

# Between The Lines

## Gangs and Exploitation: County Lines

March 2021

The headline statistics could appear to indicate a reduction in county-lines<sup>1</sup>, with fewer drug-related arrests as a proxy<sup>2</sup> - A concerted police response saw arrests up and 102 county lines closed, in September 2020<sup>2a</sup>. However, gang activity has not stopped rather gangs and dealers have changed the ways they work. Child criminal exploitation continues **between the lines**.

1. There is an increasing trend for gangs to target vulnerable children and young people in county-towns, as well as moving young people across county lines.
2. This has been supported by increased use and diversification of social media platforms to groom different types of young people in-county and across county lines.
3. There is a lack of sufficient youth services and support for young people in many of the county towns and rural areas, with a concentration of diversionary projects in the urban cities where gangs operate from.

This report looks at the changing patterns of county lines activity and criminal exploitation of young people through the pandemic, amplified by Covid-19, and a youth work response for long-term recovery and prevention. Complementary to a policing response, it requires a radical rethink for a Youth Service Guarantee, with ring-fenced funding, for young people in cities, county towns and rural areas.

“In-county grooming is a consequence of fluctuating drug prices and expanding networks to county towns and more rural areas. Current practice that simply focuses on ‘county lines’ is flawed because it does not acknowledge that more young people are being exploited on their door steps, whether that is in the cities, towns or rural areas.”

*Solve: The Centre for Youth Violence and Conflict, Craig Pinkney*

“Referrals from social services and schools, or school exclusion levels, have been made less reliable through COVID-19. As recruitment and drug dealing has changed and adapted, including online and in county towns, so must the response. Detached and outreach workers know their area, and the young people in them, and are best placed to identify and respond to the changes in county lines. Open-access youth services also provide safe spaces and early help for young people in their communities, with 85% of a young person’s waking hours across the year spent outside the school-day. Yet in too many areas this universal provision is lacking.”

*National Youth Agency, CEO, Leigh Middleton*

## New recruits

The established county lines have not changed significantly, year on year. Policing has interrupted and closed down some gang activity; but 'county lines' is a well-established business model for drug dealing, and will have its imitators. This has led to independent lines and local dealers being set up to fill the gaps left by police disruption of county lines. Increased risk of arrest, conversely, has led to debt bondage of young people facing a risk of violence or robbery by gangs and dealers, and forced to work on new lines and dangerous encroachment on rival territory, to fill the gaps.

Some county lines have been driven underground, and new recruits groomed in county towns used to avoid police attention. Yet children and young people continue to be identified far away from their homes and carrying large quantities of money or drugs.<sup>3</sup> Young people who were reported missing were often missing for longer, forced to work in the counties for longer and harder to meet the high demand. However, overall, the impact of COVID-19 has been to localise gang activities.

Children from all backgrounds are at risk of being exploited by gangs and county lines networks<sup>4</sup>. There is emerging evidence that due to the identity of the stereotypical victim profile now being widely recognised, there is an increasing risk to young people from more affluent backgrounds, and girls, who are less likely to be picked up by police<sup>5</sup>. The focus on the identification of stereotypical victim profiles is an increasing concern as County Lines supply networks and dealing crews adapt to groom and exploit young people; making offending harder to detect, and increasingly resilient to disruption by law enforcement. As police develop their understanding, county lines actors develop their tactics<sup>6</sup>.

- Dealers are using local young people as runners rather than young people from outside the area.
- There is an increasing risk to young people from more affluent areas or supported family backgrounds, in county towns, who are less likely to be picked up by police.
- There is an increase in exploitation of young women who find it easier to move around during lockdown unchallenged, while young men remain very visible.

### Hidden from view

More young people are now in potentially unsafe environments, groomed online and hidden from view. The return to school for all children, from September 2020, ensured many had contact with their teachers, after a prolonged six month absence. However, others have gone missing, often unknown to other services or where those services are understaffed. Social care staffing levels were reduced and face to face engagement stopped in many places. The number of missing vulnerable children soared as the effectiveness of safeguarding was reduced, including for looked-after children, through reduced contact and staffing under COVID-19.

The more recent regional restrictions and latest national lockdown once again limited the number of children and young people attending schools and colleges, since December 2020. Awareness of the National Referral Mechanism, for people at risk of exploitation, among professionals remains patchy. Too many children are not identified until exploitation is deeply ingrained in their lives.<sup>7</sup> For young women in particular, child sexual exploitation (CSE) is often the prime focus which can mean that questions of criminal exploitation go unnoticed and unsupported.

