



# **APPG on Runaway and Missing Children and Adults**

Briefing note on the event on disrupting  
exploitation of children along ‘county  
lines’

**4<sup>th</sup> December 2017**

## **Definitions:**

**‘County lines’:** County lines or ‘going country’ is a term used to describe groups or gangs using young people or vulnerable adults to transport and sell drugs across county boundaries. The group or gang will establish and operate a telephone number in an area outside of their usual locality, the purpose being, to sell drugs directly to users at street level.

**‘Cuckooing’:** targeting vulnerable adults living in the area and using their homes as a base to sell drugs. This will frequently involve violence, coercion and the offer of drugs or money.

## **Introduction**

Vulnerable children and young people are being exploited and used by organised criminal networks to transport and sell class A drugs. These children and young people are at serious risk of criminalisation, sexual exploitation and exposure to violence.

The All Party Parliamentary Group on Missing and Runaway Children and Adults therefore decided to bring together experts in the field, in an open event, to discuss how these vulnerable young people can be better protected. As well highlighting examples of best practice the aim was to identify gaps in the current response and what needs to change at both the national and local level.

The meeting followed on from a closed round table event that the APPG held earlier in the year. The round table looked at how we could disrupt and prevent county lines activity.

### **The event took place on the 4<sup>th</sup> of December 2017 presentations were given by:**

- Ann Coffey MP – Chair of the APPG
- Will Quince MP – Chair of the APPG on knife crime
- Vince O’Brian – National Crime Agency
- Henry Blake – Film maker
- A parent
- Cllr Joe Calouri – Lead member for children at Islington Council
- Becca Morley – Missing People
- Dean Coady OBE – Pure Solutions
- Jayne Horan – Greater Manchester Police
- Andrew Furphy - Lewisham Police
- Rhiannon Sawyer – The Children’s Society
- Sarah Hegarty – The Children’s Society

This note presents the key issues that were highlighted by the speakers, comments made during discussion periods and outlines possible responses to address these issues and make sure that children and young people who have been criminally exploited in this way get the response that they need.

## 1. Understanding the scale of ‘county line’ activity

Children who have been exploited using the ‘county line’ structure, for example carrying and dealing drugs across different areas, are victims of trafficking. Evidence from The Children’s Society’s practice base report that the current professional responses to young people in these situations tend to take a punitive, criminal justice-based approach, rather than a safeguarding and public health response. This leads to criminal exploitation being consistently unrecognised and misreported.

County lines groups tend to use younger members to identify and target other children, either through personal contacts or social media links. They frequently target young people who are already vulnerable. Many have pre-existing mental health issues, grown up in poverty or in local authority care and may have experienced trauma or neglect. Many have been reported as missing.

There was absolute agreement among the speakers that the numbers of young people and vulnerable adults effected by county lines is rising. Vince O’Brian presented findings from the NCA’s third annual report into county lines. The NCA received evidence from nearly all police forces in England and Wales (41), of that number 38 forces identified county lines in their area, an increase from last year. It is estimated that there are at least 720 lines across England and Wales. The actual number may be considerably higher, as many of these areas are likely to have more than one line.

*“This a national problem. However, there is still no national response.” (Vince O’Brian, NCA)*

Sixty-five percent of forces (28) reported the exploitation of children. Exploitation covers drug running, CSE and human trafficking, 42% (18) of forces directly reported instances of children transporting drugs or money along county lines.

Following the report the NCA acknowledged that:

*“As a result of the 2017 report, the assessment of the NCA, and the work of colleagues, we have learned that although there are some really good examples of responses to county lines, we don’t have a national response at this time. And although this work has not been the highest priority of the NCA, it has become more of a priority this year, because there is a number of areas of exploitation that county lines hits. Being as it may, the NCA will now prioritise county lines and one of the ways we will do that is by starting a national coordination doctrine as a response to county lines. I think what I should say as the state of that coordination is that it will be focused around the serious ones, we are not looking to ensure full team responses or getting a response from the Home Office today. This is about looking at the accusations that can be brought against the gangs behind this.” (Vince O’Brian, NCA)*

Whilst this is a step in the right direction there is a need for the Government to create a national strategy as well as recognising the issue of county line exploitation in a whole host of legislation.

