

# NCA

National Crime Agency

# County Lines Violence, Exploitation & Drug Supply 2017

National Briefing Report

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## Introduction

This briefing report provides a national overview on the threat of 'county lines' drug supply, violence and exploitation. It supports Home Office, NPCC and wider stakeholder priorities including those of the Ending Gang Violence and Exploitation (EGVE) programme. In particular, this report contributes towards the EGVE objective of 'Tackling County Lines'.

It is the third annual NCA report on this threat, following an initial assessment in 2015 and subsequent update report in 2016. The report also forms part of the NCA's briefing requirement to the quarterly Gangs Inter-Ministerial Group (IMG).

For the purposes of this report, a typical county lines scenario is defined by the following components:

- a. A group (not necessarily affiliated as a gang) establishes a network between an urban hub and county location, into which drugs (primarily heroin and crack cocaine) are supplied.
- b. A branded mobile phone line is established in the market, to which orders are placed by introduced customers. The line will commonly (but not exclusively) be controlled by a third party, remote from the market.
- c. The group exploits young or vulnerable persons, to achieve the storage and/or supply of drugs, movement of cash proceeds and to secure the use of dwellings (commonly referred to as cuckooing).
- d. The group or individuals exploited by them regularly travel between the urban hub and the county market, to replenish stock and deliver cash.
- e. The group is inclined to use intimidation, violence and weapons, including knives, corrosives and firearms.

This report does not address wider drug markets or supply issues and has sought to distinguish county lines from more conventional drugs supply methodologies.

The information assessed for this report was provided by 43 territorial forces across England & Wales (100%). British Transport Police and Police Scotland also provided information, but this has not been included for statistical analysis in order to be consistent with the two previous NCA reports on county lines, plus Police Scotland have their own threat assessment and BTP's perspective is different from that of regional police forces.

This report adopts the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child definition of a child, which is everyone under the age of 18.

## Key Findings

1. County lines groups have a proven ability to adapt their operating methods and practices, including changing their use of phones, transport, accommodation or vulnerable people. This is to evade law enforcement intervention as well as strengthen their criminal enterprise.
2. County lines groups impose high levels of violence, including the prevalent use of weapons and firearms to intimidate and control members of the group and associated victims.
3. Although the exploitation of children continues to be reported, the true scale of abuse remains an intelligence gap in many parts of the country. It is often difficult to assess accurately, requiring focused and systematic data capture, as well as multi-sector collaboration to develop and maintain reliable data. A clear national picture cannot be determined currently.
4. County lines groups continue to pose a significant threat to vulnerable people and explore a range of opportunities to identify potential new victims. Victims are exposed to varying levels of exploitation including physical, mental and sexual harm, with some over protracted periods. Some vulnerable individuals are trafficked into remote markets to work whilst others are falsely imprisoned in their own homes, which have been taken over (cuckooed) using force or coercion.
5. Whilst London continues to be the dominant urban source of county lines offending, a number of other export hubs are now being reported across the country, reflecting the threat's growth and evolution.
6. The use of anonymised mobile phones remains an essential feature of county lines, as well as other forms of drug supply. However county lines groups increasingly operate more than one branded line. Some use multiple telephone numbers which all connect back to the core deal line, whilst other groups use cloned phones, which mimic the identity of the main county line phone number. This increases the resilience of the criminal groups to law enforcement intervention.

## **Information base**

This report draws on returns from UK police forces (including Police Scotland and British Transport Police).

The intelligence collection period for this report is Oct 2016 to Jun 2017.

## **Purpose**

This report aims to inform the response to gang violence and exploitation linked to county lines drug supply and provide insight into the current national situation.

This report is the third of three, which refreshes the understanding of the threat, identifies new trends and maps the scope of the issue across England and Wales. It builds on the 2015 and 2016 assessments, with specific focus on highlighting significant changes and new or emerging trends.

The report informs the cross-government 'Ending Gang Violence & Exploitation' initiative, as well as the work of Home Office, police and wider partners, with a combination of national overview and regional / local context.

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## **1. County Lines Methodology**

1.1 This report focuses on the specific method of drug supply commonly referred to as county lines. County lines relates to the supply of class A drugs (primarily crack cocaine and heroin) from an urban hub into rural towns or county locations. This is facilitated by a group who may not necessarily be affiliated as a gang, but who have developed networks across geographical boundaries to access and exploit existing drugs markets in these areas.

1.2 A key feature of county lines drug supply is the use of a branded mobile phone line which is established in the marketplace and promoted throughout the existing customer base. Group messages are sent out periodically to the customer base to advertise the availability of drugs and orders are placed back to this line in response. A relay system (another phone) is then used to pass orders onto dealers in the rural marketplace. The branded phone line is generally controlled by senior group members who are traditionally located in the urban hub. However, we are increasingly seeing incidents of the phone being held closer to the rural marketplace. Some phones are reported to move periodically between these market locations.

1.3 The exploitation of young and vulnerable persons is a common feature in the facilitation of county lines drugs supply, whether for the storage or supply of drugs, the movement of cash, or to secure the use of dwellings held by vulnerable people in the rural marketplace (commonly referred to as cuckooing).

1.4 County lines groups use high levels of violence and intimidation to establish and maintain markets, whether that's forcing existing suppliers out, as a means to enact some form of retribution, controlling vulnerable individuals or as a general show of strength. Levels of violence vary considerably but it often includes the use of knives, corrosives, firearms and other weapons. It may also include sexual violence and sexual exploitation.

