

1.0 What is County Lines?

- 1.1 County lines is a term used to describe gangs and organised criminal networks involved in exporting illegal drugs into one or more importing areas within the UK, using dedicated mobile phone lines or other form of “deal line”. They are likely to exploit children and vulnerable adults to move and store the drugs and money and they will often use coercion, intimidation, violence (including sexual violence) and weapons. County lines activity and the associated violence, drug dealing, and exploitation has a devastating impact on young people, vulnerable adults and local communities.
- 1.2 Gangs typically use children and adults at risk of harm to transport and/or deal drugs to customers. These victims are recruited using intimidation, deception, violence, debt bondage or grooming. During this process the ‘victims’ are likely to commit criminal offences.

2.0 Who does it affect?

- 2.1 The term vulnerable adults is used here in the context of ‘vulnerable to harm or abuse’ They do not need to be receiving social care or support to be vulnerable. Some vulnerabilities are outlined in this fact sheet.
- 2.2 County lines exploitation:
 - Can affect any child or young person (male or female) under the age of 18 years;
 - Can affect any vulnerable adult over the age of 18 years;
 - Can still be exploitation even if the activity appears consensual;
 - Can involve force and/or enticement-based methods of compliance and is often accompanied by violence or threats of violence;
 - Can be perpetrated by individuals or groups, males or females, and young people or adults; and
 - Is typified by some form of power imbalance in favour of those perpetrating the exploitation. Whilst age may be the most obvious, this power imbalance can also be due to a range of other factors including gender, cognitive ability, physical strength, status, and access to economic or other resources.
- 2.3 One of the key factors found in most cases of county lines exploitation is the presence of some form of exchange (e.g. carrying drugs in return for something). Where it is the victim who is offered, promised or given something they need or want, the exchange can include both tangible (such as money, drugs or clothes) and intangible rewards (such as status, protection or perceived friendship or affection).
- 2.4 Some of the factors that heighten a person’s vulnerability include:
 - Having prior experience of neglect, physical and/or sexual abuse
 - Lack of a safe/stable home environment, now or in the past (domestic violence or parental substance misuse, mental health issues or criminality, for example).
 - Social isolation or social difficulties
 - Economic vulnerability
 - Homelessness or insecure accommodation status
 - Connections with other people involved in gangs
 - Having a physical or learning disability
 - Having mental health or substance misuse issues;
 - Being in care (particularly those in residential care and those with interrupted care histories)
 - Being excluded from mainstream education, in particular attending a Pupil Referral Unit.



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3.0 What happens?

- 3.1
- Once in debt to a dealer they will be encouraged to sell drugs to pay the debt off
 - The gang will ensure the debt is never fully paid off and the victim can quickly become trapped in a cycle where their only option is to commit further crime
 - The more crime they commit the less likely they are to tell someone what is happening or seek help
 - They will be dispatched to travel to other parts of the country where they are not known to police or social services and can essentially fly under the radar
 - During this time away from home they are highly at risk of coming to further harm at the hands of people they are dealing to or rival local drug dealers
 - Older people may become exploited to also traffic drugs, weapons and cash but additionally their homes might get taken over by gangs needing somewhere to hide drugs or deal from Adults with mental or physical disabilities, adults with addictions or adults who are particularly elderly may experience ‘cuckooing’ where a gang take over their home.
 - Other victims include the relatives of the exploited person who ‘lose’ their loved one to a criminal gang, and the communities where the drug dealing and associated violence is exported to.

4.0 What are the signs in adults?

- 4.1. In adults, signs of ‘cuckooing’ can include: ·
- A loved one or neighbour not being seen for some time;
 - Unknown visitors and vehicles to their house at unusual times;
 - Exchanges of cash or packages outside their home;
 - Open drug use in the street; damage and deterioration to the appearance of their home;
 - A change in their own personality or behaviour and appears nervous, worried or intimidated.

5.0 What should you do?

- 5.1 If you are worried that a person is at immediate risk of harm you should also contact the police: your local safeguarding team or, in the case of a child, your local safeguarding partner (the group of Local Authority, CCG and Police .Refer to Working Together to Safeguard Children 2018 for more information)

6.0 References

- 6.1 Serious Violence Strategy April 2018:
https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/698009/serious-violence-strategy.pdf