

County Lines

Briefing for ICVs and Scheme Managers

June 2023



What are County Lines?

County lines is a term used for drug distribution networks. It represented a move for organised gangs from highly competitive, violent drug markets in cities, to areas of high demand for drugs with less violence, outside of cities.

The higher-ranking gang members who organise the sales and supply of the drugs remain in the cities, and initially the model was to groom children to go and sell the drugs outside of the cities – in the ‘County’ in smaller cities and towns. Over the past few years, the model has changed in places to grooming local children to the distribution area to sell drugs as part of the ‘line’ as well as utilising children from cities.

Distribution is achieved by having a ‘line’ - the telephone number by which drugs are sold by the children in the out of city areas. Orders tend to come into the higher-ranking members, and they then send the order to the child to distribute via telephone communication.

What is cuckooing?

Cuckooing is the practice of a gang taking over the usually residential premises of someone vulnerable to use as a base for the sales of drugs. Those who are victims of cuckooing are often, but not always, drug users. All are vulnerable. The children who are running the ‘line’ may stay with the vulnerable person in the cuckooed property which presents multiple risks of varying kinds for all in the dwelling. The ‘County Line’ may also operate in a communal space, in social housing for example, or a local park.

What is the scale of County Lines?

The Children’s Society estimate that around 46,000 children in the UK are involved in gangs to some extent (although not all of those will be County Lines children). They state that c4,000 children are being criminally exploited in London alone. 90% of police forces report County Lines activity in their area.

You can read more on County Lines from the Children’s Society [here](#) and from the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) [here](#).

What is the link between Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE) and County Lines?

County Lines is the criminal exploitation of others for the purposes of drug distribution, however [early data reports](#) note that 35% of UK police forces responding having reported that there was evidence of CSE was taking place upon investigating county lines. CSE may be a means of control, of providing the gang members with gratification or in some cases for generating income or favours from another gang.

Who are the children who are involved?

The operations are often run on a local level by a more experienced dealer, often still only in their late teens. The drugs themselves are delivered by younger children and are often

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concealed internally. The younger children undertake most of the delivery function and often take the most risks by not only carrying the drugs and risking arrest, but also health risks that could arise from internally concealing drugs.

Typically, the children who are groomed into County Lines are between 10 and 25, although reports indicate between 14 and 17 is the most common age. Children from the local area can become embroiled in the sale of drugs in this way, as well as children that are sent out from the cities and these children come from a range of backgrounds. One of the key indicators for County Lines is missing children. The affected children vary rarely take the drugs they sell, but often smoke cannabis and drink alcohol.

The impact on the children involved can range from school exclusions, to exposure and becoming desensitised to extreme violence, being sexually trafficked as part of the gang or acceptance into the gang, being in debt to the gangs meaning children feel unable to exit, and lack of trust in services and interventions. There are many more potential impacts on children from being groomed into County Lines activity.

What does this mean for the young person who an ICV might see in custody?

Young people are likely to have been arrested for the possession or supply of drugs and brought into custody. Drugs and money that they have in their possession will be confiscated. Quite often, a young person might then be released, either under investigation, or on bail, or with no further action being taken.

In the event that they have lost drugs and/or money, this could have consequences with the gang on their return to the community and pose a safeguarding issue for them. Debt bondage means the young person is very unlikely to feel that they are able to leave the gang or accept interventions to help them.

Things for ICVs to consider:

- If there is a child in custody, ensure that they have an AA and have been offered a solicitor as you normally would.
- Let the child know that if they initially declined a solicitor, they can change their mind at any time.
- Is the child from the local area? If not, check with the custody staff whether they have an address and have considered that the child might be part of a 'County Lines' network.
- Check in your local suite, do they have a specific service or pre-release risk assessment for children who are thought to be involved in 'County Lines', some suites do.
- If the staff have identified the child as a 'County Lines' child, have the staff made specific arrangements to safeguard the child on their release.
- Record areas of good practice.
- Ensure that if you have a cause for concern in this area, record and report that to your scheme manager too.