1.5 The group, or individuals exploited by them, travel regularly between the urban hub and the rural marketplace, to replenish stock and deliver cash. This movement is not unique to county lines drug supply but is generally more frequent and in smaller deal amounts compared to most other drug supply methods.

## **2. New & Emerging County Lines Trends**

2.1 23% of forces (10) report county lines groups using accommodation other than that acquired by cuckooing in the rural marketplace. This includes the use of serviced apartments, holiday lets, budget hotels and caravan parks. This could indicate groups are beginning to move away from using cuckooing in its traditional form. County lines groups prefer to pay cash where possible and often use network associates to arrange these facilities, as a means of distancing themselves from the criminality.

2.2 County lines networks are increasingly operating from more than one phone number. This can indicate the emergence of a new spin-off line (separately branded line run by the same county lines network) but generally it involves the use of different phone numbers which all relate to/work for the same branded county line. 26% of

forces (11) note evidence of county lines groups changing phone numbers/deal lines, including some on a regular basis. There is some indication of regional variation here; reporting indicates that Liverpool-based lines tend to change frequently whereas London lines tend to stay the same for longer.

2.3 18% of force returns (8) reference potentially complicit companies providing services to county lines groups, including taxis, fast food outlets and car hire firms. Most concern suspicions of complicity rather than confirmed reports. Such facilitators would generally be used to distance the group from criminality i.e. to hide travel patterns, methods and the identity of county line nominals.

2.4 Traditionally a stash house is established in the rural area to facilitate efficient supply. However, at least one force reports that drugs are increasingly being kept by various people at different addresses in the rural marketplace. Drugs are often transported frequently in small quantities i.e. batches of wraps, but the number of wraps being transported seems to vary considerably.

2.5 30% of force (13) reports include references to 'plugging' (concealing drugs internally) with both males and females involved. Historically, the plugging of drugs is a common tactic used for the transport of drugs between the urban hub and rural marketplace, but plugging is also now commonly used for the storage of drugs as well. This poses significant health risks, as those concealing the drugs will often do so for extended periods of time. This is often in unhygienic and unsafe conditions with the individuals who are secreting the drugs also potentially being subject to violence and intimidation.

2.6 There is some indication that county lines nominals are aware of law enforcement seizure requirements and limitations, so will do all they can to factor this into their practises. County lines suspects often utilise a little and often approach to the supply of drugs and movement of cash and will vary and limit their use of bank accounts, ensuring proceeds are cashed out in the urban hub soon after being deposited.

2.7 The replacing or rotating of county lines operatives in rural marketplaces is referenced in 12% of forces (5). This is done to prevent these individuals becoming known to local police.

'County line networks often bring their own nominals into the rural marketplace in pairs. They will stay for a month or so before returning home and being replaced by others -this is done to hinder police detection and/or familiarity with these nominals.' - NPCC force.

2.8 The widespread and frequent use of violence and carrying of weapons is noted in 2017 returns. This is either as a mechanism to enforce recovery of drug debts, to obtain retribution for drug losses or to settle turf wars. Knives, baseball bats, ammonia/corrosives and other weapons are used to enforce these threats. There is also notable evidence of firearms being seen or used to threaten in connection to county lines activity.

2.9 13% of forces (6) note the emergence of county lines groups conducting franchise style operations, renting county lines and customer contacts to other criminal

groups. In some cases, the line owners also facilitate the supply of drugs to these groups. There is also some reporting of lines being up for sale or sold.

2.10 Some local drug users offer their services to a number of different county lines networks, offering to run drugs to and from the urban hub for payment in money or drugs. 58% of forces (25) report that local drug users are used to transport drugs. However, this figure does not differentiate between those who are complicit and those who are coerced.

'Once a vulnerable young person becomes sufficiently embedded in the criminality and begins to act on their own volition, their affiliation to a defined London gang sometimes becomes blurred with them often crossing over and dealing for multiple gangs who are active in their county.' - NPCC force.

2.11 Some county lines groups use existing criminal families/networks located within the rural marketplace as a means of assisting the group to conduct their activity and to open up a network. Others are reported to take over existing local drug supply lines and turn them into county lines.

2.12 County lines groups are able to adapt their methods with ease and frequency. Changeable methods include their use/exploitation of:

- Transport; including method, route, frequency, payment, person travelling
- Phones; including changing handsets, SIM cards, numbers (sometimes frequently), varying the line's location and those who control it
- Accommodation; including the exploitation of a wider set of vulnerable people, use of hotels, holiday lets, serviced apartments, caravans
- Children; including 'clean skins' (those without a record), missing persons, children in care, children exposed to broader vulnerable issues
- Vulnerable; including drug users, those with mental health issues, those with physical health issues, those at a point of crisis
- Complicit individuals; including different businesses or individuals
- Money laundering; including running cash, depositing proceeds into bank accounts of multiple network associates.

### **3. Scope and Scale of County Lines**

3.1 There is evidence of county lines activity in 88% of force returns (38). 12% of forces (5) report no evidence. 81% of forces (35) report as definite importers of county lines and 30% of forces (13) report as definite exporters.

3.2 43% of forces (19) provided data on the actual numbers of county lines in their area. From this, and on the basis that there must be at least one line present in each force that reported evidence of county lines activity, a conservative estimate is that there are at least 720 lines across England and Wales. The actual number may well be considerably higher, as many of these areas are likely to have more than one line. It



should also be noted that there was evidence, albeit limited, of lines closing, therefore it is possible that not all of these lines will necessarily remain running long term.

