

LEARNING BRIEFING

County Lines



What is County Lines?

County Lines is a form of criminal exploitation where Organised Crime Groups coerce and exploit children or vulnerable people into transporting, selling and/or storing illegal drugs/money. The 'County Line' is the mobile phone line used to move and supply drugs, usually from cities into smaller or rural areas.

Victims of County Lines are made to travel across the country or even around their local area to supply drugs. Perpetrators often groom their victims initially and use coercion, intimidation, violence (including sexual abuse) and weapons to achieve power and control over their victims.

What is Grooming?

Grooming is when someone builds a relationship or connection with someone with the purpose of exploiting them. This can happen online or in person and to both children and adults.

People who are groomed can be sexually exploited or trafficked as well as being vulnerable to criminal exploitation (such as County Lines). Perpetrators operate a Target, Test, Trap method to exploit people:

- **Target** – perpetrators observe and find out the potential victim's vulnerabilities, needs and wants. They build a 'friendship' and make them feel valued; often giving them money, alcohol, drugs or status.
- **Test** – perpetrators will then test the victim's loyalty and create dependency. They may give the victim 'responsibility' to carry out an important task which makes them feel trusted and valued or make the victim feel indebted due to the gifts or status the perpetrator has provided them.
- **Trap** – perpetrators will isolate the victim from their family and friends. They may use blackmail, intimidation or threats towards the victim or their family. They may physically or sexually abuse them which causes fear to leave or to ask for help. Victims can also be fearful that they will go to prison due to their involvement in criminal activities.

Spotting the Signs of County Lines

County Lines can affect children, young people and adults. Children who are exploited can continue to be exploited as adults.

- Being secretive about how they spend their time, including when online
- If they are a child, spending time with someone older than they are
- Having money or new things like clothes and mobile phones that they can't or won't explain
- Drinking, self-harming or taking drugs
- Spending more or less time online or on their mobile phones/social media
- Displaying new, unexpected behaviour such as anger, aggression, fear or anxiety
- Being upset, withdrawn or distressed
- Unexplained injuries or refusing to seek medical help
- Sexual behaviour, language or an understanding of sex that does not seem appropriate
- Spending more time away from home, school/college or going missing for periods of time.

Crimes and Criminal Exploitation Linked to County Lines

Violence

Organised Crime Groups sometimes use violence to threaten and control their victim. They may use violence:

- to punish them if they find drugs or money is missing
- if they refuse to do what the perpetrator says
- are threatening to leave or tell someone what is happening to them

Violent crime and anti-social behaviour can also increase in areas where County Lines are in operation.

Abuse and Exploitation

Organised Crime Groups deliberately target vulnerable people to exploit such as the homeless, poverty-stricken, those addicted to drugs/alcohol, people who have been trafficked, young people in care, people with a disability or physical or mental health problems. Sexual Abuse and Exploitation can be used as a way to threaten and control both male and female victims.

Financial Exploitation

Perpetrators can coerce or intimidate people into using their bank account to transfer or transport their illegally acquired money.

Debt Bondage

During the grooming process, victims are often given gifts or status which creates a false sense of belonging and victims can feel indebted to perpetrators both emotionally and financially. Perpetrators make it impossible for victim's to repay the debt, which creates a never-ending cycle of debt bondage and victims essentially become modern slaves.

Cuckooing

Criminals take over a vulnerable person's property in order to carry out unlawful activity, such as drug dealing/storage, sexual abuse or they may financially abuse the victim.

Modern Slavery and Human Trafficking

Modern Slavery can include human trafficking, forced labour, domestic servitude and sexual exploitation. Human trafficking involves the act of recruiting, transporting, transferring, harbouring or receiving a person through use of force, coercion or other means for the purpose of exploiting them. This crime has close links to County Lines.

Useful Information and Resources

- [County Lines YouTube Video](#)
- [Tricky Friends Video](#)
- [Safeguarding Explained Videos \(including Modern Slavery\)](#)
- [Home Office Guidance: Criminal Exploitation of Children and Vulnerable Adults \(County Lines\)](#)
- [Home Office: National County Lines Coordination Centre](#)
- [Crime Prosecution Service: Legal Guidance on County Lines](#)
- [Public Health England: County Lines Exploitation Guidance](#)
- [The Children's Society: Debt Bondage Guidance for Professionals](#)
- [The Children's Society: Counting Lives, Scale of Criminal Exploitation](#)
- [The Children's Society: Slang Dictionary / County Lines in Educational Settings](#)
- [SPACE: Stop and Prevent Adolescent Criminal Exploitation](#)
- [Crimestoppers: Report Crimes Anonymously](#)