The majority of children being recruited by county lines networks are 15-17 years old and are male. The youngest reported child was 12 years old. However, in 2016 the NCA found that in 50% of responses females were also found to be exploited and groomed by criminal gangs.

Girls who are exploited along county lines are at increased risk of sexual exploitation and trafficking.

Speakers commented that county lines cuts across a range of threats: child sexual exploitation (CSE), modern slavery and human trafficking. It was noted that young people have are being exploited using the 'county lines' model to transport and sell more than just drugs. Weapons, sex and money are also being traded in this way.

However, it was recognised that there is a gap in the data concerning the true levels of exploitation and the use of children.

### **Escalation of violence**

In an analysis of evidence submitted by 41 police forces across England and Wales, The APPG for runaway and missing children and adults found all forces highlighted a significant increase in violent crime connected to county lines. The violence included; murder, rape, stabbings and kidnapping. Moreover, police forces felt that the violence was underreported. Will Quince MP highlighted that county lines activity was bringing new forms of violence to areas. Over the past few years he has seen a significant rise in the levels of violent crime in his constituency.

DCI Andrew Furphy described how involvement in county lines had resulted in the deaths of two young boys in Lewisham. Both deaths were the result injuries sustained during incidents involving knives.

Moreover, The Children Society highlighted that a young person's exposure to violence at home, at school or in the community may increase their vulnerability to becoming a victim of child criminal exploitation.

### **Targeting vulnerable groups**

Certain vulnerabilities may increase the chance that a young person will be exploited by others. Whilst these factors do not mean that a young person will be exploited it is important to recognise the increased vulnerability that some young people face.

There was consensus among speakers that criminal networks were specifically targeting vulnerable young people and adults. These individuals were described as being criminally exploited in a number of ways.

Evidence from the police forces suggests that many criminal networks target children in care and young people in alternative educational settings such as; pupil referral units (PRUs). Young people who have been placed in local authority care outside of borough are particularly vulnerable. Moreover, there was consensus that the issue of 'cuckooing' is much greater than originally thought.

#### *Residential care homes and Pupil referral units (PRUs)*

There was a common theme that young people had been excluded from school prior to involvement in county lines activity and had unsuccessful agency involvement. Evidence submitted by police forces to the APPG emphasised that better awareness raising in schools was needed as well as greater community engagement with the issue.

Dean Codey OBE provided a statement from the pastoral manager at Manchester Secondary PRU:

*'Manchester Secondary Pupil Referral Unit (MSPUR) has a school roll of approximately 400 pupils and has 8 core learning centres which approximately 120 pupils attend. MSPRU commissions additional places from Alternative Providers and places the remaining pupils across 18 additional learning centres. Our roll comprises of pupils who have been permanently excluded, pupils at risk of permanent exclusion who are referred to MSPRU by their home school as an alternative to permanent exclusion and young people who have been moved to Manchester and are considered hard to place in mainstream school (looked after children, young people released from YOIs etc.) Our pupils have complex educational histories and we have a high proportion of pupils on free school meals, looked after children, children on child protection plans, children in need, children with SEND and educational health care plans, children involved with youth justice and children with social, emotional and mental health difficulties and or/diagnoses. Our pupils are therefore highly vulnerable and at risk of becoming involved in exploitative situations including county lines.'*

The NCA found evidence of targeting PRUs and children in care as well as reported instances of young people being coerced into recruiting other young people within alternative educational settings.

A parent of a young person who had been exploited to sell drugs using the county lines model stated her son had become more vulnerable to exploitation after exclusion from secondary school and attending three PRUs.

Dean Coady OBE highlighted that the effect of county lines was far reaching, cutting across those facing multiple vulnerabilities. He described how those affected often have mental health issues, have been neglected at home, go missing or are drug users themselves, but come

from every strata of society. He gave first-hand accounts of residential children's homes being actively targeted.

