



WHAT IS 'COUNTY LINES'?

The Home Office's **Criminal Exploitation of children and vulnerable adults: County Lines** defines the activity as 'gangs and organised criminal networks involved in exporting illegal drugs into one or more importing areas within the UK, using dedicated mobile phone *deal lines*'.

The victims of County Lines are made to travel across counties, as well as around their local area, to supply drugs of all sorts. Organised crime groups use coercion, intimidation, violence (including sexual violence) and weapons to achieve their aims.

Tackling County Lines is a national priority. The Government's **National County Lines Coordination Centre** (NCLCC) aims to measure the threat of County Lines, focus resources on the most serious offenders, and work closely with its partners to reduce associated harms.

WHAT EFFECT DOES COUNTY LINES HAVE?

It is estimated that at least 46,000 children in England are involved in organised crime activity. Young people, and vulnerable adults exploited through County Lines should be recognised as victims of criminal exploitation, rather than as criminals themselves.

Gangs deliberately target the vulnerable – the homeless, those living in care homes or trapped in poverty - and groom, threaten or trick them into trafficking drugs. They might also offer something in return for the person's cooperation, but in a way that makes them feel indebted.

SPACE says that the manipulation employed is a form of brainwashing, which leads to a change in the victim's character, leading to criminality, serious violence and extremism, and creating a loyalty to a criminal group rather than their own family.

CRIMES ASSOCIATED WITH COUNTY LINES

Violence: Gangs sometimes use violence to threaten their victims when recruiting them, and to punish them if they find drugs or money to be missing.

Exploitation: County Lines involves gangs forcing children, young people and vulnerable adults to move drugs and money between locations. Sexual abuse and exploitation are also used as a form of control, of both boys and girls.

Debt bondage: Perpetrators will rob their victims they exploit, leading to debt bondage as these individuals struggle to repay the exploiter. This 'debt' is often sold or passed to other gang masters, with dire consequences for the victim and their family.

'Cuckooing': This involves taking over a person's home and using it for the dealing, storage or taking of drugs, sexual exploitation, and financial abuse. If you suspect someone is a victim of 'cuckooing', you should contact CrimeStoppers on 0800 555 111 or use this **anonymous, non-traceable online form**.

SIGNS TO LOOK OUT FOR

There are many indications that someone is being criminally exploited. The individual may be:

- regularly absent from school, or doing badly at school, going missing from home, staying out late, or travelling for unexplained reasons
- spending time with someone older than they are
- displaying new, unexpected behaviour such as anger, aggression, fear or anxiety
- in possession of unexplained money or possessions
- spending more time on social media, or making more calls and sending more texts than usual, possibly on a new phone
- self-harming, taking drugs, abusing alcohol, or suffering unexplained injuries and refusing to seek medical help
- being controlled or instructed by another individual

WHERE TO FIND OUT MORE

Public Health England's **County Lines exploitation: applying All Our Health** provides information about County Lines and Modern Slavery, as well as advice for health and care professionals, and a comprehensive list of resources, further reading and examples of best practice.

The **BBC documentary 'Hidden Girls'** examined the exploitation of teenage girls in gangs, and is available on BBC iPlayer (for a limited period).

The **Children's Society's Counting Lives** report has useful information on dealing with child criminal exploitation. The Society has also published this helpful **Slang Dictionary**, defining some of the words young people use in relation to drugs, crime and violence.

SPACE was set up in 2018 in response to the rise in County Lines. Its **website has a wealth of information**, and a number of links to further information.



DEFINITION

Coercive internal concealment is one element increasingly common in County Lines activity. It involves drugs being moved from one place to another (or stored for a longer duration) hidden in body cavities, commonly the rectum or vagina, to avoid detection.

Criminal groups use threats, physical violence, and humiliation to coerce children or vulnerable adults into inserting drugs in their bodies. These processes are sometimes filmed, as a means of coercive control.

This is an act of exploitation, and does not indicate that the victim is complicit in drug supply. Care must also be taken not to criminalise children who may have been forced or coerced to commit the act of inserting drugs into other children.

COMMON TERMS

Several slang terms are commonly used in relation to coercive internal concealment.

Plugging, stuffing and **banking** refer to the hiding of drugs (often heroin or crack cocaine) being hidden in body cavities.

Spooning is the process of retrieving items that have been plugged rectally, with a spoon or similar object.

HEALTH IMPLICATIONS OF INTERNAL CONCEALMENT

Internal concealment poses serious risks to the victim, including:

- drug leakage, impactions and obstructions, and overdose
- recurrent Urinary Tract Infections, faecal incontinence, nausea or vomiting
- physical damage, such as tears and abrasions
- soreness in the genital or anal areas, or Sexually Transmitted Infections
- trauma and psychological harm

SAFEGUARDING IMPLICATIONS OF INTERNAL CONCEALMENT

Individuals who suffer this exploitation can see it as a means of protecting themselves from violence, to evade arrest and detection, and to avoid substances being seized by the police or rival gangs.

Coercive internal concealment is not always seen as a safeguarding concern, because the act is usually carried out 'voluntarily', i.e. victims are coerced into carrying it out themselves.

However, it is very much a safeguarding concern: treating it as a form of sexual violence can help to change attitudes towards criminally-exploited individuals, and ensure they receive adequate support to help them recover.

LEGAL CONSIDERATIONS

The Sexual Offences Act 2003 cannot currently be used to prosecute individuals who perpetrate this abuse, because:

- coercive internal concealment does not usually meet the definition of assault by penetration, since victims are often groomed to insert drugs themselves
- evidence of a 'sexual motive' or 'sexual gratification' is required for prosecuting the act as a sexual offence
- prosecutors may be unwilling to take this route in court because they might risk losing an opportunity to sentence the perpetrator for other offences

The Children's Society recommends that this abuse is instead prosecuted under the Modern Slavery Act 2015.

WHAT TO DO IF YOU HAVE CONCERNS

In an emergency, you should dial 999 and speak to the police.

You can also speak to your local police on 101, or speak to **CrimeStoppers** anonymously, on 0800 555 111. If you notice something linked to the railways, you should report your concerns to the **British Transport Police** by texting 61016.

If you have concerns, you must share them through your usual local safeguarding processes.

SERVICES THAT CAN OFFER ASSISTANCE

Children concerned about their own involvement, or that of someone they know, can call **Childline** on 0800 1111. This is a confidential service, with specially-trained counsellors.

Catch 22 works to help children and young people get out of situations they're worried about, and has helped many involved in County Lines.

St Giles offers specialist practical and emotional support to help young people make a safe and sustained exit from County Lines involvement.

WHERE TO FIND OUT MORE

The government's **Child Exploitation Disruption Toolkit** has been developed to support partners tackling child criminal and sexual exploitation, through measures such as Slavery and Trafficking Prevention and Risk Orders.

Public Health England's **County Lines exploitation: applying All Our Health** provides information about County Lines and Modern Slavery, as well as advice for health and care professionals, and a comprehensive list of resources, further reading and examples of best practice.