



# Policing County Lines: Impact of Covid-19

## Interim research briefing, Feb 2021<sup>1</sup>

The second briefing from [ongoing research](#) indicates that restrictions introduced in response to Covid-19 have forced adaptations in the methods used by County Lines drug supply networks and have impacted upon the ways law enforcement work to detect and dismantle County Lines activity, as well as safeguard those vulnerable to criminal exploitation.

### Key Findings

As the UK continues to impose Covid-19 related restrictions, ongoing concerns include:

- **Adapting County Lines supply methods** – Increased detection of activity on the rails has seen some movement towards the use of the roads and to greater exploitation of children from local areas.
- **Vulnerability** – Exploitation of vulnerable young people remains high; reports suggest increased targeting of females, young white males and children from affluent backgrounds, with social media being used by perpetrators to facilitate the recruitment of young people and the supply of drugs.
- **Intelligence sharing** – A lack of intelligence due to school closures and reduced capacity of other frontline agencies meant that referrals for at-risk children had reduced; and police were concerned about the lack of identification of missing children and the possibility of them slipping through the net.

### Why is this important?

Lockdown restrictions introduced in response to the COVID-19 pandemic have both hindered and helped law enforcement to address County Lines activity and the associated exploitation. During the first lockdown, police reported benefitting from the ability to reallocate resources from the night-time economy toward neighbourhood policing, particularly in communities considered high-risk. However, as detection of suspicious activity progressed, so too did the supply methods and exploitative techniques of County Lines networks, with drug dealers adapting to their new, more restrictive, environment.

With reports of an increased exploitation risk to females, vulnerable drug users, children from more affluent backgrounds and – in some areas - university students, perpetrators circumvented the stereotypical victim profile, focusing their efforts on those with less risk of apprehension from law enforcement. This also coincided with the increased exploitation of local children to

engage in County Lines drug supply. The ease with which exploiters are able to target new groups has, in large part, been attributed to the increased use of social media by children and young people during lockdown. Indeed, findings of this study demonstrate that platforms, such as Instagram, Snapchat, and web forums provide spaces for perpetrators to circulate drug-related imagery and offers of 'paid' work via involvement in drug supply.

With the country currently in its third national lockdown, the risks to children and young people of all backgrounds continues to be of paramount concern to law enforcement and wider organisations.

### Recommendations

1. Police forces should **maintain neighbourhood policing approaches in high-risk communities**, especially in light of increased cuckooing.
2. All police forces should **ensure accurate data is provided to regional level County Lines analysts**, because consistent and concerted data collection is needed to better understand patterns of exploitation.
3. Where possible, **police should continue to develop strong relationships with partners** to enhance intelligence gathering and share good practice.
4. More **intelligence should be collected on the middle-tier actors** involved in County Lines.
5. Paying close attention to platforms such as Snapchat and Instagram, **increased analysis of social media activity is required** to identify new grooming patterns used by perpetrators.

### Research overview

Through an analysis of primary interviews and a review of published sources (including media articles and government reports) this project aims to unpack the contours of risk related to the exploitation of young people in County Lines drug supply during the pandemic. The 17 interviewees collated for this report were drawn from law enforcement, including analysts and coordinators from the National County Lines Coordination Centre (NCLCC), specialist officers from the Regional Organised Crime Units (ROCU) and officers from territorial police forces across England. These were supplemented by additional input from 13 statutory and non-statutory practitioners working in care and safeguarding roles. Participants were asked to reflect on their personal experiences of working during the pandemic, its effect on the risk to policing effectively and observed impacts on activity related to the County Lines model.

<sup>1</sup> This report was prepared by Dr. Ben Brewster, Dr. Grace Robinson, Vicky Brotherton, and Prof. Sir Bernard Silverman from the University of Nottingham's Rights Lab, and Prof. Dave Walsh from the De Montfort

University School of Law. The ongoing project, 'Covid-19 and Child Criminal Exploitation: Closing Urgent Knowledge and Data Gaps on the Implications of Pandemic for County Lines,' is funded by UKRI.

## Impact on detection and enforcement

Over the course of the pandemic, police remained quietly confident in their ongoing ability to detect and enforce County Lines activity, taking advantage of a reallocation of resources and relying on neighbourhood policing, increased community intelligence and stronger partnership work. This confidence was more explicit among interviews with British Transport Police (BTP), who followed a disruption strategy that focused on making the use of trains increasingly difficult for County Lines networks. BTP benefitted from quieter train platforms and the resulting improvement in the ability to spot suspicious activity. Though initially effected by staff self-isolating, BTP took advantage of increased visibility of young people to stop and question their reasons for travel and they were quickly faced with young people in possession of false documentation, incorrect/invalid tickets and a lack of credible justification for their journey. Successful interceptions also provided opportunities to apply safeguarding measures to exploited young people.