He stated that it is vital that we begin to recognise that these vulnerabilities also map onto young people who attend PRUs and that adequate support and training is given to the staff that run them.

#### *Out of area placements*

Police forces raised concerns about the increased risk of harm from county line activity that looked after young people face when they are placed out of borough. They stated these young people are often identified by criminal networks and targeted to run county lines.

Many speakers echoed this concern and there was anecdotal evidence of young people who had been placed in out of borough care placements being specifically targeting to widen a criminal network.

#### *Cuckooing*

Many speakers noted vulnerable adults e.g. those living in poverty, experiencing poor mental health or dependent drug users are targeted, their homes used as a base for county line activity.

The cuckooing of vulnerable adults brings increased risk of exploitation to young people. The APPG heard evidence of young people becoming involved in county lines as they may be related to those who had been cuckooed.

## **Recommendations**

- **The Government should commit to a national strategic response to tackle county lines activity.**
- The Department for Education should ensure that the risks of grooming and exploitation for criminality should be included on the relationship and sex education curriculums in both primary and secondary schools.
- Police forces should collect data on the number of children and young people being criminally exploited and the harms that they encounter.
- Targeted prevention activities should be put into places where children are most at risk. For example, in alternative educational settings and areas with large numbers of residential children's homes.
- The Department for Education and local authorities should ensure that all professionals who work with children and young people both in educational settings and other contexts are trained to understand gang and criminal exploitation. The training should cover referral pathways to appropriate support, enabling the young person to see that they are a victim of exploitation and protection for those most at risk.

- Statutory guidance on children who run away or go missing from home or care should be updated to include more detailed guidance on looked after children placed out of area due to the risks of gang involvement, to ensure that appropriate care planning and notifications are taking place. Care plans for these children should include multi-agency planning of what needs to happen if they go missing. All agencies should agree a minimum response and how they will coordinate.
- When a looked after child is being moved to an out of area placement because of gang exploitation the responsible local authority should notify the police in the host authority area of the risks to the child and their vulnerability.

## **2. Identification - link between missing and county lines**

Coercion and manipulation often increase a young person's vulnerability to exploitation, pushing them towards going missing and becoming involved in criminal activities. Some individuals may be pulled towards exploitation through the promise of money, gifts, affection and status. However, they may then be forced to work for these people as they are coerced into believing that they are indebted to them.

There was agreement among the speakers that there is a strong link between going missing and county line exploitation.

Frequent missing episodes and being found out of area, returning from missing episodes with injuries, unexplained absences from school were all highlighted as being warning signs that a young person could be involved in county lines activity.

Recognition of missing episodes as indicators of potential criminal exploitation, followed by appropriate and timely responses, may prevent further exploitation of vulnerable children and young people.

### **Return Home Interviews (RHI)**

Statutory guidance on children who runaway or go missing from home or care states that all children who go missing should be offered an independent RHI.

RHIs are an effective tool in the identification of risk of criminal exploitation and a way to ensure effective early intervention is made. They may also serve as an important source of intelligence therefore allowing the police and other safeguarding professionals to protect other children from exploitation.

The NCA raised concerns that there were frequently missed opportunities to gather intelligence from RHIs. Other police professionals in the room echoed this.

The Children's Society found RHI provision across England and Wales is patchy<sup>1</sup> and a suite of evidence demonstrates that not all local authorities offer RHIs to all children and young

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<sup>1</sup> The Children's Society (2017) Making Connections

people who go missing<sup>234</sup>. Therefore, the opportunity to identify county line risk and intervene early may be lost.

### **Information sharing**

Information about missing children is held on a range of systems across different partner agencies and therefore intelligence may not be shared effectively. A more coordinated and collaborative approach is required – the introduction of the national missing persons database in 2018 could have a significant impact on how information about missing people is shared and accessed. How the register will be used is still unconfirmed but there would be significant value in including exploitation or trafficking markers that would flag concerns to the responding police officer, thereby improving the effectiveness of the risk assessment and response.