3.3 We estimate that there are at least 283 lines originating in London. Again, this number should be considered as a conservative estimate given that some forces were not able to confirm sufficiently detailed or accurate data on the total number of county lines in their area.

3.4 Forces were asked whether lines were established or had emerged in 2017. For the majority of lines (371 of the 720) this information was not provided, often citing a lack of sufficiently detailed coverage or resource to monitor the changing picture to this extent. For the forces that did provide this data, 172 lines were established and 177 were emerging. The high proportion of emerging lines may indicate that county lines activity is increasing. However, with limitations around the data i.e. the difficulties distinguishing between a county line and 'conventional' drug supply lines, and lack of more detailed and accurate information, it is not possible to confirm that assessment at this time. The data does indicate that county lines markets can change considerably from year to year.

3.5 33% of forces (14) reported having established lines in their area, 19% of forces (8) reported having emerging lines and a further 49% of forces (21) reported having county lines activity but could not distinguish whether it was established or emerging.

3.6 Motivating factors for setting up / utilising the county lines methodology include huge profits, reduced competition from other drugs OCG's, receptive customer bases, less intimidation or resistance from local dealers and a lesser risk of being known by local police.

3.7 Not all county lines operate 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. Some operate more sporadically, such as when they have a commodity to sell. One perpetrator was reported to save up money in the rural market before moving back to the urban hub to spend the proceeds.

3.8 The Metropolitan Police force area is mentioned as the exporting hub of county lines going into 65% of other forces (28). Merseyside is the second highest exporter affecting 42% of forces (18) nationally. County lines originating from London predominantly impact forces in the south and east but some also affect forces further north. County lines originating from Merseyside have a greater impact on forces in the north west but also impact forces in the south east.

3.9 The true scale of county lines activity is difficult to determine with accuracy as its nature is fluid and the intelligence surrounding the threat is not always clear, nor is it recorded consistently. Elements of county lines drug supply are likely to exist in all forces across England and Wales. It is also likely that the number of forces with exporting lines will increase as more criminal groups adopt the county lines methodology.

#### 4. Drugs

4.1 The most commonly reported drug being supplied via the county lines methodology is heroin, with 79% of forces (34) reporting it being sold. This is followed by crack cocaine, with 70% of forces (30) recording it being supplied. This aligns to the traditional county lines model which predominantly catered to the addicted daytime economy drug markets supplying heroin and crack cocaine. However, some force returns noted evidence to suggest groups were now targeting different drugs scenes, including the night time economy (club scene) and selling other class A drugs. This could indicate an evolution of the model. Alternatively it could indicate that other types of drugs line have been incorrectly included in the data capture for this report.

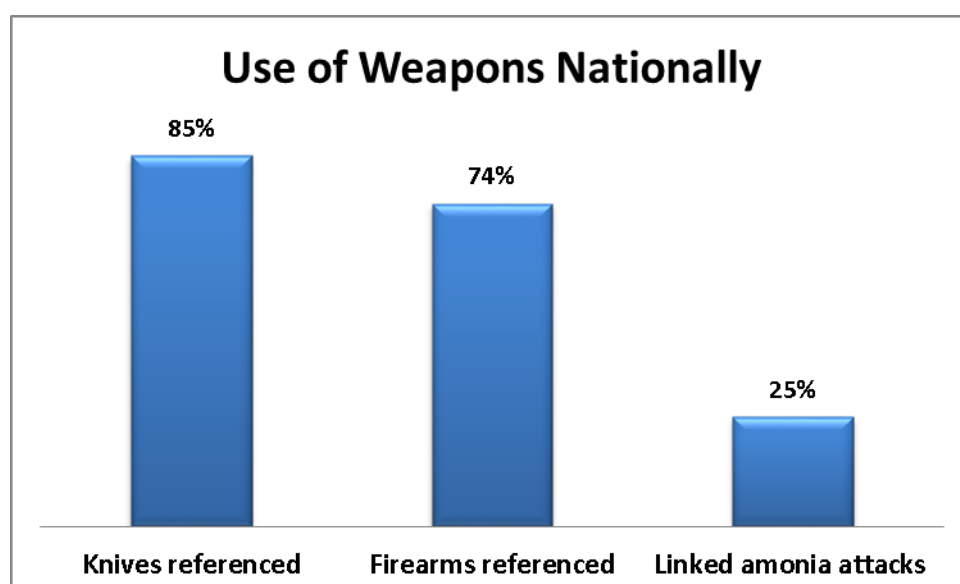
4.2 The synthetic cannabinoid commonly referred to as Spice was reported by 9% of forces (4) as being supplied by county lines groups. One force also mentioned new psychoactive substances (NPS) being supplied.

4.3 More than a third of forces (35%) reference the supply of cannabis by county lines groups. However, this is generally referenced as a secondary drug and there is some suggestion that it is supplied by runners as an independent supplementary side-line to generate additional income.

#### 5. Violence and Weapons

5.1 Virtually all forces that reported county lines activity also referenced that the individuals responsible were involved with carrying weapons. Knives were mentioned by 85% of forces (35) and firearms were mentioned by 74% of forces (32). Approximately a quarter of forces reported intelligence relating to the use of firearms to threaten, however there were no reported incidents of guns being discharged in relation to county lines activity.

