



Safeguarding Children from Criminal Exploitation Including 'County Lines'

Criminal exploitation is a form of child abuse where children and young people are manipulated and coerced into criminal behaviour. Sometimes, this can involve the trafficking of them to commit crimes or be sexually exploited. Research by Barnardos has shown that 'vulnerable children and young people are increasingly at risk from interconnected forms of adversity'. Those who are targeted can also be groomed, physically and/or emotionally abused, sexually exploited or trafficked.

Studies show that a child or young person is more at risk of being recruited if:

- they have been excluded from school
- they have special education needs
- there are problems at home like neglect, domestic abuse or sexual abuse
- they have problems with their mental health
- they live in areas known to have active gangs

Some of the dangers of criminal exploitation include:

- being subjected to threats, blackmail and violence
- being exploited and forced to commit crimes
- being arrested for crimes committed by the gang and not the individual member
- not being able to leave or cut off ties with the gang
- having their safety or the safety of friends and family threatened
- risk of physical harm or rape, severe injury or being killed
- risk of emotional abuse
- misusing drugs, alcohol and other substances
- the long-term impact on education and employment options

Those involved with gangs and criminal exploitation need help and support. They might be victims of violence or pressured into doing things such as stealing or carrying drugs or weapons. They might also be abused, exploited and placed in dangerous situations.

County Lines

County Lines is the police term for urban gangs exploiting others into moving drugs from a hub, usually a large city, into other suburban areas, market and coastal towns, using dedicated mobile phone lines or "deal lines". Although the typical age of those involved is 15-16 years, children as young as 12 years old have been exploited into carrying drugs for gangs. This can involve them being trafficked away from their home area, staying in accommodation where they can manufacture and sell drugs.

There is an increasing number of children and young people who are becoming involved in the distribution and supply of drugs in this way.

Centralised groups use them to move drugs around the country whilst collecting the profits to be laundered elsewhere. County Lines, is having a dramatic effect on local communities, introducing serious criminal behaviour, high levels of violence and the exploitation of children, young people and vulnerable adults, who are often drawn into these networks because they are vulnerable. They may be easily coerced through the threat of violence (towards them or other family members) and/or tempted by a lifestyle that involves access to drugs and money. Predominantly, Class A drugs such as heroin, crack cocaine and spice are being moved. Police have highlighted the use of young white children (referred to as 'clean skins') to carry drugs, as they are felt to attract less attention.

Should a mule (a person who carries drugs) or runner (who delivers drugs ordered through a dedicated phone number) use or lose drugs or money, they will be subject to 'taxing'. This is one of the ways senior members of the gang set an example to others, and the Police report numerous incidents of violence which include slashing, stabbing, beating and breaking bones.

In the available literature, there is frequent reference to sexual violence, often with female drug users being forced into prostitution to pay off drug debts or punished by rape.

County Lines reduces the risks for those involved at the top, as there is a nationwide network of groups who change frequently. Local contacts help identify vulnerable people who are coerced or threatened into letting dealers use their accommodation (called cuckooing) as a base. They are often recruited because they are Class A drug addicts and see it as a way of getting free drugs, but they can also be elderly, have physical or mental health issues or be sex workers. Once a network of addresses has been established, the controlling urban group sets up a regular delivery of drugs to supply a growing local demand. When a distribution network is established, the next area is identified, and contacts made. The constant changes of personnel significantly reduce the risk of being detected or individual members collaborating to set up their own network.

If a child has become involved in County Lines, they may exhibit any of the following signs:

- Returning home late, going missing from school or foster home and being found outside of the local area
- Increased drug and/or alcohol use or having large amounts of drugs on them
- Having unexplained amounts of money, clothes or mobile phones
- Being secretive about who they are talking to and where they are going. This can include a high level of texts or phone calls
- Being isolated or withdrawn
- Having relationships with older adults or groups who appear to be very controlling
- Increasingly disruptive or aggressive behaviour
- Committing petty crimes like shop lifting or vandalism
- Using sexual, drug related or violent language or new slang words
- Having hotel cards or keys to an unknown place
- Having unexplained injuries and refusing to seek medical help
- Carrying weapons (most often knives)
- Gang association or isolation from peers or networks
- Self-harming for children who have been in care due to abuse or neglect

If you have any concerns that a child or young person in your care is involved in County Lines, please speak with your Fostering Social Worker or the AFA Designated Lead for Safeguarding immediately.

Information from AFA

AFA has produced a leaflet called 'Your Life, Your Choice!' which is provided to all young people aged 10 and over who are living with AFA Foster Parents. This gives them information with the aim of helping them think about Exploitation, County Lines, and other risks they may come across. This includes other sources of help.

For further information see:

Child line <https://www.childline.org.uk/info-advice/>

CEOPS <https://www.ceop.police.uk/Safety-Centre/How-can-CEOP-help-me-YP/>

National Crime Agency (NCA) <https://www.nationalcrimeagency.gov.uk/what-we-do/crime-threats/drug-trafficking/county-lines>

Crime Stoppers <https://crimestoppers-uk.org/keeping-safe/community-family/county-lines>

Barnardos - <https://www.barnardos.org.uk/what-we-do/protecting-children> including https://www.barnardos.org.uk/sites/default/files/uploads/who-will-notice-who-will-ask_0.pdf

NSPCC- <https://www.nspcc.org.uk/what-is-child-abuse/types-of-abuse/gang-criminal-exploitation/>

County Lines - <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/criminal-exploitation-of-children-and-vulnerable-adults-county-lines>

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

Children's Commissioner <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/?s=county+lines>

Connected Policies or Guidance

Name of Policy / Guidance	Relevant for
Record Keeping and Confidentiality Policy	All staff and Foster Parents
Safeguarding Policy	All staff and Foster Parents
Children Missing from Care	Foster Parents, Fostering Social Workers
Foster Parent's Handbook	Foster Parents, Fostering Social Workers
Staff Handbook	All staff
Safeguarding Children from Trafficking	Foster Parents, Fostering Social Workers
Safeguarding children from Gang Activity	Foster Parents, Fostering Social Workers
Safeguarding children from Child Sexual Exploitation	Foster Parents, Fostering Social Workers
Alcohol, Drugs and Solvents Policy	Foster Parents, Fostering Social Workers

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