DCI Andrew Furphy explained how in Lewisham his team were trialling a way to circumvent the lack of a missing persons database to better safeguard children and young people involved in county line activity.

They conducted a retrospective look at the numbers of missing children over a twelve-month period from both police and social care records. Two-hundred young people were identified to be at risk. A marker was then placed on them and they were added to the Police National Computer (PNC) system. This meant that if any of the at risk young people came into contact with the police in different parts of the county, Lewisham police would be contacted enabling them to build a full picture of the problem and help bring the county line organisers to justice.

### **Recommendations**

- The Department for Education should consult on and revise the statutory guidance on children and young people who runaway and go missing from home and care to include information about the links between criminal and gang exploitation and missing. The revised guidance should also take into account the new ‘no apparent risk’ definition of missing, to ensure that all children reported as missing receive a return home interview.
- Police forces and local authorities should work together to effectively map missing episodes relating to criminal exploitation, including county lines in their area.
- The Home Office should ensure that the planned National Missing Persons register should include a number of functions to enable earlier and better response to children who go missing because of gang exploitation. This should include markers for potential exploitation and/or internal trafficking.

### **3. Response - Current professional response**

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<sup>2</sup>IBID

<sup>3</sup> The Children’s Society (2017) The Knowledge Gap

<sup>4</sup> APPG (2016)

*“It’s not something that the police can deal with alone. It is something that has to be done by the whole safeguarding system and the system is quite fragmented as it is divided into agencies that work in child protection and those that work in the criminal justice system. The exploitation of children to run and supply drugs means they are seen as both victims and offenders by different agencies.” (Ann Coffey MP)*

There is a need for national joint safeguarding response to protect young people affected by county lines. There was consensus in the room that learning should be adopted from the response to tackling child sexual exploitation. Whilst the response to CSE is by no means perfect, it has come along way in recent years. Greater understanding of the warning signs, better awareness among both people who work with children and members of the public, better partnership working, specialist services and dedicated workers have all contributed to making the response to children and young people who have been sexually exploited safer. It is vital that these ways of working extend to victims of child criminal exploitation too.

Furthermore, we heard evidence that child criminal exploitation is not being recognised and responded to as a safeguarding concern – professionals too often view criminal exploitation as a lifestyle choice which can make a young person feel blamed for their exploitation or reinforce a young persons feeling of ownership over a false identity of being an autonomous drug dealer. Further still it was pointed out that it is vital to recognise the wider contextual drivers catalysing criminal and drug activity.

### **Multi-agency working**

There was consensus among all the speakers that when local agencies work together across boundaries, the most successful disruption to county lines can takes place. Moreover, it was recognised that children and young people at risk of criminal exploitation cannot be adequately safeguarded if agencies work in silos.

Examples of mapping exercises, weekly partnership meetings and multi-agency case management were given. Joe Caluori highlighted that services often don’t work effectively across borders in order to combat this he helped coordinate a cross borough imitative with input from 20 London boroughs with input from the Local Government Association (LGA). The participating boroughs have been able to come together and combine ideas for best practice on how to tackle this growing and dynamic issue.

The need for a contextual approach to safeguarding<sup>5</sup> was discussed, it was recognised that the risks young people face outside the home need to be integrated into child protection plans and a more holistic response to disrupting criminal exploitation adopted.

### **Public health matter**

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<sup>5</sup> Firmin, C. (2017) Contextual Safeguarding: An overview of the operational, strategic and conceptual framework ,<https://www.contextualsafeguarding.org.uk/assets/documents/Contextual-Safeguarding-Briefing.pdf>

Cllr Joe Caluori recognised that the issue of county lines is also a public health matter. He stated:

*We can't ignore the problems in these areas which create demand for drugs. People must be receiving the appropriate services in these more rural and isolated places so the drug market can't thrive.*

The Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs (AMCD) found that maintaining funding of drug treatment services is essential to preventing drug-related crime in communities.<sup>6</sup> However, a recent report found evidence of funding reductions to drugs services in local areas in England.

