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**Title** The Criminal Exploitation Of Young People Through County Lines And Criminal Justice Responses.

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## **Abstract**

The past several years have witnessed an evolution of the drugs supply markets, which prompted a central government response. Worth an estimated £9.4 billion (Black, 2020), the drugs industry has developed a distribution model that supplies drugs to coastal towns and villages in a process known as county lines. The central features of county lines are the use of mobile technology and social media and the recruitment of young people by organised criminal gangs, who are used to transport and sell substances between markets. Once recruited, they are quickly placed into debt bondage, exacerbating their involvement.

This paper will argue that despite the exploitation of young people to commit criminal acts, the mechanisms introduced to recognise those exploited as victims have been described as not fit for purpose. As a result, many young people who are recognised as victims endure criminal proceedings, resulting in them being criminalised.

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Having assured anonymity, I cannot name each participant individually; however, I extend my most sincere thanks and appreciation to those who freely gave their time and contributed to this research project.

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## **Chapter One: Introduction**

### **Introduction**

While the concept of child criminal exploitation and county lines are relatively new, gaining political, law enforcement and media attention from 2016, the emergence of research detailing the oversaturation of urban drug markets began to emerge in 2010 (Coomber & Moyle, 2013). Reports of organised criminal gangs using children to transport and deal drugs began to emerge in 2012 (Windle & Briggs, 2015). Yet, there remains a distinct lack of understanding of child criminal exploitation and little academic research into the criminal exploitation of children through county lines (McLean, et al., 2020). Therefore, this research will investigate how the exploitation of young people manifests through the county lines model and establish whether any specific characteristics make a child vulnerable to exploitation by criminal gangs. It will analyse the role of information technology and social media and investigate how the advancements have impacted the transactional practice of supply and distribution of Class A substances. It will explore the methods that criminal gangs use to groom and recruit young people and their tactics to ensure that the involvement of young people is deepened and extended and consider the risks that young people involved in county lines are exposed to. Finally, it will consider the duality of the role of young people as both victims and offenders and investigate the complex relationship between young people and those who exploit them.

The research will examine the legal framework that defines the responses to young people criminally exploited through county lines. It will address the legislative requirements of collaborative working between authorities to safeguard young people and investigate and analyse the introduction of legislation that facilitates the prosecution of adults who traffick and exploit young and vulnerable people, and explore the statutory defence for victims of modern slavery. Finally, it will analyse how effective the National Referral Mechanism is in protecting the victims of criminal exploitation.

## Chapter Two: Literature Review

This literature review will investigate and critically analyse child criminal exploitation through the contemporary phenomenon of county lines drug dealing. The evolution of drugs legislation will be examined and evaluate its impact on the illegal drugs markets. It will scrutinise the relationship between county lines and organised criminal gangs and the methodology used to recruit and exploit their employees both in the field and established base locations. It will further examine the role of children as both the exploited and exploiter and evaluate the evolution of criminal justice responses to both victims and perpetrators.

The term county lines, describes the migration of class A drugs from urban markets to lesser policed rural towns, villages and coastal towns in response to a disequilibrium of drug dealers and users within in major urban cities within the UK (McLean, et al. 2020; Harding 2020: National Crime Agency 2016). Whilst drug supply is by no means a contemporary problem, markets have witnessed an evolution that encompasses a more professional and business orientated model (McLean, et al., 2020). Initial reports of gang members utilising young people to transport and deal drugs began to emerge in 2012 (Windle & Briggs, 2015). Media and political attention ensued following a significant increase in arrests of young people in possession of Class A drugs in rural and coastal locations, at times hundreds of miles away from their home (House of Lords, 2019). The reporting of county lines intelligence commenced in 2016 leading to the establishment of the National County Lines Coordination Centre (NCA, 2016).