With the aforementioned disruption efforts of the BTP increasing the risk to County Lines networks, some drug dealers shifted their consignments onto the roads, notably through the use of private hire vehicles.

*“We have seen the movement away from the trains, when they go off the trains, they go on the road again [and] the tactics that we can deploy significantly increase on the road. Because you have cameras, you have a car, you have a vehicle registration number and you have a driver who has a driving licence.”*

However, COVID-19 restrictions, made some areas of policing more challenging. For example, some forces spoke of limits to their ability to detect drug supply due to a restriction on the use of police sniffer dogs. Further, the ability and speed at which interviews could be conducted with suspects was delayed due to a lack available personnel, in particular with lawyers who were working from home or unable to attend police stations while self-isolating. Significant and ongoing delays with court procedures continue to create uncertainty among frontline service providers, exacerbating the risk to, and vulnerability of, young people who are left in limbo as a result.

## Impact on safeguarding & vulnerability

Overall, police expressed dissatisfaction at the constraints the pandemic imposed on their ability to effectively safeguard young people. Doorstep interaction impeded engagement and meant that sensitive issues such as drug use could not be properly addressed. There were also concerns about the reduced level of information fed into the police about at-risk young people from schools and other agencies, with one force reporting a 30% drop in referrals. This reduction in referrals contributed to a lack of intelligence to alert law enforcement as to when a child had gone missing. A recent study reported a 35% decrease in missing children reports.<sup>2</sup> While this may have been expected, concerns remain around the increasing vulnerabilities of those that do go missing,

especially children under the care of the local authority, who comprise a significant proportion of all missing cases.<sup>3</sup>

The aforementioned increase – or acknowledgement – of the exploitation of children from more affluent backgrounds reiterated the notion that positioning financial incentives as the only driver of involvement in County Lines is too simplistic. Indeed, in some cases vulnerabilities presented themselves in the form of isolation, a need for belonging and emotional neglect.

As advised in our first Policy Briefing, criminals will adapt their practice in order to make their offending harder to detect, so gradual shifts towards the exploitation of young people that make their operations more resilient is a predictable progression. Those falling victim to the enhanced tactics of perpetrators include females and, reported in one region, university students.<sup>4</sup>

*“We’ve seen county lines either targeting students or actually having people who work for or run County Lines, gaining places on university courses, because you can pitch up in the halls of residence and you’ve got a pretty captive market at the moment”.*

Notwithstanding that the increased use of females was seemingly a national trend, the certainty with which we can attribute that to Covid-19 remains unclear. The exploitation of these individuals may well have persisted under the radar of the authorities, only being brought into the spotlight due to the lockdown restrictions. Females provide a clear opportunity for exploitation through the possession of drugs and weapons as they are less likely to be subjected to stop and search, offering perpetrators greater protection from law enforcement.

## Adaptations to drug supply methods

There was agreement among the various police forces that County Lines networks varied from region to region, with little evidence suggesting ‘one-size fits all’ adaptations to the operation. Where the first national lockdown had demanded changes in supply methods e.g., perpetrators using local children to transport drugs, the adaptations that had proved successful at evading detection from law enforcement, were sustained through 2020. For example, with cuckooed properties seemingly easier to detect, some areas reported an increase in ‘day-tripping’ by drug supply lines rather than establishing a local supply base.

By July, County Lines networks were reported to have returned to operating at normal levels. In one part of England, police documented inconspicuous methods of transport including the use of canal barges to traffic drugs along waterways. The use of drones was reported in another.

In the South of England, it was reported that County Lines networks had reduced the time that they were spending in drug market locations, preferring instead to make more frequent day-trips. Success of neighbourhood policing and the ability of law enforcement to identify cuckooed properties made it more difficult for such networks to set up a base for any significant period of time:

<sup>2</sup> University of Liverpool, “Missing in lockdown – new report reveals the vulnerable are more at risk”, November 17, 2020 <https://www.liverpool.ac.uk/coronavirus/news/articles/missing-in-lockdown-new-report-reveals-the-vulnerable-are-more-at-risk/>

<sup>3</sup> National Crime Agency, “Missing Persons Data Report 2016/2017”, July 1, 2019 <https://www.nationalcrimeagency.gov.uk/who-we-are/publications/304-2016-17-ukmpu-data-report-v1/file>

<sup>4</sup> Evening Standard, “County Lines gangs ‘targeting students at top university’s’ as experts issue warning”, November 13, 2020 <https://www.standard.co.uk/news/crime/county-lines-target-university-students-children-s-society-b68355.html>

*“Another issue that a lot of the lines had was that it was becoming too easy to identify the Cuckoo addresses from which they were dealing ... what we saw during lockdown is, whereas before we would see addresses cuckooed for maybe a week, two weeks, and dealers would set up residence, we saw a shift to a quick cycle. So, they'd set up in an address for maybe one two days, and then move because it was too obvious”.*

Yet in the North West of England there was intelligence to suggest that some County Lines networks were reluctant to travel due to the restrictions and added risks, instead requesting drug users and commuters travel to them to collect their drugs.