Figure 1. Graph outlining the use of weapons nationally.



5.2 Other violence-related crimes reported by forces included kidnapping, robbery, assault, and aggravated burglary. There were also reports of exploited victims being forced to strip and then being scalded with boiling water.

5.3 The use of acid or ammonia was noted in the 2016 NCA County Lines report as a potential emerging trend. This year, 25% of forces (11) reported evidence of possession or use of acid, corrosives, noxious substances in relation to vitriolage (acid throwing attacks), with one force reporting potential evidence. About half of the cases referred to ammonia rather than acid as the substance used.

'Over 50% of the acid attacks could be attributed to county lines activity. Nearly 70% of these acid attacks also involved other forms of violence ie GBH, stabbing etc.' NPCC force.

5.4 42% of forces (18) mentioned homicide in their returns. These relate to a total of 19 separate deaths including two homicides which were mentioned by one force. However, it is often not clear whether these homicides were directly connected to county lines activity. Deaths were referenced by two other forces, although it's not clear if these were killings or not. Our judgement is that there are definite connections to county lines in at least 21% (9) of the cases reported.

5.5 'Taxing' is a newly-reported term which describes the infliction of violence in order to obtain control i.e. the marking or injuring of a gang member who has done wrong, as a show of strength to others. It is thought to be used in a similar way to the

'A male's hand was severed and both legs broken. The victim was male, with intelligence supporting that the incident was a drug taxing. The victim is believed to be part of a county lines network with the offenders being a local drug line. It's suggested to be a punishment attack by the persons the victim was running drugs for, for having used drugs/spent proceeds himself.' - NPCC force.

term 'debt bondage' i.e. the creation of a drugs debt, perhaps through fake robbery, which the victim then has to pay off. Evidence of taxing was reported by 35% of forces (15) with a further 5% of forces (2) noting potential evidence.

5.6 5% of forces (2) reported the discovery of numerous knives, generally kitchen knives, being hidden in various places throughout properties being used for supply. They were generally out of plain sight but concealed amongst furniture in different rooms for ease of access if required.

5.7 Although a number of forces have anecdotally reported an increase in violence and knife crime (including the presence of knives and knife wounding), there is little evidence or detail in the returns to confirm either the raw data which reflects such 'increases', or the sufficiently detailed reporting to confirm attribution to county lines activity.

5.8 Numerous incidents of serious violence have been reported and often describe the slashing, stabbing, beating and breaking bones of victims. There are also reports of limbs being severed, skull fractures and attacks by numerous gang members simultaneously. Sexual violence was referenced by 21% of forces (9), often with female drug users being forced into sex to pay off drug debts, or nominals being raped as a form of punishment.

5.9 58% of forces (25) reported county lines related turf wars occurring in the past year. These include violent and destructive conflicts between rival groups/lines competing for market dominance, using violence and intimidation to force rival groups out and impose control. Anecdotal reporting suggests these turf wars are a major cause of the increasing incidents of violence in rural areas. However, more focused and detailed analysis of related incidents would need to be carried out before this could be confirmed.

5.10 Reasons given for the use of violence were diverse but included competition between county lines groups and local dealers, revenge violence (often due to robbery or intimidation of runners) and robberies to enforce/create drug debts. They also included violence due to unpaid drug debts, a general show of strength, to intimidate individuals into working for the line, to obtain control over an address (cuckooing) or to punish unacceptable behaviour e.g. consuming drugs rather than selling them.

5.11 Whilst the statistics highlighted in this report around the use of violence and weapons to facilitate county lines activity are very concerning, it is necessary to build a better understanding around the real causes behind this apparent propensity for violence. More proactive prevention work is required to stop young people becoming involved in this criminality. Conventional judicial outcomes are not only challenging and resource intensive for law enforcement, victims are often not willing to assist in the prosecution through fear of further reprisals.

## **6. Cuckooing**

6.1 In 2017, 77% of forces (33) documented incidents of cuckooing that were associated to county lines activity. Cuckooing clearly remains the dominant method of obtaining access to suitable premises to operate and deal from. Virtually every force that reported the presence of a county line end-point reported cuckooing. The vulnerable adults targeted are predominantly class A drug addicts but also include the elderly, those with mental or physical health impairments, female sex workers and single mothers.

6.2 County lines groups will target new premises by pursuing vulnerable individuals who attend recovery groups, dependency units and areas associated with those experiencing problems. They are seeking to establish relationships with vulnerable individuals for access to their homes. Once they gain control over the victim, whether through drug dependency, debt or as part of their relationship, groups move in. Once this happens the risk of domestic abuse, sexual exploitation and violence increases. In some instances, drug users may appear to be complicit in allowing their home to be used, however the issue of true consent is questionable, as many drugs users will not necessarily see themselves as being vulnerable.

6.3 It is common for county lines networks to have access to several cuckooed addresses at any one time. They will move quickly between vulnerable peoples' homes and will stay for just a few hours, a couple of days or sometimes longer. This helps groups evade detection, especially as intelligence gathered by law enforcement is often unclear and is quickly out of date. Conversely, some forces also mentioned that

individuals from the urban hub appeared to have settled down in the rural marketplace.