Facilitated by advancements in technology, county lines utilise mobile telephones to act as 'deal lines' between customer and supplier (NCA, 2016). Almost exclusively, deal lines are controlled by gang members residing within the upper echelons of a gang hierarchy. Deal lines provide dual functionality enabling customers to place orders for substances and dealers to advertise products (Harding 2020: National Crime Agency 2016). The supply of Class A substances, predominately heroin and crack, is serviced by an estimated 2000 deal lines, each estimated to generate annual profits up to £800,000, and are directly controlled by organised criminal gangs

(HMICFR, 2020; Home Office, 2018). Whilst research conducted by the National Crime Agency in 2017 suggests sixty-five per cent of drugs exported to remote locations originated from areas covered by the Metropolitan Police Service, evidence of county lines has proliferated with eighty-eight per cent of police forces throughout the UK reporting activity (NCA, 2017).

Drug use within Britain is by no means a contemporary phenomenon; however, societies response has evolved considerably. Historically drug use was to a degree normalised with concerns regarding intoxication and adverse effects first raised in the mid-nineteenth century (De Castella, 2012; Castello, 2020), leading to the introduction of the Pharmacy Act 1868 (HM Government, 1868). The act was the first piece of legislation introduced attempting to limit sales of poisons and dangerous substances exclusively to chemists. Further acts of legislation ensued throughout the early part of the twentieth century, eventually leading to the criminalisation of production, import, export, and possession of certain substances. The offence 'intent to supply' was introduced within the 1971 Misuse of Drugs Act. The act further introduced a classification system that defines the harms of illicit substances and created penalties that reflect the harms (Reuter & Stevens, 2007). The strengthening of legislation, however, failed to curb the prevalence of use and created an illegal drugs trade today, reportedly worth more than nine billion pounds (Black, 2020).

The way drugs are supplied to the end-user has further developed from a model described by Harding (2020), as dominated by a stereotypical 'Mr Big', who, alongside his extended family, was well known to Police. The management and distribution of Illicit substances being controlled by the 'crime family' through door security and criminal networks (Harding, 2020), whilst McLean et al. (2020) describes a market monopolised by local dealers residing in the same communities as their customers, generally areas of socio-economic deprivation. Any attempts to expand markets would frequently be met with resistance from rival drug dealers in neighbouring areas, often resulting in violent drug wars (McLean, et al., 2020).

The present-day drug supply market has observed an evolution in both who and how those markets are operated. Rather than the local 'Mr Big' (Harding, 2020), today's drug markets are managed with the application of stringent business principles by organised criminal gangs (Robinson, 2019). The professionalism of criminal gangs have further witnessed those at the top of the hierarchy move from the working-class communities they once served to more affluent suburbs, wearing expensive clothes and driving expensive cars; they project an image of professionalism, prestige and status of legitimate businessmen (McLean, et al., 2020). The professionalisation of drug supply harnessed the technological advancements of mobile phones, the internet and social media and initiated the expansion of market operations to rural and coastal locations. The expansion allows organised criminal gangs to capitalise by increasing both their client base and profits (Harding 2020: National Crime Agency 2016). It is further argued the Traditional 'Mr Big' middleman's ability to maximise profits was reliant on cutting the end-user product. In contrast, county lines eradicate the need for a third party with benefits passed onto customers in terms of products that are superior in purity (Harding, 2020). Robinson (2019), however, argues the migration of drugs to rural outposts is not exclusively about maximising clientele or profit; rather, the movement of drugs, also known as 'going country', is a method adopted by gangs to avoid police scrutiny (Robinson, 2019).

Early models of county lines described as 'commuting' emphasised identifying a market area, eradicating the traditional 'Mr Big' and infiltrating the area with trusted gang members to establish new markets (Coomber & Moyle, 2013). Those initial trusted gang members tasked with the infiltration were generally young people from London, particularly of BAME heritage. However, rather than suggesting race as a determining factor in the targeting of young people to run the lines, it is argued those young people initially selected was more reflective of the disproportionate representation of young people of BAME heritage residing in areas of London that suffer from greater degrees of socio-economic deprivation (NCA, 2017).

Those young people employed to run the lines, due to their immaturity, are reliant on the use of public transport for their commute, in particular trains (NCA, 2017). Duration



of stays when going country range from day trips to overnight and beyond. Early models were quickly adapted when it became apparent that the young people of BAME heritage going country were gaining the attention of residents and Police in areas with no indigenous BAME population (Harding, 2020). A further aggravating factor prompting the adaptation in tactics is the disproportionate rate at which young males of BAME heritage are subjected to stop and search (Grimshaw & Ford, 2018). As county lines proliferated throughout the country, the ethnicity of young people targeted to run the lines is evidenced to be more reflective of the areas in which the lines originate (Harding, 2020; NCA, 2017; McLean, et al., 2020; Robinson, 2019).

