

County Lines Drug Supply, Vulnerability and Harm 2018

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Key Judgements

- County lines offenders remain highly adaptable in their operating methods and practices, including in the recruitment and exploitation of vulnerable people. This adaptability, encouraged by the profit offenders can make, drives changes to the threat as offenders seek to minimise the risks they face.
- The county lines criminal business model continues to rely on the targeting of vulnerable individuals to facilitate drug supply at a local level. Any vulnerability is a potential target, resulting in a broad profile of victims of exploitation in county lines offending.
- There is a continued risk of serious injury and loss of life in relation to county lines offending.
- The greatest number of county lines continue to originate from the area covered by the Metropolitan Police Service, followed by the West Midlands and Merseyside force areas. There are currently 23 further force areas reported as exporting forces. More force areas may also serve as exporting locations.

Introduction

1. The county lines offending model involves gangs and organised criminal networks moving drugs into one or more supply areas within the UK and using dedicated mobile phone lines, known as deal lines, to take orders.
2. Although demand for and the supply of drugs underpins county lines offending, exploitation remains integral to the business model. Offenders continue to recruit, transport and exploit vulnerable individuals, including children, to carry out low-level criminal activity essential to their operations.
3. Since the 2017 report, both enhanced data collection as a result of the creation of the National County Lines Coordination Centre (NCLCC) and increased awareness of the links to modern slavery and human trafficking (MSHT) within county lines offending have resulted in improved identification and reporting of the threat. Our understanding remains incomplete, however, with an intelligence gap relating to the number of lines that are active or inactive at one time. We anticipate that increasing compliance with reporting into the NCLCC will help address this gap in the coming year.

Nature and Scale

4. Analysis suggests there are currently over 2,000 individual deal line numbers in the UK, linked to approximately 1,000 branded county lines.¹ These deal lines are controlled by criminal networks based primarily in urban hubs and facilitate the direct purchase of illicit drugs, primarily Class A (crack cocaine and heroin), by drug users in smaller towns and rural areas.
5. Cities, towns and rural areas across the UK are supplied with drugs by multiple county lines. The greatest number of county lines continue to originate from the area covered by the Metropolitan Police Service (approximately 15% of individual deal lines), followed by the West Midlands Police (9%) and Merseyside Police (7%) force areas. There are currently 23 further force areas reported as exporting forces² in relation to Class A drugs. Additional forces may be unaware that county lines are operating and exporting from their area.
6. Males represent 91% of individuals recorded as associated to county lines offending. However, we believe that females may be underrepresented as both offenders and victims of exploitation in this form of criminality. Potential gender bias, through which females may be seen as less likely to engage in criminal behaviour than males, is likely to reduce suspicion by law enforcement and present fewer opportunities for identification of females involved in county lines offending.
7. Exploitation is a key element of the county lines offending model. This is borne out in the data contained in the National Referral Mechanism (NRM), where greater awareness, alongside concerted efforts by law enforcement, government, local authorities and the charity sector has driven up reporting of exploitation within the county lines business model, as well as in cases of child sexual abuse and exploitation.
8. Despite the growing number of related referrals, it's believed that NRM data underestimates the number of victims exploited in county lines cases. Data is presented according to the primary exploitation type recorded, meaning that statistics may not present the full extent of exploitation suffered.

Drugs

9. Heroin and crack cocaine remain the drugs most commonly supplied through county lines. Although other substances such as powder cocaine and cannabis are also supplied by offenders associated to county lines offending, it is likely that the sale of such secondary drugs is undertaken as a supplementary side-line by individual offenders at the supply level.

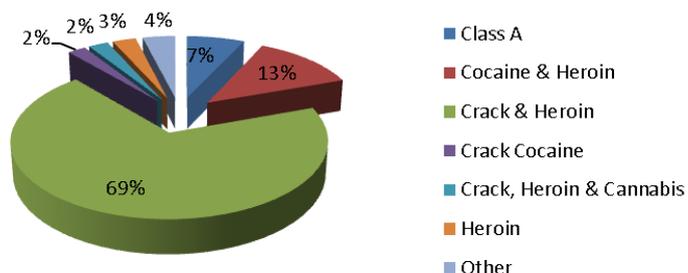


Fig.1 – Drugs supplied by branded lines, NCLCC
December 2018

10. Although heroin remains the most frequently supplied drug, reporting indicates that the use of crack cocaine only is increasing, suggesting a proportional decrease in the cohort of heroin only users.

