

Every conversation starts with the child”

County Lines



The Home Office defines 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’.”

Agencies have expanded on this definition. For example, Lambeth Safeguarding Partnership's definition describes 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.

The information in this blog is taken from a piece of work undertaken by Tilia Lenz, who is a lecturer/practitioner consultant, Pan Dorset and Wiltshire social work teaching partnership. Tilia considers 'The challenges of tackling county lines in a rural area', and how her region developed work around county lines and criminal exploitation and shares the issues raised so far. Sara Sherwood (manager of York's exploitation team) has also contributed some really important information about the team and about some emerging trends in York.

My hope is that in sharing this with you, you will be able to understand more about county lines and how we can support young people in York. Whilst York is not necessarily 'rural' it is a city and referrals which include information which suggests that young people are subject to exploitation in York are increasing. In June 2020, we established a separate team in York, designed to work specifically with young people who we considered to be at immediate risk of exploitation.

The Child Exploitation Team is a multi-agency team including Police, CAMHS, Youth Justice, Health and Education partners. The team supports children at risk of all forms of exploitation including sexual and criminal exploitation, trafficking and modern day slavery.

Key areas of work include:

- Holding cases where exploitation is the key concern.
- Providing additional specialist support to children already on Child In Need and Child Protection Plans or CYPIC.
- Carrying out welfare checks and supporting children from other authorities, who arrive in York through County Lines.
- Completing missing interviews and identifying where there is need for further support.

A clear benefit of having created this team is that we have built a much greater understanding about how child criminal exploitation occurs locally. York has traditionally sat between many of the recognised models of criminal exploitation. York is bigger than the rural market towns, which have traditionally been low risk, lucrative import areas for County Lines. But, York is smaller than many export cities, where large organised crime groups recruit and traffic young people across the County Line network.

Over the last 7 months we have seen some concerning trends though:

Localised Recruitment

Criminal Exploitation: Stages of Recruitment
Children At Risk of Exploitation (CARE)

There are a number of different stages that people use when they're trying to exploit you. Knowing what these stages of recruitment are, and what signs to look out for, can help you keep yourself safe from exploitation.

There are four main recruitment stages when somebody is trying to exploit you:

- Targeting stage
- Experience stage
- Hooked stage
- Trapped stage

This booklet gives you more information about each stage of recruitment, and you can find out more by visiting childrensocietyeast.org.uk

If you think you (or someone you know) might be being recruited for exploitation, don't keep quiet. There are plenty of people you can talk to who'll be able to help, including:
ChildLine: 0800 11 11
NSPCC: 0808 800 5000
The Mix: 0808 808 4994
You can call also The Children's Society on 01245 493 311 or visit childrensocietyeast.org.uk

We are seeing localised crime groups, using the same recruitment strategies as their larger counterparts. We have identified young people recruited and exploited by local crime groups, using the Children's Society's, Target, Experience, Hooked, Trapped model of recruitment.

Using the Children's Society's model has allowed us to recognise an emerging pattern that there are certain groups within the city, who are more active in the recruitment of children. It also allows us to recognise where the grooming and recruitment has been more sophisticated. This allows us to clearly identify "how far in" a child is and

understand the kinds of influence they are most vulnerable to. Turning this assessment on its head then means we can identify what interventions may be most effective and work with partners around specifically what each young person needs.

[An Increase in County Lines](#)

Nationally, the COVID pandemic has forced a shift in County Lines operations. Organised Crime Groups are actively looking for new sources of revenue, as they adapt to the impact of COVID on their activity. In York, through November-January we have seen a significant increase in County Lines activity.

Since November, the exploitation team have supported nearly 10 young people, on one particular County Line. These are extremely vulnerable young people arrested in York. They were often carrying thousands of pounds of drugs or cash and involved in violence, with some very concerning weapons.

Working with colleagues from other authorities we have used "critical moments," whilst in custody, to reach out to the young people. We have ensured they are referred to the National Referral Mechanism and recognised as victims by the criminal justice system and have worked with colleagues in other LA's to put strategies in place to disrupt the County Lines activity. Supporting young people to feel safe and supported means we have been able to gather more information to disrupt activities further.

A previous blog on County Lines, brought attention to [research from Crest Advisory Group](#) about an increase in recruitment within import areas, like York. Through the recent County Lines work, we have identified an increased trend toward recruiting and cuckooing vulnerable adults within York. As yet, we have not identified any recruitment of York young people in to these County Lines, but this seems a likely progression from what we are seeing both locally and nationally. So, the exploitation team are now actively identifying any links to families and young people from the intelligence we have and seeking to address exploitation to York young people, before it occurs.

The following is reproduced from 'The challenges of tackling county lines in a rural area
Published in Community Care 26th June 2019.