"[T]here are kids out there without their usual support networks and who are harder to reach... [G]angs are reaching out to them in a way we don't want... What we are doing now is redoubling our efforts around young people... It is about this early intervention – working with education at county, also with teachers' reps, and with the voluntary youth groups."

*Essex Police and Crime Commissioner, Roger Hirst (2020)*

## Young lives

Border controls through COVID-19 and post-Brexit reduces drug-supply. Increased levels of unemployment, especially for young people impacted by the recession, has sustained if not increased demand. This combines to drive up drug prices, debt bondage and levels of exploitation, including in more affluent county towns or rural areas with increasing levels of unemployment. With increased disparities and the widening gap of rich and poor, gangs and dealers offer 'rewards' and a lifestyle for young people, and greater use of social media to influence young people.

The involvement of young people in organised criminal activity often develops over a long period and through the subtle gaining of 'trust' and 'loyalty'. Once a trusting relationship is formed, the victims are required to perform increasing exploitative tasks that embed them further into gang activities, leading them in to 'debt' and further exploitation. This brings more pressure being put on young people to help identify others for grooming.

During lockdown, gang criminal activity is less visible, changing locations from known hotspots and removed from the streets to indoors. Young people still go missing from home, but for shorter periods and are not reported missing, switched instead to work on local drug lines to meet the local demand. Young people, including those in areas of relative affluence are 'fair game' for criminal gangs<sup>8</sup>, groomed or coerced into working for gangs before they recognise the dangers, and often before parents or professionals realise what is happening. The pandemic has seen a drop in referrals to children's services, in spite of increased risks. Around 27,000 children at high risk of gang exploitation have not been identified by formal services, falling through gaps in education and social care; once involved in and exploited by gang activity, it is difficult to reach them<sup>9</sup>.

- The challenges for young people are likely to increase as we emerge from the prolonged lockdown, including low income households, debt, insecure or lack of employment; with increased vulnerabilities to gang related activities.
- Private and encrypted digital spaces make detection and protection difficult, with the young people at risk; and heightened factors of 'risky behaviour' with early initiation when friends engage in criminal activities.
- Children as young as 12 years old are being exploited across county lines; 15-16 years is the most common age range<sup>10</sup>, with anecdotal reports of children as young as 7-8 years exploited<sup>11</sup>. When vulnerable people reach 18, support available to them drops off a "cliff edge" leading to a "lost generation"<sup>12</sup>.

### School-runs

Drug dealing has adapted to avoid public spaces and identification of young people and dealers involved, for example more through collection or delivery and altering dealing hours to blend with the lockdown routines. A change of hours and places for dealing increase the risks of school-run exploitation. Even being absent from school for a short time, such as being missing for part of the school day, can increase the risk of criminal exploitation<sup>13</sup>.

This includes young people from supportive families or more affluent areas, off school<sup>14</sup> and groomed or on the school-run and coerced into drug-dealing. Those young people do not go missing for long hours, returning home at the end of the school day, with their absence from school missed or overlooked. They are not seen to be at risk in the early stages, nor their increased vulnerabilities recognised early on. There needs to be greater levels of awareness and alertness around school attendance and detached or outreach youth work across the school-day.

"[The] gap of youth provision between the school and family is the void that exploiters are filling. Youth diversion services have to be hard wired in. [The] gap between the school gate and the front door is where the exploiters are attractive to youngsters"

*National police lead for modern slavery and human trafficking, Shaun Sawyer (2020)*

## Digitally-savvy

Social media continues to hold great influence over young people and this continues to be capitalised on by exploiters in order to groom them onto county lines. Social networks and followers can be exploited even further, and grooming is not just dictated by locality. The unexpected nature of the connections made between people online can be more difficult to pre-empt and to safeguard against. Even if a young person doesn't own a phone or has little or no data, they will still have social media accounts that they can log into via public Wi-Fi or from friends' phones. New Apps are constantly evolving and updates offered, including privacy features that make it harder for activity to be seen or recovered by parents, professionals and police<sup>15</sup>.

Instant messaging that disappears after periods of time or encryption, means it is difficult to keep track and unexpected associations are being formed between young people, gangs and drug-dealers both locally and across county lines. Lesser known apps are being used by gangs which police are unable to identify or decrypt remotely, or that offer 'secret chat' functions where one account can be used simultaneously across multiple devices.