11. It is likely that the increased use of crack cocaine only is a result of focused marketing activity by county lines offenders encouraging the use of the drug, either on the basis that it is more profitable than heroin, or to increase profit through the overall volume of drugs supplied. It is also

¹ County lines is 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 forms 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. A county line may be associated with a series of unique mobile phone numbers, or "deal lines". The association of multiple mobile phone numbers to a county line allows access to the line by multiple offenders and provides resilience in the event of disruption or removal of an individual mobile phone number.

² An 'exporting force' refers to a police force area where county lines offending originates. Drugs will be held and lines managed in these force areas, before the drugs are transported out of this force area and into an 'importing force' for distribution to customers.

possible that crack cocaine is seen as a more attractive primary drug than heroin amongst the younger users, likely to form the largest cohort of new customers.

12. The emergence of a small number of county lines supplying only crack cocaine may be linked to increased demand for crack cocaine as a primary drug. However, given the potential relevance of factors such as availability, comparative risk and profit margins, this will be monitored and addressed as an intelligence gap.
13. The supply of synthetic cannabinoids has not been identified in county lines offending this year, and the supply of new psychoactive substances (NPS) was referenced only once. Although this could represent a return to the central model of targeted supply to users addicted to Class A substances, it is also possible that police forces may not identify and report activity centred around other drugs as linked to county lines.
14. County lines offenders continue to use mass marketing text messages to advertise the supply and availability of drugs. Offenders offer promotions such as two for one deals, free samples and other marketing initiatives. The offer of free samples in exchange for the contact details of potential customers is also used to expand the customer base within supply areas.
15. The use of social media varies across groups and individuals engaged in county lines offending. Although some offenders use social media both as a means of recruitment and in promoting their identity and brand and intimidating rival offenders, including when moving into new supply areas, others avoid social media in an effort to avoid identification and disruption by law enforcement.

Vulnerabilities and Harm

16. The NCLCC identifies eight main areas of harm, as follows:

- a. Linked to CSAE
- b. Access to firearms
- c. Trafficking (all)
- d. Local juveniles trafficked or criminally exploited
- e. Out of force juveniles trafficked or criminally exploited
- f. Vulnerable adults trafficked or criminally exploited
- g. Cuckooed addresses
- h. Serious physical violence evidenced

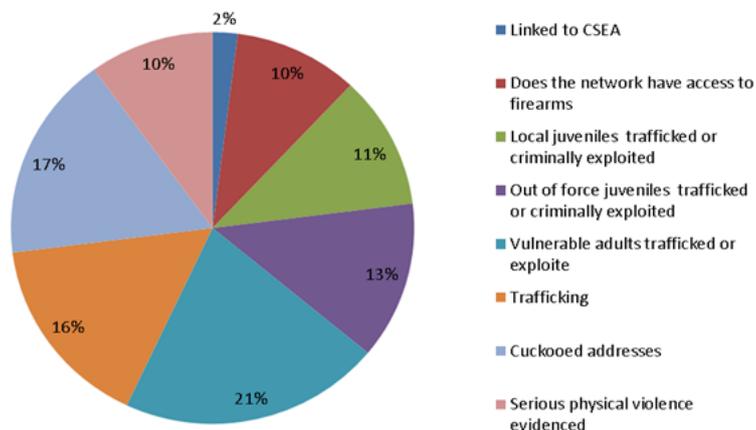


Fig.2 – Harm indicators associated to branded lines, NCLCC December 2018

Vulnerabilities

17. The current county lines criminal business model thrives on the exploitation of vulnerable adults and children to move and deliver drugs. This enables offenders to maximise their profits and reduce the risk of their criminal activity as it distances them from the supply transaction. Any vulnerability is a potential target, resulting in a broad profile of victims of exploitation in county lines offending.
18. Data from 2018 identified younger potential victims than previously identified. Analysis of the NRM highlighted potential victims aged between 11 and 56. However, the majority of referrals related to a narrow band between 15 and 17 years old. Individuals within this age group are

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likely targeted as they provide the level of criminal capability³ required by the offending model, but remain easier to control, exploit and reward than adults.

