

Protecting children from county lines

What is county lines?

County lines is a form of criminal exploitation where urban gangs persuade, coerce or force children and young people to store drugs and money and/or transport them to suburban areas, market towns and coastal towns (Home Office, 2018). It can happen in any part of the UK and is against the law and a form of child abuse.

Children and young people may be criminally exploited in multiple ways. Other forms of criminal exploitation include child sexual exploitation, trafficking, gang and knife crime.

County lines gangs are highly organised criminal networks that use sophisticated, frequently evolving techniques to groom young people and evade capture by the police.

Perpetrators use children and young people to maximise profits and distance themselves from the criminal act of physically dealing drugs (National Crime agency, 2019). Young people do the majority of the work and take the most risk.

Dedicated mobile phone lines or “deal lines” are used to help facilitate county lines drug deals. Phones are usually cheap, disposable and old fashioned, because they are changed frequently to avoid detection by the police.

Gangs use the phones to receive orders and contact young people to instruct them where to deliver drugs. This may be to a local dealer or drug user, or a dealer or drug user in another county.

Phrases that young people may use to refer to county lines include:

- ‘running a line’
- ‘going OT/out there’
- ‘going country’
- ‘going cunch’.

These all refer to going out of town to deliver drugs or money

We've put together some information to help anyone who works or volunteers with children and young people to recognise the signs that a child might be being exploited by a county lines gang and understand what action to take to help keep children safe.

This includes:

- the risks associated with county lines
- recognising and responding to concerns about county lines
- how professionals can work to prevent county lines
- a summary of the relevant legislation and guidance.

Risks

County lines is a cross-cutting issue that often overlaps with other forms of abuse and criminal exploitation. It can lead to serious physical and emotional harm to young people (Home Office, 2020a).

Criminalisation

If adults who work with children don't understand that county lines is a form of abuse, they may see children involved in county lines activity as criminals rather than as victims of criminal exploitation (Children's Society, 2019).

This can lead to children not getting the safeguarding support and protection they need.

Drugs

Perpetrators may use drugs and alcohol to entice young people into the gang lifestyle.

In some cases gangs trick young people into incurring drug debts that they then have to pay off through county lines activity. This is often referred to as 'debt bondage'.

Physical violence

There is a strong link between county lines activity and:

- serious violence such as knife and gun crime
- the use of substances such as acid as a weapon
- homicide

(Home Office, 2018).

Conflict between rival gangs that are in dispute over who controls an area can lead to serious injury or death for young people who get caught in the wrong place.

The fear of serious physical violence as revenge for disrespecting, 'snitching' or 'grassing' is one of the things that prevents young people from leaving gangs or seeking help from the police and other agencies.

Sexual abuse and exploitation

As well as being used to transport drugs, county lines gangs may sexually abuse and exploit children of any gender (National Crime Agency, 2019).

This can happen through:

- young people being forced into sexual activity with gang members or for the gang's financial gain
- vulnerable children being made to work off drug debts through sexual exploitation as 'payment' (this might happen after the child has been coerced into becoming dependent on drugs by the gang)
- children being groomed into what they believe is a romantic relationship with a gang member which then leads to exploitation

(National Crime Agency, 2019).

Some children are forced to transport drugs in ways that are invasive and harmful to their bodies. Young people may be forced to swallow bags of drugs to transport them, which could potentially be life threatening.

The practice of 'plugging' is also common, whereby drugs are inserted into a child's rectum or vagina. This is a form of sexual abuse and in some cases it can cause a child's death (Ofsted et al, 2018).

Trafficking and missing children

Young people can be trafficked to locations far away from where they live for long periods of time by a county lines gang. They may end up staying in unsuitable accommodation in an area that is unknown to them. This might include short term holiday lets or budget hotels.

Cuckooing

Cuckooing happens when a county lines gang takes over the home of a vulnerable adult by coercion or force, and use it as a base to deal drugs from. The vulnerable adult may have issues with substance misuse or mental health problems, be elderly or disabled or be in debt to the gang. These factors can make it easier for the gang to exploit and control them.

Children can be forced or coerced to stay at cuckooed addresses for long periods of time to deal drugs.

A cuckooed address is sometimes referred to as a 'bando' or a 'spot' by county lines gangs (Thurrock Council, 2020).

Financial exploitation and abuse

Gangs are known to launder money from drug sales through children's bank accounts, either by using an existing account or forcing or persuading the child to open a new one (Children's Society, 2019).

Recognising

Grooming

The grooming process involves the gang:

- seeking out a child to exploit
- observing the child for vulnerabilities
- finding out what the child's needs and wants are
- manipulating the child into believing that being in the gang can fulfil these needs.