A new Instagram channel, YourPolice.UK<sup>16</sup>, has been piloted to directly engage with young people; this works in partnership with Barnardo's 'See it, Hear it, Respond' service, for example, to refer young people within a group chat in Instagram, so that they can receive the help and support that they need, where they need and when they need. Meanwhile, where youth work has been digitised through lockdown, online contact has worked well for those whose relationships were already established; however, it is more challenging for work that is starting remotely to reach other young people. Street-based or 'on the road', mobile and outreach youth workers can engage with young people directly, often as the first point of contact, and as the trusted adult or mentor.

- Influencers of status with young people promote a desirable lifestyle, music and artists, including glamorisation of drugs and violence; and young people pre-disposed to social media friends.
- Fake advertising of jobs and opportunities to make quick money are designed to appeal to young people, and are likely to increase with family poverty and under employment.
- Social networks lead to identifying other young people for grooming, with young people and their details are added to through direct or in-direct association, and without consent.

## Vulnerabilities

**Over 2,000 county lines** across the UK (National Crime Agency); 90% of English police forces have seen county lines activity in their area

**27,000 young people are involved in county lines** (Children's Commissioner' report) and 4,000 teenagers in London alone (Children's Society).

**280,000 children are "missing school" in England** (Local Government Association); through lockdown most teenagers lost half a year in school.

**700,000 young people are missing from education**, persistently absent or not in education, employment or training. (Department for Education)

**450,000 young people are exposed to risks** associated with gangs and 300,000 know someone in a gang (Home Office); 60,000 young people identify as a gang member or know a gang member who is a relative. (Children's Commissioner for England)

**1 million young people are from vulnerable families**, of which 450,000 are unknown to formal or statutory services but are likely to be known by youth workers. (National Youth Agency)

**2 million young people have vulnerabilities triggered by COVID-19** and many more with hidden or unforeseen consequences from the pandemic and recession (National Youth Agency)

Other risk factors for county lines include: child neglect and abuse; substance misuses; social isolation; poverty; insecure accommodation; mental health; learning disabilities; looked-after children<sup>17</sup>.

## A policing response

In 2020, Her Majesty's Inspector of Constabulary reported that policing is currently too fragmented to best tackle county lines offending and did not allow for the level of coherence needed. Significantly, where joint working involves the police and others recognising the risks and early warning signs of exploitation, funding for, and availability of, support services varies hugely from area to area<sup>18</sup>.

Cross-border coordination for policing has identified and disrupted supply chains, but this has led to more independent lines being set up, increasing the number of rivalries, and a greater focus on online and in-county grooming of young people. This changed demographic has seen a drop in arrests and prosecutions, rather than a reduction in drug-related activity and exploitation. A change of police tactics following the November 2020 lockdown saw, for example, 30 out of 75 county lines into Norfolk being shut down after the gangs controlling them were traced and arrested in London.

While forces in Merseyside and the West Midlands have also been targeting county lines dealers based in their areas. Gangs operate a "just in time" supply chain, eschewing transporting large amounts of drugs at once; it needs lots more people. Gangs moved away from cuckooing – taking over properties from the vulnerable to use as a base – to cajole and bribe rather than threaten. Norfolk police had reported an increased attempt to recruit and use local children.

The number of potential child victims of criminal exploitation has overtaken adults for the first time driven, in part, by an increase in the identification of county lines.<sup>19</sup> However, this tells just one part of the story. The difficulty with formal data on county lines is that it is often interpreted on the basis of how many young people get found outside each region. Meanwhile, what is considered less thoroughly, or sometimes not at all, is young people who are being exploited on their own doorsteps, and the trend has been increasing. Alongside policing there needs to be a different service response and support. As well as long-established county lines and gangs from London, Merseyside and the West Midlands

- Young people are also being exploited in their local areas, like towns in Hampshire from London gangs and links to Southampton into other neighbouring areas.
- Some cities, like Bristol and Nottingham, both 'import' and 'export' young people to their county neighbours.
- Regions such as Thames Valley have dense urban and rural areas across its three counties; also, including Slough, close to London but with little county lines activity, controlled by established, local crime gangs.

### Violence reduction units (VRUs)

Meaningful youth engagement is included as a funding condition for Violence Reduction Units (VRUs) in 2020/21, with examples of such an approach in London and Greater Manchester. However, additional guidance and support is needed to plan for, invest in and work with youth services.

Youth services must be embedded in a public health approach for county lines, not simply a policing or social care response. There needs to be cross-boundary co-ordination between youth services, through VRUs working with local authorities. This includes building the capacity and up-skilling of youth and community groups, including outreach across county towns and rural areas, working with young people 'where they're at'.