6.4 There is an emergence of cuckooed addresses being used by multiple county lines groups simultaneously. This scenario is

'This cuckooing model was initially used by county lines groups originating from London. County line dealing 'franchises' then spread throughout the country, taking the cuckooing model with them. However, due to the success of this method, cuckooing has now been adopted by other drug supply networks.' - NPCC force.

described in a number of returns but there is insufficient detail to confirm how complicit or collaborative groups might be. What is worthy of note is that there were no reports of violence in these cases. County lines run by a mixture of subjects from different urban hubs have also been referenced, although it is not known whether this is an anomaly or an emerging model.

6.5 The victims of cuckooing are most commonly class A drug users, however there have been numerous cases of victims with learning

difficulties/mental health issues and, to a lesser extent, those with physical disabilities. Victims will often also suffer from other forms of addiction i.e. alcohol.

6.6 The use of premises associated to sex workers by county lines groups is reported in 33% of force returns (14). There were also reports of sex workers being used as recruiters for further business, forced prostitution and acting as drug couriers.

'Some police forces have a well-documented success rate of engaging with known vulnerable drug users and carrying out Misuse of Drugs Act warrants at problematic addresses. This persistent approach may have contributed towards the emerging use of alternative addresses i.e. hotels.' - NPCC force.

6.7 23% of forces (10) report county lines groups using other forms of accommodation in the rural marketplace to facilitate their business. This includes the use of serviced apartments, holiday lets, budget hotels and caravan parks. One force reported that as county lines groups have begun to work more remotely, the use of violence has reduced. There was insufficient detail in the return to confirm if this was as a direct result of moving away from cuckooing.

'The group were consuming and selling drugs from within the property and prevented the victim from leaving the address or going to the toilet areas.' - NPCC force.

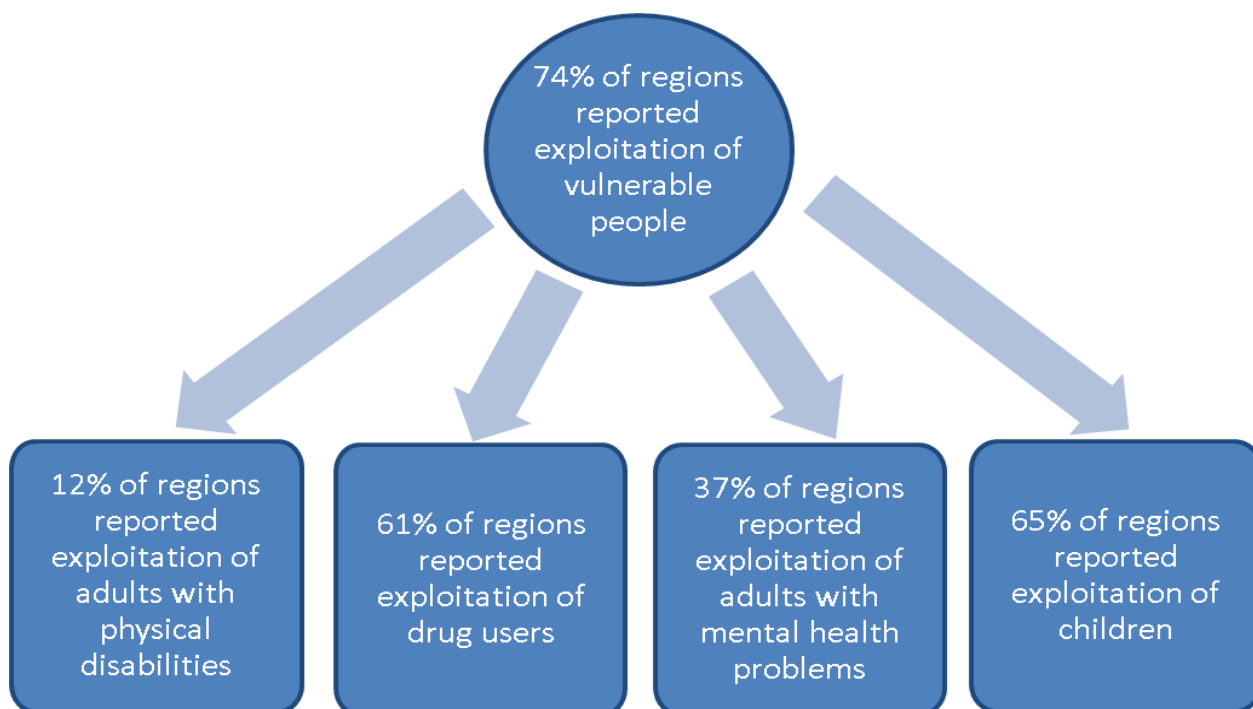
6.8 Of the 33 forces which reported incidents of cuckooing, 21% (7) reported possible instances of imprisonment/modern slavery, where vulnerable people were detained against their will and/or denied access to areas within their home. Some vulnerable adults even take the extreme measure of leaving their own property, making themselves voluntarily homeless, and leaving the network free reign over their accommodation. Although, as one force reported, there is likely to be an element of

forced labour (drug running to pay off debts) or forced imprisonment (cuckooing) in relation to every county line.

## 7. Exploitation of Vulnerable People

7.1 74% of forces (32) noted exploitation of vulnerable people. 37% of forces (16) reported exploitation of persons with mental health issues and 12% of forces (5) reported exploitation of persons with physical health issues. 65% of forces (28) reported that county lines activity was linked to exploitation of children.

