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Risk control
County Lines
Drug Running



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County Lines Drug Running

Introduction

County Lines is where criminal gangs establish a drug dealing operation, illegally distributing drugs from one city/town to another. Normally, gangs from 'big cities' expand their operation to smaller towns, often using violence to drive out the smaller town drug dealers to take over the supply in that area. The drugs most commonly associated with this type of operation are heroin, cocaine, MDMA, cannabis, amphetamines and spice.

A common and harrowing feature of county lines operations is the exploitation of children and young people; often the most vulnerable of society being drawn into the gangs wrath to perform the role of drug runner – collecting the cash from individuals and delivering the drugs.

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 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/intimidation to take over the home of a vulnerable person to use it as their drug dealing base.
- **Trapping** – the act of selling drugs.
- **Trap Line** – a specific mobile phone used only for running and selling drugs through.

Enforcing the Law

The National Crime Agency is clear that tackling county lines 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 don't 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 ever limited resources can be targeted at the most serious offenders and enables smoother engagement with partners including health, welfare, local government and education. Further information can be found on the National Crime Agency website³.

Securing Convictions

In May 2019, three drug dealers became the first gang to be convicted under modern slavery laws for their role in using/abusing children to traffic drugs in a county lines operation. In this particular 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 utilise all legislation nationally to suppress county line activity"⁴.

The Role of the Local Authority

Child criminal exploitation (CCE) is a safeguarding challenge for local authorities to get a grip of. It's an emerging area that they are working hard to respond to and address in their own jurisdictions. Poverty plays a role but equally does a lack of incentive for children to better themselves or for places for them to socialise where safeguarding leads can be present to spot the signs of grooming and criminality.

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.nationalcrimeagency.gov.uk/who-we-are/publications/257-county-lines-drug-supply-vulnerability-and-harm-2018/file>

⁴ <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2019/05/14/first-county-lines-drug-dealing-gang-jailed-using-modern-slavery/>

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 uncomplicated communication channels between themselves, the police and youth worker teams.

Some authorities are targeting their limited financial resources by developing tracking and mapping tools. Lewisham Council has developed a tracker which considers risk factors of young people who may be involved in county lines activity and then places markers on individuals to enable them to map gang network expansion. North East Lincolnshire Council has traced lines activity coming into its area from larger cities such as Liverpool and Manchester and mapped children who have been exploited by criminals⁵.

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 is involved in county lines activity⁶. These are:

- Those often going missing from school or home
- Travelling alone to places far away from home
- Cash rich unexpectedly, lots of new clothes, new mobile phones
- 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 like they have something to hide
- Scared or unusually quiet
- Self-harming

⁵ <https://www.communitycare.co.uk/2018/12/21/werent-set-deal-councils-responded-county-lines/>

⁶ <https://www.fearless.org/en/campaigns/county-lines>

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. The police have identified around 2000 drug supply chains as part of the county lines network which in turn is fuelling other crimes – including gun and knife crime. The £3.6m National Council Lines Coordination Centre aims to improve safeguarding, better protect victims and improve intelligence on county lines across all forces but will it be enough⁷?

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.nationalcrimeagency.gov.uk/who-we-are/publications/257-county-lines-drug-supply-vulnerability-and-harm-2018/file>
- 4 <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2019/05/14/first-county-lines-drug-dealing-gang-jailed-using-modern-slavery/>
- 5 <https://www.communitycare.co.uk/2018/12/21/werent-set-deal-councils-responded-county-lines/>
- 6 <https://www.fearless.org/en/campaigns/county-lines>
- 7 <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2019/jun/05/police-lack-resources-tackle-county-lines-drugs-networks>

⁷ <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2019/jun/05/police-lack-resources-tackle-county-lines-drugs-networks>

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

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