"A strong policing response has led to a crackdown on county lines. However, the wide-scale exploitation of young people by organised gangs has not gone away. Gangs adapt and fill in the gaps. We need to put an end to children being drawn into them in the first place. More is needed to address the root causes, alongside policing, in our schools and mobilising youth work in our communities."

*West Midlands Police and Crime Commissioner, David Jamieson (2021)*

## A youth work response

Youth services re-opened in some areas from July 2020, but by then over one million young people had gone off the radar.<sup>20</sup> Some targeted youth work has been maintained through the regional restrictions and national lockdown for the most vulnerable.<sup>21</sup> Yet the patchwork provision of youth services has left young people vulnerable and prey to gangs, without a safe space in their communities, among friends with trusted adults and trained youth workers. The support young people receive remains inconsistent and often insufficient.

At the same time an up-lift in young people being identified under 'rescue and respond' programmes, returning and supporting exploited young people from county lines.<sup>22</sup> However, too many young people go missing between the lines. There is a lack of early intervention identification and support due to a lack of appropriately skilled frontline practitioners, and qualified youth workers. A policing response alone is not sufficient, and a multi-agency approach is more likely to work with young people known already to formal services. What is missing is a consistent and coherent approach to youth services, in particular prevention, diversion and support for young people at risk.

Specialist services will work with young people at greatest risk or at the point of crisis, for county lines and exploitation, like the rescue and respond programme funded by MOPAC and led by Brent council. Targeted and outreach youth work supports young people for prevention and diversionary activities, more prevalent in urban areas but also as part of youth offending teams (YOTs) or safeguarding partnerships in county towns and rural areas. However, to stay 'one step ahead' as gangs and local dealers adapt their business model, to recruit and exploit other young people, requires the safety-net of open-access youth services.

- Young people need safe spaces in their communities, to gain trust and disclose their problems or ask for help.
- Where there is open-access youth work – in community spaces – supported by detached, street-based youth workers, exploitation will be lower.
- Some VRUs, such as the West Midlands, work closely with community sport providers and the charity Street Games<sup>23</sup>: sport, music and arts can provide a safe space for youth work interventions, without stigma.

### County towns

In county towns, the focus had been on child sexual exploitation and street-gangs. In response to county-lines activities and in-county grooming, a children's safeguarding model has been applied within services for those young people at known risk. This includes work with Youth Offending Teams and local authorities' children's services, such as the Willow Team in Hampshire. Underpinning much of this work is trauma informed practice working with VRUs, policing and health services. Some youth charities, including Red Thread and St Giles Trust, work closely with young people involved, often at the point of crisis or diversion projects for young people identified to be most at risk.

However, early help at statutory levels of risk or court disposal is support that is often late, at the point of crisis. There is also a heavy reliance on referrals of young people from schools, for early help. What is all too often missing is the support from a youth worker, not simply as part of a specialist team of targeted interventions, but for wrap-around support and community-based activities; building long term, trusted relationships with young people, and community resilience to gang activities over time.

"Alongside policing, there is a great deal of local work with youth offending teams and children's services, to support young people most at risk or as victims of exploitation. We are also working with community groups and local youth services, to help build the capacity for a youth work response to local gang activities in the city and county, and moving across county lines."

*Nottinghamshire Violence Reduction Unit, Director, David Wakelin (2021)*

## Conclusion

Open-access provision provides safe spaces and group activities for young people, with a trained youth worker and skilled volunteers. As such, youth services are comprehensive, but it needs a whole system approach for youth work, including:

- Treatment and recovery from drug addiction for young people
- Diversion schemes with schools to help reduce exclusions, and alternative provision (AP)
- Intelligence-led interventions, embedded in violence reduction units (VRUs)
- Community outreach and street based youth work (detached youth work), in priority areas of gang-related activity
- Greater use, up-skilling and equipping of youth workers to maintain contact through social media and online services, including county and rural areas.

NYA therefore supports a call by the Home Affairs select committee for a youth service guarantee and a cross-departmental government strategy on child criminal exploitation<sup>24</sup>. Our recommendations apply a youth work approach to county lines.

### Recommendations

1. A high level government strategy for youth workforce development, to recruit, train and deploy 10,000 full-time equivalents, qualified youth workers alongside targets for 20,000 police officers.
2. Government guidance and a clear plan for detached, outreach and digitised youth work, with ring-fenced funding, in support of vulnerable young people in county towns and rural areas.
3. Violence Reduction Units (VRUs) to embed youth services in a public health approach for county lines, with significant investment in training youth workers, including safeguarding.
4. Cross-boundary co-ordination between youth services, not simply a policing or social care response, building the capacity of youth and community groups for in-county support.