Figure 2. Exploitation of people with different vulnerabilities



7.2 In 2017, 58% of forces (25) mentioned vulnerable people dealing drugs as part of county lines enterprises. Vulnerable people are also coerced into running errands on behalf of county lines groups, acting as street dealers or runners, arranging accommodation, hiring cars, booking train tickets etc. One force mentioned that vulnerable individuals were exploited for money laundering purposes, including one person who had £22,000 in drug revenue put through his account. Victims can often become scared and may not wish to continue working for the group but do not want to involve the police for fear of self-incrimination or retribution by the perpetrators. 28% of forces (12) report victims are coerced through debt enforcement/debt bondage.

'Children assessed as vulnerable due to missing episodes do appear to be more regularly linked directly or through association to drug networks operating in the areas they reside.' - NPCC force.

7.3 Methods used to recruit children and vulnerable adults are not fully understood, but it appears many children are lured by the promise of earnings and/or valuable assets (designer clothing/jewellery). One reported method involves a member of the gang attending drug rehabilitation centres to seek out potential drug users who could be utilised by the network as runners or for their home address. Young women are often involved in recruiting other young women and county lines groups are often



deliberately targeting vulnerable people in crisis. There is also intelligence indicating that social media is being used to recruit members into the group. Some forces mentioned a cycle of exploitation in which exploited individuals went on to recruit other vulnerable people to be exploited.

7.4 The use of missing persons (MISPERs) is a commonly reported feature of county lines activity with many being encountered during police stops and warrant searches. Many of those encountered are children, but it is often very difficult to get young missing people to engage with the police or partner agencies. The true correlation between missing persons and county line drug dealing is reported by many forces as an intelligence gap, as it has not yet been fully established or understood.

7.5 The exploitation of vulnerable people is an essential aspect of county lines drugs supply. The actual numbers of victims being exploited is difficult to assess due to a lack of sufficiently detailed intelligence, although we expect it to be significant, given 72% of forces reported exploitation of the vulnerable. Methods of exploitation do not appear to have changed significantly; however, with more groups adopting the county lines model, the risk to these individuals of further and more serious forms of exploitation is high.

7.6 Another factor is that intelligence relating to vulnerable individuals, children and MISPERs is held on a range of systems across a variety of different partner agencies. A more coordinated and collaborative approach is required, where information and intelligence can be shared efficiently and effectively by relevant stakeholders. This will ensure that the appropriate identification and safeguarding of vulnerable individuals can be achieved soon after they are encountered.

## **8. The use of Children**

8.1 65% of forces (28) reported the exploitation of children. This broadly covers all types of exploitation i.e. drug running, child sexual exploitation (CSE) and human trafficking. 42% of forces (18) specifically reported evidence of children 'running' (moving drugs/money) on behalf of drug lines. The youngest reported child was 12 years old. Many forces quoted them being as young as 14, although some younger children (including pre-school) were found residing at addresses believed to have been cuckooed by county lines nominals.

'Vulnerable young people aged between 13 to 18 years are being recruited to be drug runners/dealers. Most of these young people have accrued drug debts and the networks are using fear tactics, threatening them with violence in order to force them into working for the line.' - NPCC force.

8.2 County lines groups tend to use younger members to identify and target other children, either through personal or social media links. They focus on those who are particularly vulnerable or at a crisis point in their lives. They are groomed and enticed by gang members to work within the drugs distribution network. Further infiltration can happen through drug debts which are often inflated or staged in order to coerce young people into further county lines activities. Groups will sometimes threaten family members of new recruits, using violence and intimidation to ensure engagement and

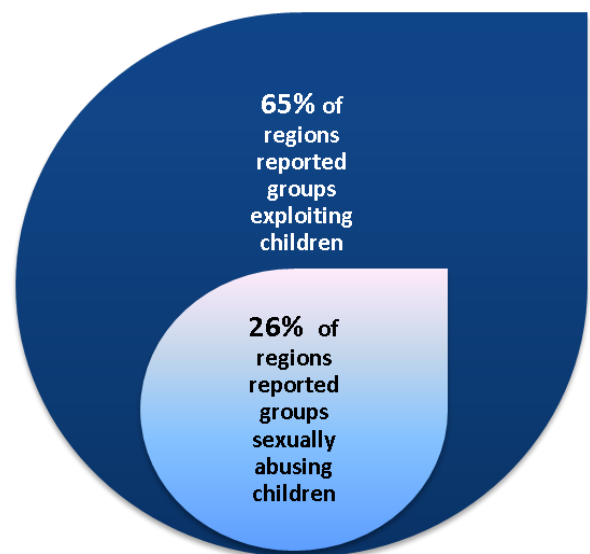
cooperation with the network. Young males are often used as 'watchers,' with some being given small quantities of drugs to deal.

8.3 The majority of children being recruited by county lines networks are 15-17 years old and are male. Anecdotal evidence suggests children are often used for supply and to run drugs/money between the urban hub and rural marketplace. This is because they are less likely to be known to police and more likely to receive lenient sentences if caught.

8.4 A number of the children used are vulnerable, not only because of their age. Many have also been identified as having broader mental health issues, coming from broken homes, experienced chaotic/traumatic lives, or have been reported as missing. They may also be drug users. Almost half the forces mentioned that individuals involved with county lines came from care homes and 15% (3) of those had evidence relating to care homes being actively targeted by county lines nominals for the recruitment of vulnerable individuals.

8.5 Not all forces reported the use of children as part of county lines activity. 5% of forces (2) reported no exploitation of children. One force reported that 1% of OCG associated nominals were under 18, whilst another force reported that there were no obvious signs that children were routinely used by county lines networks. However, 19% of forces (8) reported the exploitation of children as an intelligence gap.

