

COUNTY LINES and CUCKOOING

County lines is the organised criminal distribution of drugs from the big cities into smaller towns and rural areas using children and vulnerable people. The term "county lines" has a likely origin due to simply meaning one telephone line in use to order illegal drugs, and shared often using social media, business cards, or even printed on the sides of giveaway cigarette lighters.

Although cannabis is occasionally linked to the county lines organisations, it is harder drugs that provide the focus: heroin, cocaine, and amphetamines. The county lines gangs use standard business techniques to develop their trade. In a new area, they need to offer discounts, a consistent quality product, and make sure it's reliably delivered. The main county line gangs operate from London and Liverpool, but other groups work out of Reading, Birmingham, and Manchester.

People from the cities who are not known by police in the quieter areas and can operate more easily.

The influence of county lines is nationwide. Metropolitan Police have found gang members from Islington in 14 different police areas. People from London, Liverpool have been arrested in Cumbria, Somerset and Devon.

Street gangs managed by elders and ultimately the shadowy organised crime gangs are the hub of county line activity. The further away from the street, the less likely are arrests or attention from the police. Dealers from cities involved come to the country, to distribute and deliver the drugs. The Dealer will identify and groom younger boys, sometimes as young as 10 years old; and there are always others who want to be part of the gang and its allure of ready cash, clothes, cars, and respect.

Girlfriends are pulled into the gang, and are often subject to a high level of sexual exploitation.

Others close to the gang members, their families, friends, and neighbours - reluctant affiliates - are drawn into the gang's sphere of influence too.

The boys, typically 15 and 16, but sometimes younger, travel by coach, train, and taxi. With only a burner', or disposable phone, often stolen, and a stash of drugs.

For the gang's security, each runner only knows one other phone number along the delivery chain.

Any lost drugs must be paid for, one way or another. Of course, the drug runner needs a place to stay. And to do this, the gang will take over the home of a vulnerable person, often after following them home. This is known as "cuckooing". Once in the property, drugs and weapons can be stored there along with a possible venue for dealing drugs and the sexual exploitation of girls and young women.

The vulnerable people whose homes have been taken over in this way are kept compliant by intimidation, violence, and threats that now they are involved, they could be jailed too. The impact on local communities cannot be underestimated. Debt bondage further threatens the vulnerable person and keeps them from reporting the intruders. The vulnerable person is told that drugs or guns are missing, and that they have to pay for them. Of course, they can't, so they have to pay off the debt in various other ways.

Children most at risk are those with chaotic backgrounds, maybe some previous offending, poor school attenders, and often children who are looked after. Signs that should prompt people to consider a young person's involvement in county lines include: being found in distant areas; unexplained new clothes, money, or phones; being associated with older people; and a significant change in behaviour or mental state.

Documents that provide further information and guidance include a detailed briefing document from the National Crime Agency, and a quicker read from the Home Office, the County Lines Guidance, published in July 2017.

The Home Office document has an easy to read style, and includes several case studies. This one from Suffolk Police, a 16 year old boy was arrested for a failure to appear in court. Once in custody, severe burns were found over his stomach area, probably caused by a hot liquid, but the use of household acids are also a particularly prevalent tool of violence and intimidation, which is proving hard to legislate against.

In this second case study, the girl found in Wales, forced there from London, had been a victim of sexual violence in order to pay off her debt through sexual exploitation. The home office guidance contains a particularly useful flow chart to help practitioners understand what steps they should take once they're concerned about someone's potential or actual involvement in county lines.

Further Reading

[Criminal exploitation of children and vulnerable adults: county lines \(Home Office, 2017\)](#)
[County Lines Gangs Violence, Exploitation and Drug Supply \(National Crime Agency,](#)