I clearly remember first becoming aware of the existence and terminology of county lines. I was working as an assessment team manager in a rural county in south-west England in 2014. There appeared to be a new pattern in some of the referrals coming through for young people. I learned the word 'cuckooing' (where drug gangs take over the home of a vulnerable person to use a base in a new area) and increasing numbers of cases mentioned drug running, coercion and sexual exploitation of boys and girls in small rural towns. Schools told us of young people being taken by gang elders into the back of a van, and being sexually and physically abused.

We were alerted to young people carrying class A drugs internally and I remember vividly how worried I was about a 15-year-old boy who had apparently brought crystal meth to sell at school. It turned out to be ground bath crystals but the professional anxieties for all involved with the children in the town grew immensely. The victims were usually young

people were considered 'difficult to engage' and for services it was challenging to overcome those barriers.

Mapping the problem

Over weeks I to mapped on many meters of lining paper, spread across filing cabinets in the office, and invited colleagues from other teams to add their knowledge of connections. This exercise meant SW's could undertake more effective risk assessments, we became aware of hot spots and could narrow it down to individual families.

In some cases, the parents of young people who were at risk or involved in exploitation were vulnerable themselves. Mothers and fathers who had a long-standing drug addiction had been cuckooed and their children were drawn into county lines by the same gangs. We were able to share information with partner agencies in strategy discussions and could look out for connections in new referrals.

Growing awareness

Since those days, there has been growing awareness of criminal exploitation. MASH teams in a number of local authorities undertake this kind of mapping now and new reporting tools like exploitation risk assessment make it easier to ask the right questions.

Professionals now receive training on recognising the signs, and serious case reviews, for example, Newham's 'Chris' ([Serious Case Review – Chris \(newhamscp.org.uk\)](#)). Ofsted and other reports offer recommendations for practice. Media coverage means there's growing understanding in the public too that those involved in drug-related crime might be victims. But understanding of county lines, and training on how to identify those who may be at risk does not give us all the answers to help keep them safe.

For rural areas that have traditionally dealt less with young people involved in gangs (although gangs have long operated in both urban and rural areas – giving a sense of belonging that adolescents in particular crave) the need feels particularly acute.

Rural impact

In a February 2019 report, the Children's Commissioner for England, Anne Longfield, found there was a lack of research into gangs generally, but also that gangs are often seen as an issue for inner cities and not identified and addressed by rural services. This is in part due to the evidence base, or lack of it ([CCO-Gangs.pdf childrenscommissioner.gov.uk](#)). Fraser (2018) has found funding is targeted to groups or localities perceived as 'gang areas' but which are by no means evidenced as such. For rural areas across the UK that subsequently means little or no funding for specialist intervention.

Professional bias that gangs and criminal exploitation are a black youth issue for cities needs to be challenged. A joint targeted area inspection (JTAI) of part of our region (Dorset) in 2018 found the extent of child criminal exploitation and the risks posed by gangs was not well understood outside of the police and made recommendations for better multi-agency working and to combat the problem of cases being closed or stepped down prematurely when the risks were still there.

Constant vigilance

But we need to be constantly vigilant and ensure our approach keeps pace as drug gangs become ever more sophisticated and increase their grip on our communities. The 'market' has changed drastically. There's no need to seek out a dealer anymore – a drug user will get 'special offers' and constant text messages from dealers and runners until they eventually give in and buy. Saying "no" has become harder.

Education, health, police, early help and statutory services are not sufficiently equipped to ensure that vulnerable young people can get out of gangs and stay out. The lure of gangs and risk of relapse is high.

We know that finding time to build trustful and effective relationships is crucial to keeping young people safe but all agencies face high workloads and funding cuts. Who can build these relationships? In rural south-west England, there are no specialist services for these young people; youth services have been significantly reduced and non-statutory interventions are minimal. Some bigger towns like Bournemouth have specialist youth workers but smaller town and villages are struggling to respond. We also rarely hear discussion about what the safeguarding response for vulnerable adults exploited by these gangs should be.

What about vulnerable adults?

It's increasingly clear that agencies need to work together – both within and across county/local authority boundaries – if we want to rise to the challenge that organised crime has set us. We are not currently capturing the scale of the problem and vulnerable children and adults are falling through the net. Gang leaders know where the gaps and boundaries are in services and exploit them, we need to bridge them.

https://www.researchinpractice.org.uk/children/content-pages/podcasts/a-sisters-experience-of-county-lines/?utm_source=Partner+bulletin&utm_campaign=71316990c7-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2020_03_05_09_22_COPY_01&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_f249d121b6-71316990c7-38064857

The above link is for a series of three podcasts that have been produced by Research in Practice and created by a young woman whose brother was exploited through county lines.

I hope that you have found something useful and thought provoking within this blog. If you want to read up on any of the enclosed information I have added the address for you to cut and paste into google, if you have any difficulty please let me know.

What is going well	What is not going well	What would you like to change
Comments		

Dallas

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