8.6 There are some significant information gaps around the level of exploitation in children. One reason for this is that there is often no consistent or proactive way of identifying if a vulnerable person/child has entered another force or region. Safeguarding opportunities rely on the child being subject to a stop check or being present when warrants or safeguarding visits are conducted, which could be too late to adequately protect the child. Elements of the picture will be held on a range of different partner agencies systems, therefore there is scope for increased intelligence sharing and coordination to improve the collaborative response.



## 9. Sexual Exploitation

9.1 Although class A drugs continue to be the main driver of this criminality, sexual exploitation can be highlighted as a significant risk factor associated to county lines. It is used either as a means of control/exploitation, for the gratification of gang nominals, or even as a commodity to be sold. 35% of forces (15) reported some evidence of sexual exploitation in relation to county lines, and a further 9% of forces (4) had possible evidence that was unconfirmed. 26% of forces (11) reported evidence of child sexual exploitation and a further 7% of forces (3) reported possible child sexual



exploitation. It is unclear exactly how victims begin their association with those who exploit them, but once girls become accessible to gang members the risk of sexual exploitation and trafficking becomes significantly higher.

9.2 Grooming can take place in local communal areas such as parks, where prospective victims are given alcohol and drugs to establish their 'relationship'. Groups then exploit them sexually and coerce them to take and deal drugs. There are also reports of young women being pimped out by their partners to settle drugs debts.

9.3 2017 returns identified the first possible example of the sexual exploitation of a young boy, where a 17 year old runner of a line from Liverpool is suspected to have been sexually abused by the group. The level to which boys are exploited for sexual purposes is unknown, nor is the extent to which it is being considered, i.e. if boys are treated as potential victims and offered an appropriate opportunity to disclose sensitive/personal information.

9.4 Sexual exploitation continues to be a significant risk factor associated to county lines. There are numerous reports of 'girlfriends' being offered to and abused by other gang members for their gratification. One force reported that a county lines group had filmed a female victim being sexually assaulted by multiple male group members. The footage was then used to humiliate the male partner of the victim. Girls who are being exploited to hold and deal drugs are vulnerable to becoming more accessible to gang members wishing to sexually exploit them.

9.5 It is difficult to confirm an accurate threat picture regarding the level of sexual exploitation of victims as part of county lines activity, predominantly due to the lack of intelligence. Victims may initially present as part of the criminal network and may appear to be a potential perpetrator of harm i.e. by carrying a weapon. Therefore they may not always be given the best opportunity to disclose their vulnerability. Also, they may not feel they could be adequately protected from the perpetrators if they did report to police.

9.6 Better education is needed to provide children with an awareness of what grooming is, what it might look like and how they might be at risk. It is important to demystify some of the hype and arm children with the necessary skills to identify what might be happening and how to respond effectively and positively.

## **10. Money**

10.1 58% of forces (25) provided some information on the amount of money that is associated with county lines in their area. However this information was not consistent and many forces indicated that the figures provided were estimates only and that intelligence was generally limited in this area.

10.2 The amount of revenue obtained from a county line will vary significantly depending on the size of the market and the level of competition. However reporting indicated a typical line can make in the region of £3,000 per day with some more prominent lines possibly making in excess of £5,000 per day.

10.3 The accounts into which the criminal cash deposits are made are often held by persons in the originating county line force area and are frequently family members or associates of the group. Proceeds are often cashed out by senior group members in the urban hub, soon after the deposits are made. This distances the key nominals from the money trail and has the additional benefit of runners not needing to carry large amounts of cash whilst travelling, minimising the risk of being robbed, or having the cash seized if identified by police.

10.4 In terms of assessing the value of a county line, one force reported that a 'drug line/customer base' had been sold for £50,000, whilst another indicated a 'cocaine supply line' was purchased for £30,000. There was also a report of a county line network which appeared to be leasing a drug line at a cost of £10,000 a month, promoting a potential revenue stream of around £5,000 per day.

10.5 Specific details regarding the laundering and movement of county lines proceeds remains an intelligence gap for many forces. One force reported a potential emergence around the use of virtual currency cash machines. However this was not corroborated by any other force.

10.6 Much of the reporting regarding the money associated to county lines is inconsistent and/or based on anecdotal reporting. Very little is known about how money is laundered, or what senior county lines members do with the proceeds. Money generally changes hands quickly and is therefore difficult to trace, often being moved on a little and often basis. This restricts the impact potential and likelihood of law enforcement intervention.

