



NCA

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County Lines, Gangs, and Safeguarding

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The Gang and Youth Violence team within the Home Office identified a growing body of intelligence, emerging in particular from London and the South East, that vulnerable young people are being exploited in order to facilitate the running of street level drug dealing within county lines. The purpose of this report is to present a baseline national assessment of the 'County Lines' criminal business model and raise awareness of the issue to front line practitioners.

Key points

'County Lines' is a national issue involving the use of mobile phone 'lines' by groups to extend their drug dealing business into new locations outside of their home areas. This issue affects the majority of forces.

A 'county lines' enterprise almost always involves exploitation of vulnerable persons; this can involve both children and adults who require safeguarding. The assessment has identified the need for a multi-agency approach at a national, regional and local level.

Secure operating bases are an essential feature of these enterprises which can be successfully disrupted through concerted application of conventional law enforcement tactics.

Mobile phone 'lines' are an essential feature of these enterprises; it is judged that developing a viable tactic to disrupt lines would have a substantial effect.

County Lines, Gangs, and Safeguarding

Intelligence base

This report draws on returns from police forces following the circulation of a national intelligence requirement. These returns have been supplemented with information from the Home Office Gang and Youth Violence front line team, force problem profiles, subject matter experts and academic literature.

The intelligence cut-off date for this report is 30/09/2014.

Introduction

1. In the context of this report, a 'county line' describes a situation where an individual, or more frequently a group, establishes and operates a telephone number in an area outside of their normal locality in order to sell drugs directly to users at street level. This generally involves a group from an urban area expanding their operations by crossing one or more police force boundaries to more rural areas, setting up a secure base and using runners to conduct day to day dealing.
2. Throughout this report we will refer to the originating location of a group as their 'home force' and the areas where the groups travel to sell drugs as the 'county force'. This distinction is made as home forces are generally large urban areas such as cities whilst county forces are generally coastal or market towns.
3. The groups involved are often described as Urban Street Gangs, although the use of this terminology is not consistent across the country. In some cases the groups are defined as Organised Crime Groups; some forces refer to these types of enterprises as Dangerous Dealer Networks or transient drug dealers. For the purpose of this report the term 'group' is used; this should be understood as encompassing all of these terms.
4. There are a number of factors that help determine why groups might embark on county lines activity. These include the perception of 'space' in drug markets outside of urban areas and the anticipation of increased profits because of less capable competition. Operating outside of their own areas, where they are 'known' and subject to law enforcement targeting, often gives groups the perception of increased anonymity.
5. A major concern for this report is the issue of safeguarding, as many gangs form a secure base in the homes of vulnerable people and force assistance by using violence or exploiting an addiction to drugs. Similarly, the exploitation of young people is a common factor, with groups often recruiting children to work as runners.

The Nature of the Threat

Commodities

6. The county lines issue largely concerns Class A drugs, particularly the supply of heroin and crack cocaine. Drugs such as cocaine, amphetamine and cannabis are also seen, although the numbers are very small. One force also noted the recovery of MDMA from runners.

7. There is widespread consensus that problematic 'county lines' involve the sale of heroin and crack cocaine. The absence of reporting regarding cocaine and other 'party' drugs is judged to reflect their different customer base, as well as the dissimilar methods used to sell these drugs. For example, there is almost no mention of drugs being sold in the night-time economy in the context of county lines.

Site Selection

8. There appears to be a number of ways that groups select and establish themselves in a location. Typically, a mid-level member of the group visits the area to scope the available drugs market, potentially following a period of law enforcement activity that has created space for this to occur. Family and community links have been used by criminals to establish themselves.

9. One region identified that prison release locations and local authority relocations are factors that can allow groups to establish a foothold in a county location. Criminals, family members or known associates who are relocated, often to less urban areas as a way to manage their risk or safeguard them, may provide the group with a secure base in a new force area. However, this was not widely identified by other forces in the country.

10. Above all, it is the perception of an easy market space that draws groups to these locations. This is characterised by an ample supply of customers (users) and the lack of resistance from local dealers. Where competition (and the associated violence) does occur, this is most often a result of two outside groups competing for the same space.

11. A sample of areas affected by county lines activity found that 42% were coastal towns, rising to 57% when including towns close to the coast. 15% of the areas were market towns and another 15% were commuter towns near London; the remainder were two small cities and a large spa town. The areas were characterised by being predominantly white British with lower than UK average numbers of ethnic minorities and an older than average population. 65% had decent transport links to a major city while 30%, all of which were coastal towns, had very poor transport links. 46% of areas had at least one issue with either deprivation, low levels of educational attainment amongst residents, unemployment, high levels of mental health issues or crime. All but one of these areas was a coastal town. The remaining 53% of the areas had no issues with deprivation or unemployment and would be described as middle class or affluent areas.

12. It would appear that groups target two types of areas, either small coastal towns that suffer from issues relating to deprivation and unemployment or in contrast more affluent areas with decent transport links to London.

13. These findings show the general features of the affected areas. However, the message from practitioners¹ is that the key feature driving targeting is assessed to be whether there is a receptive market to exploit. More in-depth work is required to identify better indicators of vulnerability than these traditional socio-economic factors.

Establishing an operating base

14. It is essential for a county lines enterprise to identify potential premises to operate from; ideally two or more at any one time. One force noted that groups will often use one location to deal from and another to rest and 'restock', with another force noting that multiple premises provide groups with the option to move around in the event of law enforcement targeting.

15. Establishing these bases is achieved in a number of ways, most commonly by exploiting local drug users. This is achieved either by paying them in drugs, by building up a drug debt or by using threats and/or violence in order to coerce them; this practice is commonly known as 'cuckooing'. In other cases group members have entered into relationships with vulnerable females in order to use their properties.

16. The use of hotels by groups featured less in the returns. In some cases groups made use of hotels when first arriving in an area, before identifying suitable places from which to operate; in other cases hotels were used on an ongoing basis as a place to resupply.

17. It is assessed that hotels are a very short term accommodation solution for dealers at the start of their enterprise, which would explain why there is little reporting of their use. Any protracted use of a hotel represents a potential risk for the dealer, as the suspicions of staff are likely to be aroused; dealing from a hotel is certainly a high risk strategy.

18. Force returns indicate that police targeting of these locations using conventional tactics such as search warrants and partner interventions can make it hard for groups to find locations to deal from. Furthermore, one force noted that simple repeat welfare visits to vulnerable premises are a useful tactic, as the dealers are often present allowing for improved engagement and safeguarding opportunities.

The centrality of the telephone 'line'

19. The line (i.e. the telephone number that is marketed and that the users call) is the lifeblood of the group's activity in the county force and represents a brand rather than an individual. Unlike other criminal businesses where phone numbers are changed regularly to avoid police detection, drugs lines do not change frequently. Instead they are very consistent, often running for years or even decades.

20. In most cases the line is guarded closely and kept well away from the county location (for example most of the lines used by London gangs are kept in London). In order to facilitate delivery, a relay or exchange system is operated so that locally based runners can be directed accordingly.

21. In a situation where nominals change frequently and are expendable, and multiple addresses are used, the phone lines can be the only consistent feature. The issue of mobile phones as facilitators of drug dealing activity has been identified since 1995. A drug line is

¹ Front line staff with knowledge of county lines, for example police officers and expert drug witnesses or youth offending service officers and social workers.

not a single point of failure for the business and the most likely course of action, if it were to be removed, would be the marketing of a different number.

Marketing

22. Once an operating base has been secured, the group will need to undertake marketing in order to build the business. This can take a number of forms including:

- a. Business cards - scraps of paper with the line name and number on.
- b. Exchanging drugs for the phone contact lists of drug users (on the assumption that users associate with other users) and then sending blanket text messages.
- c. 'Penetration' pricing and introductory offers such as buy one get one free in order to quickly establish a market share.
- d. By word of mouth.

Use of runners

23. As the enterprise is established, the use of runners allows higher level group members to withdraw from the area at an early stage. Again this can take a number of forms. Some forces highlight the exploitation of children by these groups, which is supported by the work of the Gang and Youth Violence team at the Home Office. Exploitation is particularly evident in London based groups but is also occurring in other parts of the country. There is limited information from the returns and whilst anecdotal evidence provides some insight there is yet to be a full picture on this issue:

- Children can be recruited in both home and county forces and can be used to run the operations on the ground. This can include delivering drugs and money between locations (often via trains), staying in safe houses to look after the drugs and money or in some cases selling drugs to local users. Children are believed to be used as they are inexpensive, easily controlled and less likely to be detected by the police.
- Boys aged 14-17 are the most often targeted, however girls can also be exploited. In some cases girls may engage in a relationship with a group member and can later become victims of sexual and domestic violence. When mapping gang members, it is helpful to look at women and girls that they associate with as this can help support the identification of vulnerable women and girls²
- The use of debt is a common feature in the exploitation of children, as with adults. Children may initially be groomed by a member of the group who will give them money and items such as clothes and mobile phones. They will then be told they owe the group money before being threatened and forced to take part in county lines drug dealing. In addition, we have received intelligence that whilst in possession of drugs the children may become victims of a staged robbery; believing they are in debt to the group, they are told they must work for free to pay it off.
- Alternately some children may be willing to take part in county lines and do not consider themselves victims of exploitation, particularly when they believe they will be rewarded with large sums of money or higher status in the group. One force reported

² A 2013 report by the University of Bedfordshire, *'It's wrong but you get used to it: A qualitative study of gang-associated sexual violence towards, and exploitation of, young people in England'*
http://www.beds.ac.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0005/293234/Gangs-Report-final.pdf.

that a child had received £500 per week as a runner, however this is not universal and most returns indicated children received little or no money with many practitioners describing even willing children as being groomed.

- Unsurprisingly, vulnerable groups of children such as Looked After Children (LAC)³ or those known to Children's Social Care or a Youth Offending Service are more likely to be involved in county lines exploitation. There have been cases where young people with independent accommodation are targeted in order to use their home as a secure base. This can include LAC or young people released from custody that are relocated by Social Services or the Local Authority.
- However, children who are not known to services and who have no previous convictions are also utilised in an effort to evade police detection. Not being part of a vulnerable group can mean that signs of exploitation can go undetected or be unidentified for some time. In addition, children recruited in county forces can be targeted due to their ethnicity, with children reflecting the county force ethnic profile being preferred as they are considered less likely to be stopped by the police.

24. It is important to consider the various ways a child's wellbeing can be affected when exploited for the purpose of county lines. Although the returns did not directly highlight the impact on school attendance, it can be inferred that both attainment and attendance are likely to be impacted. In addition, there are significant physical and mental health issues associated with children who are used as runners. It is common for runners to conceal drugs internally; they spend time in unhygienic and unsafe environments and can be subjected to violence and fear. There are additional concerns in relation to young women who may be subject to domestic or sexual violence.

25. The Gang and Youth Violence Team have identified local authorities working closely with their police force to tackle this issue. However, there were only a small number of cases provided in the force returns. This highlights the lack of reporting pathways for practitioners, and a need for greater understanding of this issue. Child exploitation in a county lines context is often misunderstood and not considered exploitation in its accepted form, with many children deemed as voluntary participants. In addition, child exploitation is usually referred to in the context of sexual exploitation, and there is a need to understand that exploitation takes many forms. As there is no accepted term for this type of exploitation it is either not reported, or once reported the information difficult to aggregate.

26. A common theme in the returns (specifically highlighted in 26% of cases) was the use of local drug users to act as runners delivering the drugs. Drug users are often exploited through the establishment of a drugs debt before being instructed to work as a runner to pay them off. This is another example of how debt is employed as a method of manipulation by groups with both vulnerable adults and children

27. For the criminal groups this provides a level of security as these individuals are not out of place; they are also cheap and can be bullied. Given the small quantities of drugs in their possession they will always have a viable cover story if they are stopped by the police.

Transportation

28. Groups choose methods of transportation that enable them to evade police detection. Rail travel is frequently cited in force returns as a preferred method of transport;

³ A child who is accommodated in agreement, at the request or in the absence of their parent or subject to a Care Order made by the family courts.

all regions identifying an issue with county lines were also able to identify at least one group that were making use of the rail network as part of the enterprise. In addition to being considered a safer form of transport, considering the age of the runners used by groups, rail may be used as they would be unable to obtain a driving licence. However, rail travel is clearly limited by station location and as such the use of hire cars or vehicles belonging to local users to complete the journey was common.

29. One region reported that groups have responded to law enforcement attention at train stations by stopping short and then using other means of transport. Five forces have identified the use of bus and coach services and eight forces note groups who make use of taxis.

Violence and weapons

30. There are a number of scenarios where violence can occur in the county lines context. Firstly, where groups infiltrate an area and push out local dealers. In general, reporting indicates that local dealers do not offer significant resistance owing to the capability and intent of the groups involved. Secondly, violence can be used to secure an operating base, coerce people into becoming runners and to enforce drugs debts. Thirdly, and most importantly, where there is insufficient space in the drug market for groups to co-exist and they compete for business. This often draws more group members to the area to build strength and act as enforcers.

31. Police forces are able to give numerous examples where weapons, including firearms and knives, have been used to inflict serious assaults on potential competition.

Profit

32. The revenue involved in these drug lines is substantial. For instance a police expert drugs witness has estimated that one county line was grossing up to GBP 3,000 per day (GBP 21,000 per week).

33. These figures may seem high for what is considered a 'street' enterprise but the volume of activity on the lines is generally very high. It is common for an established line to have more than 10,000 incoming communications a month and a group may run multiple lines in different areas.

34. Other intelligence has stated that a line can be sold on in excess of GBP 25,000. Whilst initially this figure may appear low in comparison to the potential profits, it is important to note that a county line is unlike a conventional business. When taking over a line the buyer will need both the required infrastructure and willingness to take on the associated risks with an illegal enterprise. In addition as there will be no 'non-compete' clause it could be considered an unsafe investment.

Group Structure

35. The groups engaged in this type of activity at the street level are often fluid although the drug lines (and the higher level nominals that underpin them) have often been established for significant amounts of time. One force gave an example of a line that has been active for 10 years. As mentioned previously, lines often appear to be a form of franchise where the brand name is the same but a different number is used for a different area. This structure allows for individuals to relocate or rotate to another area if targeted by law enforcement.

36. Usually an enterprise such as this requires two persons in the county location, one stays in the location that they are operating from and another to run the drugs to customer. Runners are unlikely to have the key to the premises or any other link/connection in order to limit police search powers. Potentially there will be a further location used for rest and restocking and then most likely a further nominal holding the line in the urban area whilst core leadership will rarely if ever attend the county location.

37. County lines group members are easily replaced, practitioners reported a case where the line is seen as more important than the group members and they would sometimes rather risk prosecution than have to change the line.

The Extent of the Threat

38. There was evidence of the county lines MO taking place in seven police force regions. There were 827 nominals identified as being involved in this type of activity, 31 of whom had been identified by more than one force. 548 of the nominals identified by forces were aged between 17 and 25, with 39 nominals being aged 16 or under. There were 181 groups identified, varying from urban street gangs with links to OCGs to apparent stand alone drugs lines with little detail held about those responsible for running the line. 15 of these groups can be identified as affecting more than one force; these are all London based gangs.

39. While the returns showed 181 groups, the extent of affiliation between the groups is hard to quantify given the fluid nature of gangs. As such, this figure should be seen as an indicator rather than an absolute.

40. The returns indicate the prevalence of London based groups engaged in county lines and to a lesser degree other urban forces. However, the regional variation shown is likely to be a reflection of the difference in intelligence coverage between forces and different levels of awareness amongst partners, rather than a true reflection of variations in the level of activity. The Gang and Youth Violence front line team note that information and intelligence on the street scene is usually scattered among frontline staff and not systematically collected. Experience demonstrates that where a multi agency approach is taken, understanding on this issue increases significantly.