Once a target location has been identified, gang members seek to establish a base location (McLean, et al., 2020; Coomber & Moyle, 2013; NCA, 2016). The practise known as cuckooing replicates the way in nature a cuckoo bird invades the nest of other birds to provide a nest for its own young. Cuckooing in county lines comprises of gang members who will either con or coerce vulnerable people including, drug users, the disabled and the elderly, into using their accommodation for drug dealers to stay and establish a base location (Spicer, et al., 2019; NCA, 2016). Seventy-seven per cent of police forces in 2017 documented the direct association of cuckooing with county lines (NCA, 2017). Drawing parallels to any legitimate business model, county lines continually evolve and adapts to the demands of the market, seeking to mitigate risks where appropriate (Harding, 2020). This appears evident following the increased awareness of cuckooing; a quarter of police forces have reported a move away from cuckooing in its traditional format to utilising properties such as Airbnb, caravan parks, hotels and serviced apartments (HMICFR, CQC, Ofsted, 2018).

Whilst there is currently no statutory definition of child criminal exploitation, the Home Office describes the practice as...*"a common component of the county lines model in which a group or individual will take advantage of an imbalance of power to coerce, control, manipulate or deceive a child or young person under the age of 18. The victim may have been criminally exploited even if the activity appears consensual. Child Criminal Exploitation does not always involve physical contact; it can occur through the use of technology"* (Home Office, 2020)". The Home Office further report the

criminal exploitation of children as a practice that is prevalent and integral to the structure of county lines (Home Office, 2018). The exploitation of children in county lines occurs in a variety of ways and includes the forced labour of children in cannabis factories, transportation and distribution of drugs and the commission of crimes including burglaries and robberies (Turner, et al., 2019). Whilst the National Crime Agency acknowledge a gap in intelligence preventing any estimation of the number of children involved (NCA, 2017), research conducted by the Children's Commissioner suggested the involvement of up to fifty children per active line (Children's Commissioner, 2019).

More than two-thirds of police forces directly associated instances of labour and sexual exploitation of children and human trafficking to county lines. Whilst the evidence suggests the vast majority of young people involved in county lines are male aged between 15 and 17, it is important to clarify that children of both sexes are potential targets (NCA, 2016; HMICFR, CQC, Ofsted, 2018), further evidence further exposed the direct involvement of children as young as eight (Turner, et al., 2019). Almost half of all police forces reported the recruitment of 'employees' by those controlling operations to both transport and retail drugs in market locations (NCA, 2018). The recruitment of employees permits those within the upper echelons to remain at a distance, therefore mitigating the risk of interaction with the Police (McLean, et al., 2020; Harding, 2020; Children's Commissioner, 2019).

Recruitment of employees occurs by varying methods, including the use of social media. Social media provides a medium in which grandiose images of wealth and status can be projected, creating a misconception of the financial rewards generated by involvement (McLean, et al., 2020; Robinson, 2019; Harding, 2020; NCA, 2016). Whilst some of the young people recruited to run the lines do receive a wage, the imbalance of power between those in control and their employees results in for many little or no financial reward (Robinson, 2019). McLean et.al. (2020) details instances where employees were provided opportunities to earn real money, were in reality, provided with small quantities of cannabis for personal use and a change of clothes (McLean, et al., 2020).

Whilst any child can become a victim of criminal exploitation, the evidence does suggest that there are certain characteristics that make a child vulnerable to grooming by organised gangs. Such characteristics include the exclusion from mainstream education; attendance at alternative education provisions; those that are not in education, training or employment; previous history of offending; looked after children; and those residing in areas of socio-economic deprivation (NCA, 2018; HMICFR, 2020). However, children from seemingly normal backgrounds and attending school regularly are still vulnerable to exploitation; with research uncovering gang members engineering the exclusion of children within mainstream education (Children's Rights Alliance for England, 2020), a further report commissioned by Ofsted described a young person who was of no previous concern to the authorities had set up his own county line and recruited children from the school as runners (HMICFR, CQC, Ofsted, 2018).