Once they have identified a child, the gang will make some form of contact and the grooming process will begin. This could be in person or via mobile phone. Social media profiles may also be used to glamourise gang life and entice young people.

Some children are groomed through family members, for instance if they have a sibling or relative who is already involved with a county lines gang.

County lines gangs offer money and status to attract young people. Children may also be attracted to joining a gang by the prospect of belonging to a 'family' that will protect them if their own family feels unstable or unsafe.

The following have been identified as key places where county lines gangs target and approach vulnerable young people:

- schools and further and higher educational institutions
- special educational needs schools
- places for alternative provision outside of mainstream education
- foster homes
- homeless shelters.

Once a child is part of a county lines gang their loyalty and commitment will be tested. The gang will begin to trap the child by making them feel powerless to leave. This might include threats of violence if they leave, making the child feel like they are betraying their new 'family', or telling the child they will get in trouble if they seek help because they have committed a criminal offence (Children's Society, 2019).

Who is vulnerable to county lines exploitation?

Any child could potentially be at risk of criminal exploitation by a county lines gang.

Factors that make a county lines gang more likely to target, groom and exploit a child include:

- the child having experienced neglect, physical and/or sexual abuse in the past
- social isolation or social difficulties
- poverty
- homelessness or insecure accommodation status
- connections with other people involved in gangs
- having a learning disability
- having mental health problems
- having substance misuse issues
- being in care or having a history of being in care
- being excluded from mainstream education

(Home Office, 2020a).

Permanent exclusion from mainstream education has been identified as a critical event that can lead to young people becoming vulnerable to criminal exploitation (Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel, 2020).

County lines gangs can take advantage of the lack of structure, loss of a sense of belonging and feeling of rejection that exclusion can elicit in a young person.

The average age of young people who are exploited through county lines activity is 15-16 years old, but children as young as 12 have also been reported to have been involved (Home Office, 2020a).

Signs that a young person may be involved in criminal exploitation

The following signs may indicate that a child is being exploited by a county lines gang:

- frequently going missing from school, home or care
- travelling to locations, or being found in areas they have no obvious connections with, including seaside or market towns
- unwillingness to explain their whereabouts
- acquiring money, clothes, accessories or mobile phones which they seem unable to account for
- receiving excessive texts or phone calls at all hours of the day
- having multiple mobile phone handsets or sim cards
- withdrawing or having sudden changes in personality, behaviour or the language they use
- having relationships with controlling or older individuals and groups
- unexplained injuries
- carrying weapons
- significant decline in school results or performance
- being isolated from peers or social networks
- associating with or being interested in gang culture
- self-harming or having significant changes in mental health

(Ministry of Justice, 2019)

Responding to concerns about county lines exploitation

If you're worried that a child or young person might be or is at risk of being exploited by a county lines gang, you must share your concerns.

Reporting

If you think a child is in immediate danger, contact the police on **999**. If you're worried about a child but they are not in immediate danger, you should share your concerns.

- **Follow your organisational child protection**
- **Contact the NSPCC Helpline** on [0808 800 5000](tel:08088005000) or by emailing help@nspcc.org.uk. Our trained professionals will talk through your concerns with you and give you expert advice.
- **Contact the local child protection services.** Their contact details can be found on the website for the relevant local authority. The local authority the child comes from is responsible for the child's welfare. But it is also good practice to contact the local authority in the area the child is found, as they may need to be a part of the multi-agency response and there may be other children or vulnerable adults at risk.
- **Contact the police.**

National referral mechanism (NRM)

As part of county lines, young people are trafficked to different locations.

You should refer children who have been trafficked to the National Referral Mechanism (NRM). Evidence of a referral can be used in a young person's defence in criminal and legal proceedings (Youth Justice Legal Centre, 2018).

Multi-agency working

A multi-agency response is needed to tackle county lines and protect any children involved from further exploitation. This should include participation from local authority children's social care, the local authority community safety team, schools, police and youth offending teams.

The local authority the child comes from (if known) is responsible for the child's welfare (Ministry of Justice, 2019). They may need to liaise with child protection agencies in the area the child was found, in order to keep the child safe.

Collaborative working and information sharing is essential in protecting the welfare of the child.

Across the UK, Independent Child Trafficking Guardians (ICTGs) can act as sources of advice for children without a figure of parental responsibility in the UK who have been victims of trafficking and modern slavery (Home Office, 2020b).

ICTG regional practice co-ordinators take on a more strategic role supporting children who do have a figure of parental responsibility, working with professionals to encourage them to take a co-ordinated and multi-agency approach to child trafficking, modern slavery and county lines (Home Office, 2020b).