With the country on lockdown, and many children remaining at home with parents, there were reports of some County Lines perpetrators becoming more involved in the operational aspect of the business, completing journeys themselves in the absence of being able to rely upon exploited children. Police also reported an increased shift towards the recruitment of local young people to mirror the demographic of the drug market area, rather than relying on those travelling from urban centres - who may present as more conspicuous to authorities.

Consistent with media reports<sup>5</sup>, findings demonstrated that County Lines actors had attempted to use disguises in order to make their travel seem legitimate. Uniforms that included delivery service drivers, supermarket staff, healthcare workers and construction workers were all mentioned by our participants. While the use of disguises by criminal groups is not new, increased travel risks placed more importance on the anonymity of drug dealers. In other cases, young people questioned on train platforms informed officers that they were travelling to food banks or the funerals of relatives that had supposedly died from Covid-19.

Certain new ways of living, implemented by the Government, had worked to the advantage of offenders and made it more difficult for law enforcement to identify criminals, providing them with a greater level of protection and anonymity.

*“Face masks... brilliant for County Lines, because you've got an absolutely justifiable reason for covering the majority of your face while you're out and about, which makes identification very difficult”.*

Despite initial speculation that the street-level price of Class A drugs would increase due to the closure of importation routes and difficulty in accessing supply, our participants did not report a noticeable change at street level. However, fluctuations were felt at the wholesale level, where the price of cocaine and heroin was estimated to have risen by up to £10,000 per kilo. Those buying drugs in bulk circumvented price increases by increasing the use of adulterants, impacting upon the purity of crack cocaine and heroin received by users.

The successes of Operation Venetic—the UK's arm of the international police operation behind the EncroChat<sup>6</sup> investigations, which saw the arrests of upwards of 746

criminals during the first national lockdown<sup>7</sup>—may have had an impact on the availability, and thus price, of heroin and crack cocaine. Yet, the extent to which the Operation affected lower-level drug supply, and the County Lines method, is unclear.

## Knowledge gaps and ongoing risks

In the absence of comparative data, it is difficult to assess whether some of the trends reported here are as a result of lockdown restrictions, or whether they had gradually been taking shape and become exaggerated by Covid-19. Of concern is that there is currently no mandatory obligation for police forces to report data to the analysts sitting within the NCLCC, which runs the risks of overlooking important trends within certain localities.

We can say with confidence that the Covid-19 restrictions continue to have an impact upon the ability of organisations to safeguard those exploited for the purposes of County Lines, and ongoing lockdown restrictions exacerbate feelings of isolation and disenfranchisement for many children and young people.

There is a lack of clarity nationally with regard to the illicit finance being made from County Lines. While forces acknowledge the exploitation of children for financial purposes, how transactions are made and where the profit is being placed remain unclear.

*“[There are] bits of information around card readers... and suggestions of some moving towards cryptocurrencies”*

An additional lack of clarity surrounds the ‘recruitment’ of vulnerable people for County Lines. Social media platforms such as Snapchat and Instagram are increasingly being referenced as being important in the early stages of grooming. Yet, the methods of contact, and the imagery and content used to lure potential victims is lesser understood and remains a significant knowledge gap. Peer recruitment remains important in the referrals of other young people to perpetrators, and the ease at which County Lines networks are able to infiltrate friendship groups is an ongoing concern and knowledge gap.

*“If one young person has been recruited and is doing very well and is flashing the cash, or appears to have resources, that is appealing to others”.*

Despite successes in some areas, the pandemic continues to pose challenges for police, who have to adapt to the evolving methods and tactics of County Lines dealers. In the absence of referrals from partners, the safety and wellbeing of children and young people remains a key concern for police and their partner organisations. As our ongoing research focuses on the safeguarding of children and young people during Covid-19, our forthcoming, and final, briefing report aims to offer valuable insights into the knowledge gaps and ongoing risks identified throughout this report.

<sup>5</sup> The Guardian, “County lines gangs disguised drug couriers as key workers during coronavirus lockdown”, July 5, 2020 <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2020/jul/05/county-lines-gangs-drug-couriers-key-workers-coronavirus-lockdown-cocaine-heroin>

<sup>6</sup> EncroChat was an encrypted messaging platform, allegedly used to plan criminal activities. A Europe-wide investigation by Police infiltrated the network between March and June 2020.

<sup>7</sup> Max Daly, “What the EncroChat Busts Tell Us About Organised Crime in Europe.” VICE, July 8, 2020, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/ep4b8m/encrochat-europe-organised-crime-busts-cocaine-guns>.