence unit on 01245 452068.

Social Care or the Police may decide to make a referral to the National Referral Mechanism (NRM), a framework for identifying victims of human trafficking and ensuring they receive appropriate care.

## Additional guidance, information and further reading

- Home Office guidance - February 2020  
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/criminal-exploitation-of-children-and-vulnerable-adults-county-lines>
- Keeping children safe in education –statutory guidance for schools and colleges (September 2023)
- Essex Safeguarding Children Board <https://www.escb.co.uk/working-with-children/child-exploitation/criminal-exploitation/>
- Children and Young People trafficked for the purpose of criminal exploitation in relation to County Lines - A Toolkit for Professionals (The Children’s Society) - includes a range of practical tips and recommendations for professionals when working with children and young people who have been, or are being, criminally exploited.
- SET Procedures (May 2022)
- County lines - protecting vulnerable people from exploitation: Home Office posters
- Children’s Society resources for parents and professionals  
<https://www.childrensociety.org.uk/what-we-do/our-work/tackling-criminalexploitation-and-county-lines/county-lines-resources>
- Puzzle Piece case study – Ben’s story  
<https://www.stophetraffik.org/puzzle-piece-case-study-county-lines-bens-story/>
- Fearless.org <https://www.fearless.org/en/campaigns/county-lines>  
Fearless is the Crimestoppers brand for young people. This website includes excellent educational resources.
- Childline <https://www.childline.org.uk/get-support/>  
<https://www.ecpat.org.uk/national-referral-mechanism>
- Essex Schools Infolink  
[https://schools.essex.gov.uk/pupils/Safeguarding/Child\\_Sexual\\_Exploitations/Pages/Child%20Sexual%20Exploitation%20\(CSE\).aspx](https://schools.essex.gov.uk/pupils/Safeguarding/Child_Sexual_Exploitations/Pages/Child%20Sexual%20Exploitation%20(CSE).aspx)