



WHAT IS 'COUNTY LINES'?

The Home Office's **Criminal Exploitation of children and vulnerable adults: County Lines** defines the activity as 'gangs and organised criminal networks involved in exporting illegal drugs into one or more importing areas within the UK, using dedicated mobile phone *deal lines*'.

The victims of County Lines are made to travel across counties, as well as around their local area, to supply drugs of all sorts. Organised crime groups use coercion, intimidation, violence (including sexual violence) and weapons to achieve their aims.

Tackling County Lines is a national priority. The Government's **National County Lines Coordination Centre** (NCLCC) aims to measure the threat of County Lines, focus resources on the most serious offenders, and work closely with its partners to reduce associated harms.

WHAT EFFECT DOES COUNTY LINES HAVE?

It is estimated that at least 46,000 children in England are involved in organised crime activity. Young people, and vulnerable adults exploited through County Lines should be recognised as victims of criminal exploitation, rather than as criminals themselves.

Gangs deliberately target the vulnerable – the homeless, those living in care homes or trapped in poverty - and groom, threaten or trick them into trafficking drugs. They might also offer something in return for the person's cooperation, but in a way that makes them feel indebted.

SPACE says that the manipulation employed is a form of brainwashing, which leads to a change in the victim's character, leading to criminality, serious violence and extremism, and creating a loyalty to a criminal group rather than their own family.

CRIMES ASSOCIATED WITH COUNTY LINES

Violence: Gangs sometimes use violence to threaten their victims when recruiting them, and to punish them if they find drugs or money to be missing.

Exploitation: County Lines involves gangs forcing children, young people and vulnerable adults to move drugs and money between locations. Sexual abuse and exploitation are also used as a form of control, of both boys and girls.

Debt bondage: Perpetrators will rob their victims they exploit, leading to debt bondage as these individuals struggle to repay the exploiter. This 'debt' is often sold or passed to other gang masters, with dire consequences for the victim and their family.

'Cuckooing': This involves taking over a person's home and using it for the dealing, storage or taking of drugs, sexual exploitation, and financial abuse. If you suspect someone is a victim of 'cuckooing', you should contact CrimeStoppers on 0800 555 111 or use this **anonymous, non-traceable online form**.

SIGNS TO LOOK OUT FOR

There are many indications that someone is being criminally exploited. The individual may be:

- regularly absent from school, or doing badly at school, going missing from home, staying out late, or travelling for unexplained reasons
- spending time with someone older than they are
- displaying new, unexpected behaviour such as anger, aggression, fear or anxiety
- in possession of unexplained money or possessions
- spending more time on social media, or making more calls and sending more texts than usual, possibly on a new phone
- self-harming, taking drugs, abusing alcohol, or suffering unexplained injuries and refusing to seek medical help
- being controlled or instructed by another individual

WHERE TO FIND OUT MORE

Public Health England's **County Lines exploitation: applying All Our Health** provides information about County Lines and Modern Slavery, as well as advice for health and care professionals, and a comprehensive list of resources, further reading and examples of best practice.

The **BBC documentary 'Hidden Girls'** examined the exploitation of teenage girls in gangs, and is available on BBC iPlayer (for a limited period).

The **Children's Society's Counting Lives** report has useful information on dealing with child criminal exploitation. The Society has also published this helpful **Slang Dictionary**, defining some of the words young people use in relation to drugs, crime and violence.

SPACE was set up in 2018 in response to the rise in County Lines. Its **website has a wealth of information**, and a number of links to further information.