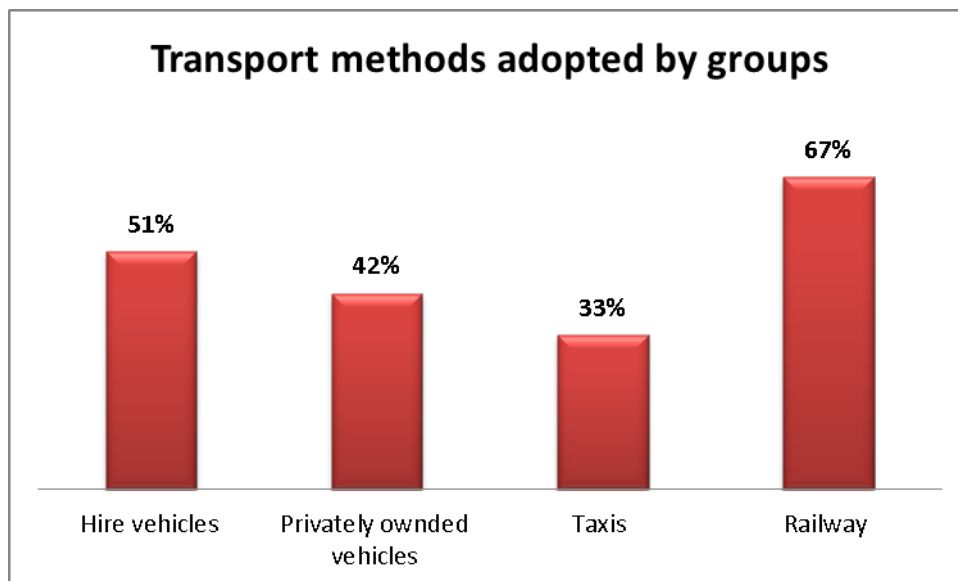
10.7 County lines drug supply generally involves regional (mid-market) to local (retail) supply, at levels which are commonly measured in ounces or grams rather than kilos. The profit margins are such that the cost (price paid) of seizure to county lines groups can be recovered quickly by profits from subsequent supply deals. The groups will also impose a debt associated to the loss of profit (resale value) from the seizure onto the individual who was holding the drugs at that point, which they will be forced to pay or work off over time.

## **11. Transport**

11.1 In terms of the mode of transport being used by county lines groups, 67% of forces (29) reported use of rail, 51% of forces (22) reported use of hire vehicles, 42% (18) reported owned vehicles being used and 33% (14) reported use of taxis. Two forces reported the use of stolen cars and one reported the use of a coach. Four forces also reported that the use of hire cars was increasing. (See figure 3)

11.2 The full extent to which those involved in county lines use the railway is not yet fully understood. British Transport Police (BTP) remain reliant on force and wider stakeholder intelligence and collaboration to contextualise and fully understand railway incidents involving individuals and groups believed to be involved in county lines.

Figure 3. Chart reflecting the extent to which differing methods of transport are used:



11.3 Cars belonging to group members, associates, girlfriends or vulnerable individuals are frequently used. Pool cars registered in fake names or in the details of local residents, who may not be well known to police, are also reported.

11.4 Both the rail and road networks remain components in the facilitation of county lines drug supply, used to transport drugs and money between the urban hub and rural marketplace. Both methods present significant risks due to the associated levels of violence, use of weapons and the exploitation of young and vulnerable people. Challenges include the identification of those travelling, assessing if those encountered are vulnerable, a perpetrator of harm or potentially both, and confirmation of potential links to county lines activity.

11.5 Effective responses often involve the close collaboration between different forces and the effective use of monitoring techniques such as ANPR and CCTV to identify, track and potentially interdict potential county lines suspects.

## 12. Ethnicity

12.1 The information supplied about the nationality/ethnicity of county lines individuals was extremely mixed. In general, most forces who provided information, suggested that county lines nominals' ethnicity (as opposed to cuckoo victims) varied according to their urban origin. London county line nominals were mostly black, whereas nominals from Liverpool and Manchester were mainly white. Asians were mentioned predominantly in relation to lines from Birmingham.

12.2 The most common non-British nationality mentioned was Somali, which was referenced by 33% of forces (14). These were predominantly forces with lines originating in London, but not in all cases. Somalis were also mentioned in relation to lines from Manchester.

12.3 Reports of Western Balkan crime groups being linked to county lines drugs supply were referenced in 9% of force (4) returns but only one group was believed to

meet the essential criteria for a county line, albeit they may only deal in powder cocaine.

12.4 Although the ethnicity of county lines nominals may provide some indication as to the upstream origins of their supply chain, it is important to acknowledge that this may not necessarily be accurate. The changing more diverse nature of drugs supply networks means that it is perhaps more worthwhile to maintain a focus on urban origins, potential gang affiliations and possible collaboration between different groups.

### **13. Challenges**

13.1 One key challenge acknowledged in a number of the returns is the difficulty involved in confirming whether the identified criminality is a county line rather than another form of drug supply. Those encountered often provide false details to officers; some may claim to be acting alone, others fall silent for fear of self-incrimination or reprisal by the county lines group.

13.2 Although the Home Office has a definition for county lines, there appears to be some variation in the application of this definition. This causes a potential blurring of the county lines threat picture and may account for some perceived discrepancy in activity.

13.3 The use of mobile phones, the use of children, the crossing of geographical boundaries to access a marketplace and the supply of class A drugs are all common features of different forms of drug supply methods. However the presence of these features alone is not sufficient to confirm the presence of a county line.

13.4 There needs to be a more consistent approach to capturing and utilising county lines intelligence to ensure it can be accessed by relevant stakeholders in a more efficient and effective way.

13.5 The limitations of this report predominantly relate to data capture and the impact this has on analysis and the resulting picture of threat. Force returns referenced a general lack of capacity/resource to conduct full data collection on county lines given the volume of potential intelligence and challenges around relevant data retrieval i.e. complexity of potential search terms that could be used, and limitations of data storage system to conduct searches.

13.6 Another challenge in assessing the true scale of a county line problem lies in the fact that it can often only be measured by the perceived and actual impact on the community, and resulting policing response. For example, police may be unaware of problems until one or more of the indicators are triggered, which is often sometime after the event has occurred and associated harms are initiated.