19. It is probable that adults are underrepresented as potential victims of exploitation in county lines activity, due in part to the requirement for adults to consent to referral to the NRM.⁴ Additionally, it is likely that adults have fewer interactions than children with agencies and organisations able to assist in the identification of victims of exploitation, and that the vulnerabilities associated with the exploitation of adults in county lines offending often create a barrier to victims' engagement with authorities.
20. Offenders establish contact and build relationships with both male and female subjects before exploitation takes place. This means that children may have been approached before the age of 11 in some cases as offenders seek to build a relationship that they can later exploit. As such, adult victims identified within county lines offending may have been recruited and potentially exploited during childhood.
21. Children displaying vulnerabilities such as poverty, family breakdown and intervention by social services, looked after status,⁵ frequent missing episodes, behavioural and developmental disorders and exclusion from mainstream schooling are frequently targeted by county lines offenders. It is likely that children displaying such vulnerabilities are attracted by the sense of belonging, inclusion and structure offered by participation in an offending group.
22. Offenders also target children who have previous involvement in criminality, including other drug offending, and those whose parents are drug users engaged or themselves exploited in county lines criminality.
23. Children from seemingly stable backgrounds are also targeted by offenders, who exploit vulnerabilities such as difficulties with parents and peer groups. Children without a criminal footprint are also targeted in an attempt to reduce attention from law enforcement.
24. The most significant adult vulnerability targeted by offenders is drug addiction. Offenders capitalise on drug users who allow the use of their property, as well as those who introduce new customers to suppliers in exchange for drugs. These drug users may believe the arrangement to be mutually beneficial, but in many cases will be building up a debt to the offending network, which they are expected to pay back through engagement in county lines offending.
25. Adult victims of exploitation within county lines offending often have extensive criminal histories, generally in low-level offending such as shoplifting. These offences are often associated with drug addiction.
26. Mental health conditions, such as depression, anxiety and psychosis, and learning and developmental disorders are often identified in adult victims of exploitation in county lines activity.

Recruitment

27. Offenders are highly adaptable, allowing them to target and exploit any vulnerability that an individual may have. This adaptability drives changes to the threat as offenders seek to mitigate law enforcement intervention.
28. Victims of exploitation in county lines activity are recruited both face-to-face and via social media, with both controlling offenders and those recruited into offending responsible for identifying and recruiting new vulnerable individuals.
29. An emerging trend in recruitment is the targeting of children within importing towns and cities, rather than in the exporting areas, in which offending groups are based.

³ "Criminal capability" refers to the awareness, knowledge and physical capability required to effectively fulfil a criminal role within the offending model.

⁴ Children believed by a first responder to be victims of trafficking or exploitation are automatically referred to the NRM.

⁵ A looked after child is defined in the Children Act 1989 as a child looked after by a local authority if a court has granted a care order to place a child in care, or a council's children's service department has cared for the child for more than 24 hours.

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30. Establishments such as schools, further or higher educational institutions previously attended by offenders, pupil referral units, special educational needs schools, foster homes and homeless shelters are key locations for recruitment. Children who have been excluded from educational establishments are also vulnerable.
31. Offenders both recruit and control victims with limited economic opportunities by offering payments and material possessions that they would be unable to obtain through legal means. This is enhanced by offenders' use of social media, on which images and videos of cash, designer clothing, luxury cars and other high value goods are posted, creating a misconception that involvement in crime is rewarding.
32. In some cases both adults and children recruited into county lines activity are aware of the illegality of their activity, and recognise the associated risks. They are also aware of the law enforcement ramifications if their involvement is identified. However, some individuals misjudge the risk of offending against the perceived rewards, and others are coerced into offending through debt bondage or other forms of control.
33. Offenders use the supply of drugs to recruit vulnerable individuals and create a debt. Adult victims recruited in supply areas have been identified and targeted by offenders through attendance at pharmacies to collect prescriptions, including for methadone.
34. Vulnerable females are targeted by male offenders who create the impression of a romantic relationship through affection and the provision of gifts such as alcohol, cigarettes and drugs, before exploiting the victim in county lines activity. Some female victims recruited in this way are subject to sexual exploitation and may not acknowledge they are victims due to the nature of the grooming by offenders, i.e. they believe they are in a relationship with them.