Supporting the young person who has been exploited

Adults who work or volunteer with children and young people are in a good position to build trusting relationships with them. This will help young people feel able to discuss issues that are affecting their lives and speak out if they need support about any issue, including county lines (Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel, 2020).

Those who work with children need to be clear that county lines is not a lifestyle choice and that the young person is not to blame for being exploited by a gang.

Young people who are involved with a county lines gang may push back when help is offered. They may not see themselves as being exploited or they may be scared of recriminations if they 'snitch' or 'grass' on gang leaders.

Gangs convince young people that there is no way out for them, in order to trap and control them. This means it's important for adults to reassure young people that there is a way out of gang life and that help is available when they are ready to leave.

Young people may finally reach out for help in the event of a major incident or emergency. This might include a serious injury or the threat of serious injury to themselves or someone they know, or if someone they know was

killed. If professionals do not act quickly and effectively to intervene at this point, the child may be 're-groomed' or pressured back into the gang (Canterbury Community Safety Partnership, 2020).

Childline

If a child or young person needs confidential help and advice about gangs or anything else that's worrying them, you can always direct them to [Childline](#). Calls to 0800 1111 are free and children can also contact Childline online.

[Childline](#) provides information and advice for young people affected by [gang activity](#), [drugs](#) or any other form of abuse.

You can also download or order [Childline posters and wallet cards](#)

Working with parents and carers

Engaging with parents and carers can help protect children and young people who are at risk of criminal exploitation. Parents and carers need support to manage any risk to their child.

It's important for services working with children at risk of county lines to understand what barriers might be in place for parents and carers. These might include fears around:

- having their other children 'taken away' from them
- their child being excluded from school
- criminalising their child
- recriminations from the county lines gang

Legislation and guidance

Statutory guidance across the UK highlights the responsibility of those in the education, community and care sectors to safeguard children from all forms of abuse including county lines and other criminal exploitation.

- [Child protection in England](#)
- [Child protection in Northern Ireland](#)
- [Child protection in Scotland](#)
- [Child protection in Wales](#)

- [See also Key guidance for schools in the UK](#)

County lines may involve child trafficking and modern slavery.

[> Find out more about the legislation relating to child trafficking and modern slavery across the UK](#)

Guidance

The Home Office has provided key guidance for all four UK nations on [how to recognise and respond to concerns about county lines](#) (Home Office, 2020a).

In **England** and **Wales**, the Ministry of Justice has provided [guidance for frontline practitioners](#) on referral pathways for responding to and safeguarding children involved in county lines (Ministry of Justice, 2019).

Public Health England (PHE) has published [guidance on county lines exploitation](#) to help health professionals prevent child exploitation and protect vulnerable children that have been manipulated and coerced into crime (PHE, 2021).

[Practice principles](#), commissioned by the Department for Education (DfE), have been published by The Tackling Child Exploitation (TCE) Support Programme. The principles are for all professionals working with children around effective partnership working when responding to child exploitation and extra-familial harm (TCE Support Programme, 2023).

Further reading

For further reading about county lines, search the [NSPCC Library catalogue](#) using the keywords "county lines" or "criminal exploitation of children".

If you need more specific information, please [contact our Information Service](#).

References

Canterbury Community Safety Partnership (2020) [Protect your child: county lines and drug and alcohol abuse](#). (YouTube video). [Accessed 16/03/2021].

Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel (2020) [It was hard to escape: safeguarding children at risk from criminal exploitation \(PDF\)](#). [London]: Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel.

Children's Society (2019) [Counting lives report: responding to children who are criminally exploited \(PDF\)](#). London: Children's Society.

Home Office (2020a) [Criminal exploitation of children and vulnerable adults: county lines](#). [Accessed 16/03/2021].

Home Office (2020b) [2020 UK annual report on modern slavery](#). [Accessed 16/03/2021].

Home Office (2018) [County lines: criminal exploitation of children and vulnerable adults](#). [Accessed 16/03/2021].

Ministry of Justice (2019) [County lines exploitation: practice guidance for youth offending teams and frontline practitioners](#). [Accessed 16/03/2021].

National Crime Agency (2019) [County lines: drug supply, vulnerability and harm 2018 \(PDF\)](#). London: National Crime Agency.

Ofsted et al (2018) [Protecting children from criminal exploitation, human trafficking and modern slavery: an addendum](#). Manchester: Ofsted.

Public Health England (2021) [County Lines exploitation: applying All Our Health](#). [Accessed 19/03/2021].

Youth Justice Legal Centre (2018) Child criminal exploitation: county lines gangs, child trafficking and modern slavery defences for children. London: Youth Justice Legal Centre.