Media representations of county lines typically portray images of vulnerable and marginalised children falling prey to evil gangs who groom and exploit children to sell drugs (BBC News, 2020). However, research conducted by Robinson (2019) concluded that whilst the grooming of children does indeed exist, it was evidenced for many the recruitment was based on a mutual agreement. For many young people, the cultural goals of economic affluence are unachievable by legitimate means. Robert Merton's (1910-2003) attempts to explain crime develops Emile Durkheim's (1858-1917) theory of anomie as a breakdown of societal norms, arguing inequality within society prevents the cultural goals of economic affluence for many to be attainable (Case, et al., 2017). Consequently, the strain experienced by those unable to access goals by legitimate means, in this case, youths who, rather than claiming they were coerced into county lines, feel a sense of privilege when allowed to earn money through county lines (Robinson, 2019) (McLean, et al., 2020). Nevertheless, even when it appears a young person's role in county lines is consensual, this does not necessarily mean that there has not been an element of manipulation and exploitation, rather the exploitation is harder for the young person involved to recognise (McLean, et al., 2020).

Once a child is involved in county lines, debt is often used by criminal gangs as an excuse not to pay their workers. Debts are incurred in a variety of ways, including the staging of robberies of a child in possession of drugs or money or cannabis given to the young person for personal use (Robinson, 2019). 'Debt bondage' is the term used to describe the purposeful method in which a debt is applied, and the use of force against a person, often in the way of unpaid labour, is applied until the debt is repaid. Debt bondage is defined by the National Crime Agency as a key component within county lines and is utilised as a tactic to exert control and perpetuate involvement (NCA, 2016). Debt bondage is further known to increase the risk of threats made to a child's family and physical violence against the young person, including the use of sexual violence (HMICFR, CQC, Ofsted, 2018).

Sexual exploitation has been connected to county lines by more than a quarter of police forces nationwide (NCA, 2018). Sexual exploitation arises in various ways and is not exclusive to females (Robinson, 2019). Methods include 'plugging', which is the term given to describe the forced concealment of drugs in the anal and vaginal cavities to transport and store illegal substances, and the consequential forced removal (NCA, 2017); strip searches and penetrative inspections of body cavities and 'ucking', which is the term to describe the creation videos capturing rapes and sexual assaults of both males and females (Robinson, 2019).

Almost every police force countrywide have reported the link between serious violence and county lines, with offences including the use of knives, firearms, corrosive substances, kidnap, grievous bodily harm resulting in injuries including the loss of limbs, breaking of bones, stab wounds and at least nine murders (NCA, 2018). Furthermore, more than a third of police forces reported the emergence of a tactic termed 'taxing'. The term describes the infliction of violence used as a method to control and gain compliance from the workforce (NCA, 2018). Intelligence of taxing supported a reported incident in the Humberside region in which a young person running a line having spent the proceeds of drugs on himself was subjected to a

punishment attack resulting in two broken legs and a severed hand (Home Office, 2020).

The role of victim and offender within the county lines, rather than fixed and defined, it is argued they can become fluid and interchangeable (Robinson, et al., 2018). Robinson (2019) describes the hierarchical structure of county lines results in the most vulnerable at the bottom, usually drug users. This provides an opportunity for the exploited to abuse their position of power and becomes the exploiter, often for personal entertainment, whilst others would establish their own lines recruiting other young people (Robinson, 2019). The complexity of the victim-offender nexus often results in dilemmas for the Police in the best way to respond to and process young people involved in county lines (Robinson, 2019; Robinson, et al., 2018; Harding, 2020). Whilst current criminal justice approaches to children in conflict with the law require the recognition of the child first, offender second and the promotion of safeguarding as the primary objective (Ministry of Justice, 2019), research suggests the way a young person involved in county lines initially presents can result in a dichotomy in police attitudes; with young people presenting as a victim benefiting from supportive diversionary tactics to indurated punitive criminal justice responses for those considered an offender (Robinson, 2019).