Control

35. Offenders use a variety and combination of control mechanisms to ensure compliance of victims once they have been recruited.
36. Debt bondage is regularly used by offenders. Debts are inflated through supply of drugs, and in some cases the use of staged robberies against victims, where the offenders then claim to hold the victims responsible.
37. Threats of kidnap and serious violence, including the use of firearms and bladed weapons, are made towards victims and their families, particularly where victims attempt to leave the offending network. We have also seen cases where sexual abuse has been used as a method of control, particularly against female victims.

Exploitation

38. Criminal exploitation is the most common exploitation type within county lines offending. Both males and female minors are recruited to act as runners⁶ within the county lines criminal business model. Runners carry the most risk within the model as a result of transporting large amounts of cash, drugs, and weapons. Both male and female victims are exposed to techniques such as plugging, where drugs are concealed internally for transportation.
39. Children undertake other roles within the county lines model, including cutting and bagging drugs, collecting debts and cuckooing premises. More generally, victims are criminally exploited in roles outside of drug supply, with intelligence indicating vulnerable victims forced to conduct petty crimes, such as shoplifting, as well as other forms of theft. Offenders make use of this exploitation to further increase their criminal profits.
40. Cuckooed addresses have been linked to many county lines, with victims of all ages encountered by law enforcement in such properties. Children recruited in the areas in which offenders are based are forced to move to and live in cuckooed properties in supply areas, often without payment, healthcare or access to food.

⁶ A runner is an individual recruited to move commodities to and from locations.

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41. There has been an increase in the use of short-term lets and guest houses to store drugs and cash, rather than cuckooed properties. Offenders use victims to make bookings for such properties, in order to distance themselves from the criminality.
42. Victims are sometimes subjected to sexual exploitation through forced engagement in sexual activity within criminal networks. This is largely, but not exclusively, restricted to female victims. A minority of female victims may also be sexually exploited for the financial gain of offenders, although this is likely to be on an opportunistic rather than organised basis.
43. County lines offenders have been identified in the direct sexual abuse of vulnerable young people. Adults involved in county lines activity have been identified offering their children to controlling offenders for sexual activity.
44. Offenders have been identified both cuckooing the properties of sex workers and using cuckooed properties to host parties at which vulnerable female minors are encouraged to consume drugs. Vulnerable females provided with drugs and subsequently held in debt bondage by offenders may be sexually exploited within the offending network as a form of "payment".

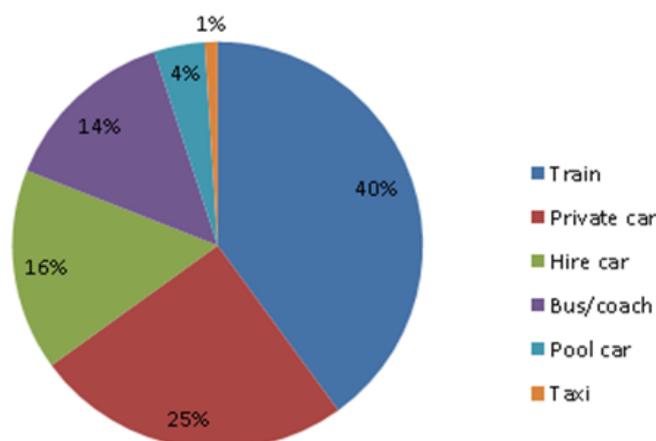
Violence

45. Current reporting constrains our ability to assess the role county lines has played in the increase in serious violence recorded since 2014. Anticipated greater compliance with NCLCC reporting will improve our understanding of links between the two issues.
46. However, the data we have does evidence the continued threat of violence and serious injury, including the loss of life, in relation to county lines offending. Within supply areas, both vulnerable drug users and runners are at the greatest risk of violence.
47. There is also evidence of serious violence as a result of tensions between competing groups engaged in county lines offending. However, there are also reports of tolerance between both competing county lines groups and local offending groups, even within small markets. This may be indicative of sufficient demand across supply markets to sustain rival operations, meaning market saturation would be a key warning indicator prior to an increase in violence.
48. Serious physical violence is evidenced across branded lines. The use of and access to weapons such as bladed weapons, firearms, imitation firearms, stun guns, crossbows, crowbars, axes, hammers, screwdrivers, knuckle dusters, CS sprays and acid continue to be reported as linked to county Lines.
49. There are currently 118 branded lines reported as having links to firearms, primarily originating in large exporting forces such as Merseyside Police, the Metropolitan Police Service and West Midlands Police.
50. The specific use of bladed weapons in relation to county lines offending remains an intelligence gap, although seizures of weapons during the week of intensified activity in October 2018 evidenced that individual offenders and groups continue to have access to a wide range of weapons.

