

County Lines – what is it? And who is at risk?

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‘County lines’ is a phrase you may have seen used in the media to describe drug-related crimes. Unfortunately, we usually only hear one side of these stories and children may well be presented as criminal drug dealers involved in gangs rather than victims of exploitation, which is what they really are.

It can be difficult for parents to find accurate and reliable information about this crime and how it affects children. Here's what you need to know to support your child.

What does the phrase ‘county lines’ mean?

County lines is a term used for organised illegal drug-dealing networks, usually controlled by a person using a single telephone number or ‘deal line’ that local drug users can call to arrange a delivery.

In 2019 all 43 Police Forces in England and Wales, plus Police Scotland, reported being impacted by county lines for drug dealing, with approximately 1,100 live lines at any one time.

How are children being used in county lines?

Children and young people are recruited as ‘runners’ to transport drugs and money out of their home towns and cities into other places in the UK, so that the criminals behind the drug trafficking are less visible and less likely to be detected. This is criminal exploitation.

Children as young as 11-years-old may be recruited, sometimes through the use of social media. The tactic to entrap children may be as simple as waiting outside a school and using location services on an app to send messages to anyone nearby offering them money. Or children may be recruited in shopping centres with promises to buy them clothes, trainers and other things they want.

Children who are not known to the police are useful to these criminal gangs, who refer to them as 'clean skins'.

Once recruited, children are forced to carry drugs between locations, usually on trains, taxis or coaches. They may also be forced to sell the drugs to local users. When they are away from home, they are often kept in squalid conditions alongside habitual drug users. They rarely have any means of communicating, as the criminals that control them take their phones.

The criminals behind County Lines aren't interested in the impact on their potential victims. They see children only as a commodity useful to their drug network. Once the child has fulfilled their use, they are tossed aside and the traffickers move on to their next victims. The criminal exploitation involved in county lines is often associated with other serious crimes such as sexual exploitation, violence, money laundering and human trafficking. It can potentially affect any child.

Evidence confirms that children from all social backgrounds and areas can be targeted by criminals operating a line. The idea that county lines only involves children from deprived backgrounds or attending alternative educational provision isn't true. More affluent children are also targeted. Recruiters groom children by offering friendship and social status.

Very often, victims don't feel as though they have been groomed, especially when the adult offenders use children to recruit other victims in a process that can feel like genuine friendship. It is this 'carousel of recruitment' we need to prevent. Sadly, there will never be a day when drug dealing is not an issue, but we can try to stop children being used, and stop criminals hiding behind them.

How are we tackling the problem?

In 2018, the National County Lines Coordination Centre was formed in recognition that the threat and harm from County Lines is a national priority that requires a coordinated response from law enforcement.

One of the key objectives is to prevent children and vulnerable adults from being exploited and trafficked around the county, often becoming victims of serious offences.

How parents can help?

Having an awareness of the problem is a positive step. Many parents and carers are unaware of how children are being recruited to County Lines activity. It's really important that parents know this could happen to any child. Talking openly with your child is an important first step to protecting them.

County lines may feel like a daunting topic, but conversations don't need to address this specifically; they could focus on broader themes, such as when strangers online offer money to a child doing for something for them. If stories in the media feel that relevant and appropriate, you could use them to start a conversation.

Knowing the signs of criminal exploitation and County Lines is key. These might be:

- Returning home late, staying out all night or going missing.
- Change of friendship group.
- Being secretive about who they are talking to and where they are going.
- Being found in areas away from home.
- Travel documents, rail tickets, taxi apps on mobile phone.
- Having hotel cards or keys to unknown places.
- Unexplained absences from school, college, training or work.
- New phone that is constantly ringing/receiving messages.
- Increasing drug use, or being found to have large amounts of drugs on them.

- Sometimes finding lubricant and condoms (which may be used for the transportation of the drugs internally, known as 'plugging').
- Unexplained wealth, phone(s), clothes or jewellery.
- Increasingly disruptive or aggressive behaviour.
- Using sexual, drug-related or violent language you wouldn't expect them to know.
- Coming home with injuries or looking particularly dishevelled.

Whatever the situation, your child needs to know that you love them and that they can talk to you about anything. As with any form of abuse, they need to know they won't be blamed.

Taking a loving, generous and accepting approach is the best way to combat the exploitative tactics of County Lines criminals.

If you ever feel as though your child is at immediate risk please call the Police on 999. Alternatively contact your school or local Neighbourhood Policing Team.

For more information and support visit:

Children's Society

<https://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/what-we-do/our-work/tackling-criminal-exploitation-and-county-lines>

Crime Stoppers - Fearless County Lines Campaign

<https://www.fearless.org/en/campaigns/county-lines>

Children's Commissioner Gangs and Exploitation

<https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk>