



NCA

National Crime Agency

County Lines Gang Violence, Exploitation & Drug Supply 2016

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Introduction

- This report seeks to inform the six refreshed priorities of the **Ending Gang Violence and Exploitation (EGVE)** programme, following transition from the Ending Gang and Youth Violence initiative. In particular, this report supports the key objective of 'Tackling County Lines'.
- The report recognises distinction between gang crime within urban hubs and the export markets established by urban origin gangs in county lines markets. The report focuses almost exclusively on county lines gangs and markets. In June 2015, the Home Office produced statutory guidance that defined a gang as "having one or more characteristics that enables its members to be identified by others as a group".
- Section 34(5) of the Policing and Crime Act 2009 defines gang-related drug dealing activity as "the unlawful production, supply, importation or exportation of a controlled drug which occurs in the course of, or is otherwise related to, the activities of a group that:
 - a) consists of at least 3 people; and
 - b) has one or more characteristics that enable its members to be identified by others as a group."
- For the purpose of this report, a county lines gang features these additional criteria:
 - The gang / gang members are based or have origin within an urban city location.
 - They have established a market in a rural town, into which they supply drugs.
 - They utilise a mobile phone number to facilitate drug orders from and supply to customers in the county town.
 - Their criminality systematically exploits young and vulnerable persons.

Key Findings

- The supply of class A drugs, from urban hubs to county towns, continues to be a widespread feature of gang activity and the key driver for the criminality highlighted by this report.
- Violence, incidents of kidnap, use of weapons (including firearms) and ruthless debt control prevail as a consequence of county lines markets.
- County lines gangs pose a significant threat to vulnerable adults and children, upon whom they rely to conduct and/or facilitate this criminality. Exposure to gang exploitation has the potential to generate emotional and physical harm.
- Gang members and those they exploit continue to be transient between urban hubs and county markets, but with an emerging trend for some to settle within the community in which the county lines market is established.
- The use of mobile phones, to maintain 'deal lines' between customers in county markets and gang member suppliers, remains a key feature.
- While gangs from London continue to dominate the activity described by this report, it is noteworthy that there has been an increase in reports from other counties, highlighting the emergence of gangs in the North West functioning with the same modus operandi.

Purpose

- This report provides insight of the current national situation, as generated by gang violence and exploitation linked to county lines class A drug supply.
- This report aims to refresh an understanding of the threat since the original assessment in 2014 and reports current scope and scale, across counties in England and Wales, also highlighting significant changes and new or emerging trends.
- The report informs the cross-Government 'Ending Gang Violence & Exploitation' initiative, Home Office, police and wider partners, with a combination of national overview and regional / local context.

Information base

This report draws on returns from UK police forces.

The intelligence collection period for this report is January to June 2016.

Contents

| | |
|---|----|
| Introduction | 2 |
| Contents..... | 4 |
| 1. Typical county lines methodology | 5 |
| 2. Scope and scale of county lines..... | 5 |
| 3. Gang origins..... | 6 |
| 4. Common themes and characteristics..... | 6 |
| 5. Drug markets and supply | 7 |
| 6. Establishing a base and the exploitation of vulnerable of adults | 7 |
| 7. Exploitation and the role of adult females..... | 8 |
| 8. Exploitation of children | 9 |
| 9. Links to Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE) | 10 |
| 10. Violence..... | 10 |
| 11. Telephone Lines..... | 11 |
| 12. Transport..... | 12 |
| 13. Conclusion | 12 |
| 14. Legislation and alternative considerations | 13 |
| 15. Observations | 14 |

1. Typical county lines methodology

- 1.1 This report focuses on gangs committing criminality within county locations. This is based on the revised statutory guidance published by the Home Office in 2015 which states that 'a gang is defined as having one or more characteristics that enables its members to be identified by others as a group'.
- 1.2 Whilst there is no official definition, typical county lines activity involves a gang (usually made up of young males) from a large urban area travelling to smaller locations (such as a county or coastal town) to sell class A drugs, specifically crack cocaine and heroin. The majority of these gangs function with a degree of affiliation and loyalty. They may challenge an existing group from the local area or another county lines enterprise, which often causes incidents of violence.
- 1.3 Gangs tend to communicate with drugs users via a mobile phone number, commonly given a brand name which we refer to as the line. Traditionally this line is kept away from the area where drugs are being sold and a relay system is used to contact those acting as the dealers in the county location.
- 1.4 Gang members travel between the urban and county locations on a regular basis to deliver drugs and collect cash. They tend to use a local property, generally belonging to a vulnerable person, as a base for their activities. This is often acquired by force or coercion and is referred to as cuckooing.
- 1.5 Gangs typically exploit children to deliver drugs from the urban to county location using intimidation, violence, debt bondage and/or grooming. Adult drug users (often addicts) and vulnerable females are also exploited for their properties or to assist with dealing within the county market.

2. Scope and scale of county lines

- 2.1 The NCA circulated a request for information to police forces in England and Wales. 71% of police returns reported established county lines activity, whilst a further 12% reported an emerging picture (within the last 6 months).
- 2.2 It is not possible to confirm how many of these gangs were impacting multiple police areas. It is also noted that gang size varies, as does levels of violence and volumes of drugs being supplied. There is a realistic possibility that a police area with a smaller number of gangs may still be equally or more affected by this criminality.
- 2.3 The motivators behind setting up county lines markets remain unchanged. They include a receptive customer base, less capable or intimidated local suppliers, limited access to drug supplies (compared to the urban location) and an assessment that competition may be low or easy to overcome. As the criminal use of firearms in urban hubs tend to be more prolific (particularly regarding criminal gang culture), supplying drugs outside of urban hubs reduces the likelihood of being a target of a firearms discharge.

- 2.4 Gang members operating outside of their home borough or city environments are less likely to be known by local police or be identified by competitors. This affords a degree of anonymity.
- 2.5 The methods through which gangs choose a county location appears to vary. Some will send members to a prospective location in order to assess the market. Approved accommodation in a county area can also be a catalyst. Familial links in county locations have been identified as a possible connection.
- 2.6 There have been reports of a number of gang nominals settling down in county areas, establishing roots through residency or relationships. This occurs in areas that have experienced county lines activity over a long period. We assess this to be natural evolution that may become more widespread in the future.

3. Gang origins

- 3.1 85% of areas encountered gangs from London and 25% were solely affected by London groups. Other gangs were reported to have travelled from Liverpool, Manchester, Birmingham, Reading and Essex, however - with the exception of Liverpool - these were in the minority. London remains the largest export location for county line groups.
- 3.2 35% of areas highlighted the presence of Somali gangs from London. Most of these areas are in the Eastern region, suggesting it is a particular stronghold for Somali gangs. We assess that Somali gangs may be more widespread than reported, as some submissions did not identify the first generation nationality origin.

4. Common themes and characteristics

- 4.1 Despite gangs often consisting of larger groups, only a small number of members will be present in each county location at any given time, usually 2-4 individuals. A number of areas stated that gang members would be rotated between county locations to try and evade detection. The presence of larger groups would usually be in response to conflict, as a show of strength.
- 4.2 Gang members are generally in their late teens to mid-twenties; however some areas reported members in their early thirties. Gangs from London were predominantly Black British or Afro Caribbean. However, all of the intelligence we received stated that gangs from Liverpool and Manchester were made up of White British or European males. Gangs travelling from Birmingham tended to be ethnically Asian and often family members or close associates and have close links to the areas they are operating in.
- 4.3 Gang members are usually known to law enforcement in the urban location from which they originate and often have reputations for violence and weapons, including firearms. County line gang members are often associated to an urban street gang linked to their home borough. This additional affiliation can cause enhanced tensions amongst rival gangs in county locations and includes violent incidents generated by feuds in the home borough.

5. Drug markets and supply

- 5.1 All the gangs highlighted in the returns were selling crack cocaine and heroin, and 70% stated groups were solely supplying these drugs. Some areas reported that groups were also selling powder cocaine and cannabis, however this was usually a smaller part of their enterprise.
- 5.2 Gangs are now reported to be selling drugs to county lines markets 24 hours a day, in contrast to reporting in 2014, which indicated activity was almost exclusive to the day time market. The line is assessed as having an influence upon 24 hour access.
- 5.3 Some areas reported gangs are selling high purity drugs. We assess this to be an indication that:
 - they have access to higher volume supplies, direct from imported drugs;
 - it is a tactic not to dilute (by bulking) their drugs, to maintain reputation and market dominance; and
 - the market within which they operate has a demand for high quality drugs.
- 5.4 Some gangs supply bags of heroin over the usual weight supplied by the local dealers. Many gangs advertise offers whereby users are discounted for buying larger amounts encouraging them to club together when making a purchase.
- 5.5 Gangs are making an average of GBP 2000 a day from drug supply into a single market. NCA data demonstrates that 1 ounce (28 grams) of heroin has a likely street value, when sold as GBP 10 (0.1 gram) bags, of approximately GBP 2800. The cost to buy an ounce of heroin equates to approximately GBP 800 as a single unit, but potentially as low as GBP 600 when split from the cost of a kilogram (36 drug deal ounces).
- 5.6 A common tactic is for runners in the county location to make cash deposits into bank accounts registered to associates or family members of nominals in the urban location. Once the money is deposited, cash withdrawals in the urban location are made swiftly. Two areas highlighted the use of businesses to launder profits.

6. Establishing a base and the exploitation of vulnerable of adults

- 6.1 Gangs must establish a base in the county location to develop a market. All of the returns confirmed groups take over addresses of local vulnerable adults by force or coercion. Typically this involves the home of a class A drug user, who is supplied with drugs to initiate a relationship.
- 6.2 Gangs quickly establish control as users fall into debt, being told they must continue to make their property available and/or work to pay the debt back. This is often referred to as debt bondage. 90% of areas saw drug users acting as runners or dealers on behalf of county line groups.

- 6.3 Debt bondage is a common and widespread theme, as is the use of force and coercion to exploit vulnerable adults. In some instances victims have become homeless, being forced to leave their address in fear of violence from gang members. Gangs typically also move to and/or between different addresses in an effort to evade detection. Vulnerable adults with premises are often exploited repeatedly by different gangs, sometimes within a short period of time.
- 6.4 A number of areas reported that groups utilise alternative addresses when required. This is primarily hotels but some use hostels, associates' homes and addresses of females, including those of girlfriends.
- 6.5 We have identified the targeting of adults with mental health problems as a new trend, however it is unsurprising considering the established link between drug users and poor mental health. Other vulnerable groups include adults with physical health problems, those recently released from custody and the elderly, however these are considered exceptions.
- 6.6 We assess that effective interventions by local multi-agency collaborations is essential to safeguarding vulnerable adults and their properties. We judge that safeguarding must be an equal priority to operational targeting and that a well engaged strategy, combining both elements, will generate more effective disruption outcomes.

7. Exploitation and the role of adult females

- 7.1 90% of areas reported that gangs are utilising consenting adult females to assist criminal activities.
- 7.2 The most common form of assistance provided by females is allowing the use of their address, followed by holding and running drugs. Females are also employed to book hotels and hire cars, identify local addresses for cuckooing, act as drivers and, on occasion, act as an enforcer.
- 7.3 The issue of consent is questionable as many of the females involved have been targeted because they are vulnerable, often class A drug users. One region highlighted that, although females initially appeared to be consenting, this quickly progressed to being coerced and controlled through threats and intimidation.
- 7.4 Females who have entered into relationships with gang members are often controlled and subject to domestic abuse.
- 7.5 In some instances where females had allowed gangs to use their property, it was unclear if this was due to a genuine relationship or through gang members having set out to exploit them for their home. Some females have also been supplied with discount price drugs, affording gangs greater control over them.
- 7.6 In some areas, females had been sexually assaulted or threatened with sexual assault. Instances of females being prostituted for sexual favours in payment for drugs have also been reported.

7.7 Although 90% of areas reported the use of females by gangs, the majority of law enforcement activity remains focused on male gang members. However it is clear that gangs utilise females due to their belief that women are less likely to be suspected of, or stopped and searched for, dealing drugs.

8. Exploitation of children

8.1 Children (under 18) continue to be exploited by county line gangs. Children from urban areas are recruited by gangs to courier drugs and money to the county location, often via train but also in cars or on coaches.

8.2 Children are reported to have stayed in very poor conditions at cuckooed addresses that generally belong to class A drug users. Many children are also used by gangs to deal drugs within the county markets. This includes local children and those travelling from urban hubs.

8.3 We assess that gangs utilise vulnerable children because they are a relatively inexpensive resource and easily controlled.

8.4 80% of areas saw the exploitation of children by gangs. The ages ranged from 12-18 years, with 15-16 being the most common age range. It remains a challenge to provide accurate figures for the number of children who have been exploited.

8.5 As numerous areas were unable to confirm accurate figures it is likely that many more children go undetected by law enforcement. This means we do not know the true scale of child exploitation by gangs and it is likely that many children fail to be safeguarded.

8.6 Despite the intelligence picture being incomplete, returns from 2016 indicate a considerable increase in law enforcement awareness of the use of children by gangs since the 2014 assessment. The majority of police forces are able to provide anecdotal evidence, pointing to a fairly consistent national picture, which is supported by research undertaken by Catch 22¹.

8.7 A very positive aspect of the returns was that 90% of areas stated they are actively working with local partners to safeguard both vulnerable adults and children.

8.8 Whilst male children are most commonly exploited, almost half the areas also reported the use of female children. Some areas highlighted that children appear to be groomed by gangs, either with gifts or promises that they will earn money.

8.9 Most commonly children from poor backgrounds engaged in offending behaviour, facing difficulties at home or in care of social services are amongst those most vulnerable to gangs. They are often listed as a missing person and/or have poor school attendance.

¹ Catch 22 Report 'Running the Risk: The link between Gang Involvement and young people going missing July 2015'.

- 8.10 It is not always clear how gangs recruit children, however one police force highlighted a gang that targeted young males from homeless hostels. Social media is also used to make initial contact with children and young persons.
- 8.11 One area stated that local children are more likely to be White British because groups believed they are less likely to be targeted by law enforcement.
- 8.12 Some children engage with gangs in circumstances where the potential threats or likelihood of encountering harm is not initially apparent. However, a number of areas reported that children have been assaulted or threatened with violence. A small number of areas stated children had been controlled under debt bondage and one area reported a child had been abducted.
- 8.13 Many young people are perceived to be consenting despite being coerced by intimidation and violence. All parties engaged in tackling county lines must ensure rigorous assessment of the circumstances where children are identified as being involved.
- 8.14 An emerging picture in some areas highlights the presence of young children who reside at cuckooed addresses belonging to vulnerable adult females. Numerous areas highlight gangs entering into relationships and utilising the addresses of vulnerable females. This generates a risk that young children will be increasingly exposed to county lines class A drug dealing.

9. Links to Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE)

- 9.1 The sexual exploitation of young females linked to county line gangs was not widely reported, although some areas highlighted young females who were assessed as at risk of sexual exploitation being transported to county locations. One force reported that females, as young as 14 and missing from home, have been found in hotel rooms used to store drugs. Some young females were also reported as entering into relationships with gang members.
- 9.2 Although CSE is not the driving factor in county line gangs exploiting children, a clear link between county lines exploitation and child sexual exploitation exists. Girls who are being exploited to hold and deal drugs are vulnerable to becoming more accessible to gang members wishing to sexually exploit them. It is conceivable that gangs or gang members use county line drug dealing as an opportunity to also target young females for sexual exploitation. Appropriate measures for safeguarding young females from sexual exploitation should be a high priority within any county lines strategy.

10. Violence

- 10.1 All areas reported gangs using violence in order to establish and maintain a county line. Generally, levels of violence in an area rise when gangs are establishing and then maintaining a presence.
- 10.2 Most areas report violence directed towards drug users who had failed to pay their debts, been accused of stealing from the gang, or refused to comply with their demands. Violence and intimidation are also common tactics utilised to

cuckoo addresses. Instances of firearms being kept visible at cuckooed addresses to intimidate victims were reported, as well as drug users being seriously assaulted or even tortured as a show of strength to other users and gangs.

- 10.3 70% of areas reported violence used towards other members of the gang, usually runners, when they made mistakes or were accused of stealing. If drugs or profits are lost by a gang member due to being robbed or arrested they will be held responsible for the loss and take on that debt, which can have serious consequences for the individual.
- 10.4 The type of violence adopted by gangs changed across police areas, being dependent upon the prevalent gang and their chosen style. Knives are the most common weapon. Homemade weapons, bats, hammers, Tasers, boiling water and acid are also noted.
- 10.5 The use of Tasers and acid is a developing trend and was not highlighted in the 2014 assessment. Gangs carrying bottles of ammonia has also been reported.
- 10.6 Many areas reported that county lines gangs are linked to firearms, with other areas highlighting access to firearms when required. However the use of firearms was typically to make threats, with most areas stating they have never been discharged or that it was very rare.

11. Telephone Lines

- 11.1 The traditional modus operandi of a county line gang is for the deal line phone to be held outside the county location, usually under the control of a senior member in the urban location i.e. London.
- 11.2 Gangs use a relay system, whereby customers place orders via the line. Another phone is then used to contact the runner in the county location, providing instructions on where and when the deal will take place. Usually this number will be long standing, representing a brand that signifies trust, value and quality to its customers.
- 11.3 Some of these numbers have been active for years and there are instances where they are sold between gangs, transferring the customer base.
- 11.4 This traditional method remains in over half the reporting areas, however a number of areas stated that some gangs are now keeping the phone line in the county location.
- 11.5 A significant change of trend since the 2014 assessment entails the use of multiple lines within a single market, under the control of the same gang, combined with a willingness to change the deal line number.
- 11.6 Regardless of the actual tactic, we assess that the lines are providing an efficient communication platform, upon which gangs can anonymously acquire the key tool in their strategy, with little to no audit trail that specifically identifies them. Each mobile phone number has the potential to interact with hundreds of

customers and facilitate thousands of deals. This creates distance between gang hierarchy and the market place and affords users 24 hours a day access to class A drugs. The frequency and volume of supply this generates is assessed as a key driver for why so many young and vulnerable persons are exploited to achieve effective drug distribution.

12. Transport

- 12.1 Rail networks and cars continue to dominate the travel methods utilised by county line gangs. Gangs also continue to use taxi firms within county locations.
- 12.2 A small number of areas noted private cars being used, however the majority of gangs use hire cars. Hire cars are commonly booked for gang members by adult drug users or female associates, often presenting as intended drivers. In some examples, these individuals will drive the vehicles.
- 12.3 Reporting suggests a decline in the use of coaches.

13. Conclusion

- 13.1 Since the 2014 assessment, county lines gang related drug dealing has remained a threat across multiple police regions, impacting upon numerous county towns.
- 13.2 Through developed insight, we can identify numerous potential triggers:
 - Towns within which prisons are located, to which gang members are sentenced; leading to visitors identifying new market opportunities.
 - New networks developing between gang members meeting in prisons.
 - Drug users travelling into county markets to buy from gangs – revealing their home town as a new potential market.
 - Gangs co-operating (against traditional feuding) reducing competition and opening free enterprise within nearby markets.
 - The provision of local housing authority accommodation for gang members, associates or associated vulnerable persons facilitates opportunities for gangs to branch out into new towns and markets through third party introductions.
 - A new trend is noted within existing county lines markets for gang members to become settled in relationships and permanent accommodation, extending the urban hub to a satellite location and, in doing so, extending the hub part way to a new market.
- 13.3 Heroin and crack cocaine remain the principal drugs supplied, with 70% of areas stating gangs are solely supplying these drugs. 30% of areas saw gangs selling powder cocaine and cannabis, however this was typically a significantly smaller part of a group's enterprise.
- 13.4 Despite long standing deal lines being held in the urban location continuing to prevail, the emerging trend of changing the number or holding the line within the county market is noted.