### **Economic issue**

A number of references were made to the need to recognise and appreciate the relationship between low socio economic status and county line involvement. Young people growing up in poverty are especially vulnerable to exploitation by criminal networks. Moreover, despite evidence that youth services play a positive role in young peoples outcomes and wellbeing, in recent years they have seen severe reductions at the local level<sup>7</sup>.

The need to address the economic and social drivers that act as barriers to exiting gangs was discussed. It was highlighted that the young people involved often see involvement as a chance to make large amounts of money and don't always see it as exploitation. Moreover, the fear that young people may have regarding repercussions towards themselves, friends or family if seen to be engaging with professionals was raised.

Exiting a gang is not simple and it is vital that policy makes recognise the wider drivers of gang involvement when developing intervention and disruptive strategies to county lines.

### **Recommendations:**

- Ofsted should routinely review local authority response to county line exploitation and monitor their multi-agency response to the issue.
- A contextual safeguarding approach should be taken to combating county lines, recognising the range of environments in which young people can encounter risks away from the family home.
- The Government should look at mechanisms to ensure that drug and alcohol misuse services are protected within local authority budgets and there is clear financial reporting on local drug misuse treatment services.
- The Government should address the financial shortfall in children's services in England.

## **4. Prevention and disruption - examples of good practice**

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/acmd-warns-ministers-of-falling-local-funding-for-drug-treatment-services>

<sup>7</sup> Losing in the long run [https://www.actionforchildren.org.uk/media/5826/losing\\_in\\_the\\_long\\_run.pdf](https://www.actionforchildren.org.uk/media/5826/losing_in_the_long_run.pdf)

The Children's Society shared examples of their approach to working with victims of county line exploitation. The Stride service takes a trauma informed approach to supporting young people who have been criminally exploited. They use intelligence gathered from RHIs to identify patterns of exploitation and escalating local intelligence to Trident, ROCUs and other trafficking working groups. They use National Referral Mechanism or local LSCB thresholds of harm to ensure proper responses. The Children's Society have also developed a best practice document for capturing intelligence and local reporting.

### **The Modern Slavery Act - use of the National Referral Mechanism (NRM)**

There was absolute agreement from all speakers that children and young people who are criminally exploited should be seen as victims and not treated as criminals. Children who have been missing and exploited to take part in criminal activity, for example carrying and selling drugs in different areas, are victims of trafficking.

In 2009, the Government set up the National Referral Mechanism (NRM) framework to identify victims of human trafficking or modern slavery to ensure they receive the appropriate support.

However, at the time of writing, only five young people have been referred to the NRM for forced criminality as drug runners<sup>8</sup> despite high numbers of young people being exploited in this way.

Evidence from The Children's Society highlighted that despite these national policies and legislative provisions, the knowledge, understanding and implementation of the NRM is patchy.

In response the Children's Society and Victims Support have developed a toolkit for working with children and young people who have been trafficked for the purpose of criminal exploitation in relation to county lines. The toolkit gives a step-by-step by step guide on what to do if you suspect a child is a victim of trafficking.

The toolkit explains how and where to make NRM referrals and signposts to additional support for those experiencing problems with professional responses and/or lack of follow up.

### **Disruption tools**

#### *Criminal behavioural orders*

A criminal behavioural order (CBO) can prohibit an individual from doing anything described in the order, such as travelling to certain places.

DCI Andrew Furphy described how Lewisham use CBOs to stop young people in their borough being able to travel freely around the country. The orders will tend to stop them leaving the M25 making them less attractive to those wishing to exploit them.

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<sup>8</sup> Safer London

### *Child Abduction Warning Notices (CAWNs)*

Scott Hill, Strategic Support Officer to Superintendent Steve Cox, highlighted that the CSE guidelines are being refreshed and updated with information on how to use CAWNs to disrupt instances of criminal exploitation.

CAWNs can be issued against individuals who are suspected of grooming children and young people – they state that they have no permission to associate with the named child and that if they do so they can be arrested under the Child Abduction Act 1984 and Children Act 1989. They have largely been used when sexual exploitation is suspected, however, their use is not limited to sexual exploitation cases and they can be used to disrupt grooming for criminality.