"Gangs working across county lines and local drug dealing bring misery to communities and prey on vulnerable young people. It has never been more important for the police to build trust and confidence between young people and the police.

Policing must be able to identify and respond empathetically to those vulnerabilities. While some young people are nurtured into adulthood, others are struggling with past trauma, everyday poverty, and discrimination. It is essential for policing to work in partnership with schools and colleges, youth and family support services."

*Chief Constable Jo Shiner, National Police Chief's Council  
Lead for the policing of children and young people (2021)*

"Criminal gangs are constantly adapting to changing circumstances using sophisticated methods to target, groom and coerce children. That's why a public health approach to identify those young people at risk and protect them to prevent harm is so important.

We need strong national leadership, backed up by strong and effective local partnership working across policing, violence reduction units, public health and children's services. Investment is needed in high quality support from youth workers able to work with children at risk in their communities, and additional support around schools where many children already have links."

*Anne Longfield, Children's Commissioner for England (2021)*

---

## References

<sup>1</sup> Home Office: Serious Violence Strategy, 2018:

County lines: “a term used to describe gangs and organised criminal networks involved in exporting illegal drugs into one or more importing areas [within the UK], using dedicated mobile phone lines or other form of “deal line”. They are likely to exploit children and vulnerable adults to move [and store] the drugs and money and they will often use coercion, intimidation, violence (including sexual violence) and weapons”

<sup>2</sup> NYA: Hidden In Plain Sight – gangs and exploitation; May, 2020

<sup>2a</sup> National County Lines Coordination Centre (NCLCC)

<sup>3</sup> University of Nottingham, Rights Lab: ‘The impact of Covid-19 on UK organised crime’; interim findings, November 2020

<sup>4</sup> Joint report, Ofsted, the Care Quality Commission, Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services and Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Probation; Protecting children from criminal exploitation, human trafficking and modern slavery: an addendum, November 2018

<sup>5</sup> University of Nottingham, Rights Lab: ‘The impact of Covid-19 on UK organised crime’; interim findings, November 2020

<sup>6</sup> Ibid: Rights Lab, Dr Ben Brewster; **Katie Andrews**, University of Nottingham

<sup>7</sup> Children’s Society, September 2020

<sup>8</sup> Ofsted: Amanda Spielman, Chief Inspector, speech in response to joint inspectorate report, ‘Protecting children from criminal exploitation’, November 2018

<sup>9</sup> Children’s Commissioner for England: Still not safe; public health response to youth violence, February 2021

<sup>10</sup> Home Office: County lines: criminal exploitation of children and vulnerable adults; 2020a

<sup>11</sup> Children’s Society: Counting Lives, 2019

<sup>12</sup> Police and National Crime Agency: Both sides of the coin, 2020; a response to vulnerable people in ‘county lines’ drug offending

<sup>13</sup> Joint report, Ofsted, et al; Protecting children from criminal exploitation, human trafficking and modern slavery: an addendum, November 2018

<sup>14</sup> Ofsted: Education and childcare during coronavirus, December 2020

“[A] significant proportion of the children who have come off school rolls are already known to one or more external children’s services – because they have special needs, previous attendance issues or other interventions in their lives.”

<sup>15</sup> MOPAC: Rescue and Response County Lines Project, strategic assessment, September 2020

<sup>16</sup> National Police Chiefs’ Council: YourPolice.UK, Instagram channel, 2020

Pilot cohort of approximately 14,800 13-17 year olds and reach of around 160,000 young people per post, group chats and referrals to support services; issues include drugs, weapons and exploitation beyond the national vulnerability and crime statistics, to support young people in a digital space.

<sup>17</sup> Home Office: County lines: criminal exploitation of children and vulnerable adults; 2020a

<sup>18</sup> Police and National Crime Agency: Both sides of the coin, 2020

<sup>19</sup> Home Office: National Referral Mechanism, Modern Slavery, September 2020

<sup>20</sup> NYA: A youth work response to COVID-19, July 2020;

<sup>21</sup> NYA: COVID-19 guidance: ‘Managing youth sector activities and spaces during COVID-19’, 2020

<sup>22</sup> MOPAC: Rescue and Response County Lines Project, strategic assessment, September 2020

<sup>23</sup> Street Games: Safer Together Through Sport, and Sport and Serious Violence Prevention Programme, 2019-20

<sup>24</sup> Police and National Crime Agency: Both sides of the coin, 2020:

[The lack of a statutory definition of child criminal exploitation] can lead to public services making different decisions about the levels of risk surrounding an exploited child, or how much support the child needs.