Transport

51. There are two distinct phases to movement in county lines operations: the movement of runners and drugs to areas of operation; and the delivery of drugs and money to customers by runners.
52. Although intelligence gaps remain around the scale, scope and routes used, the rail network remains a key method of transportation, particularly for children exploited in county lines offending. This is most likely to be due in part to the recruitment of minors, who are unable to drive legally.

Fig.3 – Methods of transport associated to branded lines, NCLCC December 2018



53. Rail network hubs such as Birmingham New Street, Clapham Junction, Manchester Piccadilly, St Pancras and Waterloo are key points of access to and exit from the rail network. However, it remains likely that other, less obvious hubs are frequently used in county lines activity. The continued provision to British Transport Police of specific intelligence by local forces would lead to improved understanding of the use of the rail network by both offenders and victims within county lines activity.
54. Between May and August 2018, 35% of suspects in county lines activity encountered on the rail network had links to possession of weapons within the previous six months, and 3% were linked to possession of firearms. This is evidence of the ongoing risk to both British Transport Police and members of the public of use of the rail network by county lines offenders.
55. The national road network also remains key to the transportation of offenders, victims of exploitation, drugs, cash and weapons. Both hire and privately-owned vehicles, including those owned by vulnerable adults exploited in county lines activity, are used in transportation between and within supply areas.
56. An emerging trend has been identified around the use of cloned number plates on private vehicles, presenting challenges around the use of Automatic Number Plate Recognition (ANPR). Offenders may also make use of minors who are not yet qualified to drive, encouraging them to operate vehicles illegally to facilitate the movement and supply of drugs.
57. The extent of the use of taxis, mini cabs and private hire vehicles remains an intelligence gap. An emerging trend around the use of app-based taxi companies to transport both offenders and potential victims of exploitation to supply areas has been identified.

Finances

58. The supply of drugs through the county lines business model is financially motivated. Though they vary between lines, profits remain substantial. Analysis by the NCA indicates that an individual line can make profits in excess of GBP 800,000 per year. Some lines are estimated to generate several thousand pounds profit from a single, daily delivery trip.
59. Costs are driven down by the use of victims of trafficking, with whom offenders do not need to share revenue. Alongside costs, profits will be dependent upon the size of the market the line supplies, as well as levels of competition. The type of drugs provided will also alter the amount of income the OCG can generate.
60. Further work is necessary to refine our understanding of turnovers, profits and movement of illicit funds associated to county lines activity. Although our picture is improving, these remain an intelligence gap. Reporting in line with national intelligence requirements, and via the NCLCC, will ensure we are able to improve our coverage of these issues.

Conclusion

61. The supply of Class A drugs through the county lines business model is a significant, national threat. The model is profitable, enables access to a large marketplace, and is perceived by offenders to offer a degree of safety from detection. The business model is able to thrive as a result of the exploitation of vulnerable adults and children, whilst it also contributes to the issue of serious violence.
62. With the launch of the NCLCC, and better reporting of exploitation and harm through 2018, our understanding of this criminality has improved. Law enforcement activity has resulted in hundreds of arrests in the past year, and collaboration across multiple agencies and police forces has mitigated the threat posed to the public by the groups that orchestrate this crime type.
63. More remains to be done, and law enforcement will work in 2019 to cover intelligence gaps relating to criminal finances and money flows; the role of serious violence in county lines; and the exploitation of vulnerable children in key locations. Through a better understanding of these issues we will be able to deter offending by targeting profits, undermine criminal enterprises by safeguarding the victims prey upon, and reduce the violence offenders use as a means of coercion.

64. The overall response to county lines offending spreads beyond operational activity, and law enforcement will work in close partnership with government, academia, charities and the private sector to ensure that the full range of options are brought to bear against this criminal threat.

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