Currently, a Child Abduction Warning Notice (CAWN) can be used to protect all children under 16. They can also be used to protect certain vulnerable groups of 16 and 17 year olds: those formally taken into care under section 31 of the Children Act 1989; those subject to an emergency protection order; or those in police protection. It is a common misconception, and often a surprise to social workers and services when they first encounter it, that all children in care can be protected by a CAWN. This is not the case.

The group of 16 and 17 year olds in relation to whom CAWN can currently be used is not wide enough making it very difficult for police and social services to protect vulnerable 16 and 17 year olds.

### **Awareness raising and training**

#### *Trapped campaign*

Jayne Horan, Safeguarding Lead in Greater Manchester police discussed the Trapped Campaign. The Campaign aims to raise awareness of all forms of criminal exploitation, in recognition that young people and vulnerable adults may feel 'Trapped' and need support to 'find a way out'.

They work in partnership with police, schools, youth centers, housing and drugs services to raise awareness with young people and vulnerable adults, to enable them to identify when someone is trying to exploit them and provide them with safe places to report their concerns. They take a contextual safeguarding approach and embed their practice across Greater Manchester raising awareness in places that young people frequent such as shopping centers and restaurants. They ensure there is a coordinated, victim-centered approach to any reported case of criminal exploitation.

They have developed a short film with local communities and actors to highlight how people can be criminally exploited.

#### *SafeCall*

Missing People and St Giles Trust SOS have been jointly funded by the Home Office to deliver a project which explores new ways of working with young people who have been criminally exploited.

SafeCall is based on RHI methodology, a scheduled telephone call to young people who are referred into the service by professionals. They do not have to have been reported missing in order for this to take place. During the call they will create a safety plan for the child in the hope that the likelihood of them going missing again decreases.

The young persons parents or carers will also receive a phone call once the child has gone missing.

They are also in the early stages of testing a new product which is made to look like a charge pack for a mobile phone. Concealed in the device are three hidden buttons that are connected to three contacts of the young persons choice. The idea is that if a young person is trafficked to an area away from home they will be able to use the device to signal their location to their chosen contacts. The device has a battery life of six months.

### *Training*

The Brooders Project, developed by Dean Coady OBE and delivered in alternative educational settings uses a bespoke approach to deliver training to young learners and adults with safeguarding responsibilities.

The training uses a Life Stories approach and aims to increase awareness of the dangers and consequences of becoming involved with crime and county line activity. It educates and challenges young peoples perceptions of the dangers of becoming exploited, especially in relation to travelling to other regions in order to commit crime.

By using the Life Story approach to delivery, the training fully addresses all aspects of county lines and introduces scenarios that explore gun and knife possession, CSE, grooming, exploitative relationships, social responsibility and crime and consequences.

## **Recommendations**

- National Referral Mechanism training should be mandatory for all professionals working with young people affected by gang-involvement and going missing from home or care. This training should cover how to complete an appropriate referral so that it does not impact negatively on young people going through immigration and court processes.
- The Home Office and The Crown Prosecution Service should produce a list of civil orders which can be used for disruption purposes, this should be disseminated with clear guidance. Any future instruments should protect all children up to the age of 18.
- Local Authorities should ensure that all professionals who work with children and young people are trained to understand gang and criminal exploitation. The training should cover referral pathways to appropriate support and protection for those children most at risk.

## Resources

ECPAT UK <https://www.ecpat.org.uk/the-national-referral-mechanism>

SafeCall <https://www.missingpeople.org.uk/how-we-can-help/173-safecall.html>

The Modern Slavery Act

[http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2015/30/pdfs/ukpga\\_20150030\\_en.pdf](http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2015/30/pdfs/ukpga_20150030_en.pdf)

Training – Dean Coady, <https://urbanpuresolutions.com/what-we-do/>

Trapped campaign <https://www.fcho.co.uk/news/trapped-campaign/>

Trapped campaign video <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pLhGpS1f-F0>

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