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Risk control
County Lines
Drug Running



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County Lines Drug Running

Introduction

County lines drug running is a term used to describe situations where criminal gangs establish a drug dealing operation, illegally distributing drugs from one city or region to another. Normally, gangs from 'big cities' seek to expand their operations into smaller towns, often using violence to drive out the smaller town drug dealers to take over the supply in that area.

A common and harrowing feature of county lines drug running operations is the frequent exploitation of children and young people; often the most vulnerable of society being drawn into the gangs' influence to perform the role of drug runner – delivering the drugs to the consumer and receiving payments.

A Whole New Language

There are specific words and terms that are commonly used as part of county lines activity¹. Knowledge and vigilance of these terms could enable the identification of activity happening in your area or a child in your care who may be at risk or involved in county lines gang activity. Some examples of these terms are:

- **Going County** – both the term used to describe county lines activity and for travelling from one area to another to deal drugs
- **Cuckooing** – this is where gangs use violence and intimidation to take over the home of a vulnerable person to use as their drug dealing base.
- **Trapping** – the act of selling drugs
- **Trap Line** – a specific mobile phone used only for running and selling drugs
- **Trap House** – a building used as a base from where drugs are sold or sometimes manufactured. These houses are usually occupied by someone, usually adult drug users. Sometimes young people are forced to stay in the trap house
- **Debt Slavery / Debt Bondage** – a type of financial exploitation. A young person may be forced to work to pay off a debt that they owe or have been deceived into thinking that they owe

Enforcing the Law

The National Crime Agency is clear that tackling county lines drug and the supply gangs responsible for violence, exploitation and abuse of vulnerable adults and children is a priority for them². In cases of child sexual exploitation, children often do not see themselves as victims or even recognise that they are part of criminal activity. They are vulnerable and those in charge of their care need to be able to recognise the signs of county lines activities.

The response to this growing area of criminality has been stepped up with police forces working to identify and flush out gangs through the support of a multi-agency county lines coordination centre. This brings together officers from the National Crime Agency, Police Forces and Regional Organised Crime Units to pull together the national intelligence picture. This means that limited resources can be targeted at the most serious offenders, enabling smoother engagement with partners including health, welfare, local government, and education. Further information can be found on the National Crime Agency website².

Securing Convictions

In May 2019, three drug dealers became the first gang to be convicted under modern slavery laws for their role in using children to traffic drugs in a county lines operation. In this case, 25 children (who ranged in age from 14 to 19) were used by the gang to run drugs from London to Portsmouth. These were vulnerable children from care homes and units for expelled pupils who were exposed to significant abuse from gang leaders and even at the time of trial were too frightened to give evidence.

Deputy Assistant Commissioner Duncan Ball of the Metropolitan Police said: "Use of modern slavery legislation is an important aspect of targeting those criminal networks who exploit vulnerable children and adults to maximise their profits from drug supply. Today's convictions send a clear message that we will use all legislation nationally to suppress county line activity"³.

Multi-Agency Approach

Child criminal exploitation (CCE) is a safeguarding challenge for Local Authorities. It is an emerging area that they are working hard to respond to and address within their own jurisdictions. Poverty plays a role, but so does a lack of incentive for children to better themselves. A lack of safe places for children to socialise where safeguarding leads can be present to spot the signs of grooming and criminality is also a contributing factor.

An effective multi-agency approach is the best way forward. Local Authorities are realigning their exploitation strategies to ensure they capture the wider criminal exploitation issues and ensuring there are effective communication channels between themselves, the police and youth worker teams.

Recognising the Signs

Many professional support services interact with children and young people including youth offending teams, social services, teachers, and counsellors. There are signs to look out for that may indicate if someone engages in county lines activity⁴. These are:

- Often goes missing from school or home
- Travelling alone to places far away from home
- Cash rich without an obvious source of income, lots of new clothes, uses the latest expensive technology
- Receiving a higher volume of calls or text messages than normal
- Carrying or selling drugs
- Carrying weapons or know of people who carry / have access to weapons
- In a relationship with or hanging out with people who are older / controlling
- Unexplained injuries
- Appearing reserved or defensive
- Scared or unusually quiet
- Self-harming

Summary

Effective prevention tools and strong multi-agency relationships are key to tackling county lines activity and protecting our vulnerable young people. Teams are coming together to deliver awareness campaigns up and down the country including at schools and other educational establishments. Those engaging with vulnerable children are being educated on how to recognise the signs of county lines activities and what to do if they suspect there may be criminality or exploitation of those young people they know.

This level of criminality will not disappear overnight; however, better multi-agency co-ordination and co-operation can potentially improve safeguarding, improve intelligence on county lines activities across all agencies over time, and better protect victims.

References

- 1 <https://www.fearless.org/en/campaigns/county-lines>
- 2 <https://www.nationalcrimeagency.gov.uk/what-we-do/crime-threats/drug-trafficking/county-lines>
- 3 <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2019/05/14/first-county-lines-drug-dealing-gang-jailed-using-modern-slavery/>
- 4 <https://www.fearless.org/en/campaigns/county-lines>

Further information

For access to further RMP Resources you may find helpful in reducing your organisation's cost of risk, please access the RMP Resources or RMP Articles pages on our website. To join the debate follow us on our LinkedIn page.

Get in touch

For more information, please contact your broker, RMP risk control consultant or account director.

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