- 13.5 The taking over of addresses (cuckooing) and exploitation of vulnerable adults remains a key threat.
- 13.6 There has been an increase in awareness of the roles played by adult females, with 90% of areas reporting gangs utilising / exploiting women.
- 13.7 Since initial reporting, there has been an increase in awareness of the use of local and urban children to convey drugs into and supply them throughout county lines markets. This poses many risks to children, not least violence, intimidation, unhygienic and unsafe practices, falling into class A drug use and in some cases child sexual exploitation.
- 13.8 Groups continue to use violence and the fear of violence to establish and maintain a county line, with an increase in incidents towards competitors occurring when groups enter a new market or fight for territory. As the density of gangs seeking to assert county market dominance increases, so will the likelihood of violent feuds and escalation of violent methods such as Tasers and acid.

14. Legislation and alternative considerations

- 14.1 The 'Sentencing Council - Drug Offences Definitive Guidelines' identify a list of aggravating features, some of which are highly pertinent to gang related exploitation linked to facilitating drugs supply. These should be highlighted to courts to ensure the aggravated nature of a particular scenario attracts the most appropriately informed sentence. Examples include:
- Using or permitting an under 18 to deliver a controlled drug
 - Drug supply conducted within proximity of a school
 - Targeting premises used to accommodate vulnerable persons
 - Presence of others – especially children
 - Presence of a weapon, when not charged separately
 - Established evidence or community impact
- 14.2 The 'Sentencing Council – Drug Offences Definitive Guidelines' also provide mitigating examples, reducing the seriousness of being concerned in drug supply offences, including:
- Involvement due to pressure, intimidation or coercion, falling short of duress
 - Offenders' vulnerability was exploited
 - Age and/or lack of maturity where it affects the responsibility of the offender
 - Mental disorder or learning difficulty
- 14.3 These examples are often present and at the core of gangs targeting vulnerable persons to assist drug supply.
- 14.4 Anecdotal evidence suggests that a drugs conviction is often seen as an occupational hazard within gang culture, and at times even a badge of honour,

whereas the potential to be convicted for modern slavery is reported to have attached stigma.

- 14.5 The Modern Slavery Act 2015 creates opportunity to consider the circumstances of a county line – particularly those where significant exploitation of the young and vulnerable has prevailed.

15. Observations

- 15.1 County lines gang activity generates considerable harm at both the urban core and within the county market location, generating a need for multi-agency responses, with safeguarding at the very fore of priorities. One of the key features of a county line is the unrelenting recruitment, coercion and exploitation of young and vulnerable persons. Having a capacity to protect these individuals is key to delivering an effective response.
- 15.2 The most positive safeguarding outcomes to date have involved a truly collaborative approach, with the police engaging local multi-agency safeguarding partners, housing authorities, town councils, public health, charities and the media. This level of engagement is recommended at local levels.
- 15.3 Successfully pursuing criminal gang activity is informed by knowing which gang members are where and who they are affiliated to, and ensuring individuals are appropriately safeguarded. It is recognised that an individual has the potential to be exploited in one county market and be the exploiter in another.
- 15.4 It is essential that criminal justice decisions correctly focus on issues of 'aggravating or mitigating' circumstances, leading to the appropriate disposal and/or safeguarding of a person in custody – from the moment they are encountered.
- 15.5 Non-contract mobile phones remain central to county line market domination, customer communication, supply tactics and logistics. It is common for the holder of the 'deal line' to operate with anonymity and distance from the market. We assess that disrupting this criminal tactic would have a significant impact upon gang related class A drug supply and associated exploitation.
- 15.6 In the continued response to the threat posed by urban street gangs engaged in county lines criminality, we assess that multi-agency safeguarding coupled with law enforcement intelligence and operations are essential for the protection of young and vulnerable persons, while generating criminal justice outcomes.