The National Referral Mechanism, initially launched in 2009 to ensure compliance under the European Convention of Action against Trafficking in Human Beings (ONS, 2019), provides a framework that enables the identification of victims of human trafficking and modern slavery and ensures victims receive the support that is required. Referrals of children to the National Referral Mechanism increased annually from 66 per cent in 2017 to 48 per cent in 2018 and 52 per cent in 2019, with the increase in referrals reported directly attributed to child criminal exploitation in county lines (NCA, 2018). Referrals made through the framework by the Police further necessitate a crime report for a modern slavery offence irrespective of a charge (Crown Prosecution Service, 2018).

The diversity of offences within county lines enables the Police to consider a variety of legislation, including the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971, Offences Against the Person Act 1861, Sexual Offences Act 2003 and the Modern Slavery Act 2015 (Crown Prosecution Service, 2018). Although the criminal exploitation of children through county lines is strongly associated with offences under the Modern Slavery Act 2015 (HM Government, 2020), prosecutions have been slow to ensue. The first successful prosecution followed an initial conviction of three men for conspiracy to supply Class A substances in 2016. A further conviction for offences under the Modern Slavery Act followed in 2016 after it was proven they had groomed and recruited six young people aged between 14 and 19 to transport substances between London and Portsmouth (Regina v Glodi Wabelua, Dean Alford, Michael Karemera, 2020). The Modern Slavery Act 2015 section forty-five further provides a statutory defence for victims for offences committed as a direct consequence of exploitation (Crown Prosecution Service, 2018). However, the statutory defence can be problematic with evidence suggesting the coaching of victims by their exploiters to say they have been trafficked if arrested. Further problems arise for Police and prosecutors to disprove the defence if applied dishonestly (HMICFR, 2020).

To conclude, criminal gangs controlling the distribution of drugs by harnessing both technological advancements and availability, specifically mobile telephone phones developed a drug supply model that operates to strict business principles driven by the saturation of drugs markets in inner cities. Criminal gangs capitalise on profits whilst minimising their risk of interaction with the Police by recruiting young people to act as runners and dealers (NCA, 2016). Whilst there is a dichotomy of evidence that support certain characteristics increase a young person to be targeted by gangs and the consensual participation of young people (McLean, et al., 2020), what is evident is the projected imagery of the lucrative financial rewards by gang members is an integral recruitment tactic (Robinson, 2019). Described as a prevalent and integral to the structure of county lines criminal exploitation occurs in a variety of guises, including the imposition of debts facilitating forced free labour. Debts are further utilised in conjunction with violence the threat of violence and sexual violence as a method to gain control, complicity and prolong the involvement of their workforce (NCA, 2016). Whilst framework exists to identify victims and legislation provides the ability to provide

a defence for victims of criminal exploitation, the complexity of the victim-offender nexus can present a predicament to authorities when involvement in county lines appears either consensual or the exploited turns the exploiter.

## Chapter Three: Methodology

### Research Methodology

The research will adopt a qualitative approach for data collection. Bryman (2012) describes one of the benefits of qualitative research is its ability to better understand the social world through the experiences of those who participate (Bryman, 2018). The study aims to provide an insight into the criminal exploitation of children through county lines and criminal justice responses from the perspective of practitioners who work alongside victims and offenders, thus providing a contextually rich and in-depth piece of research. Because county lines is a relatively contemporary phenomenon, there remains a distinct lack of historical statistical data, and the topic is under-researched generally in academic fields. A series of semi-structured interviews was considered to be the best option to obtain information from the participants. Bryman (2008) describes semi-structured interviews as offering both flexibility and encourages reflection on both the interviews question and participants answer during the interviews. Semi-structured interviews further enable the researcher to deviate and ask meaningful questions, encouraging in-depth discussions and therefore obtaining a greater understanding of the subject from the participants' perspective (Bryman, 2018). The interviews were transcribed and thematically analysed to establish key themes and contrasted against existing literature to determine similarities.

It was crucial to obtain a balanced and in-depth understanding of the problems relating to the exploitation of young people through county lines. Therefore seven participants were chosen according to their relative areas of expertise, providing a unique and valuable insight both professionally and personally from the perspective of law enforcement, urban and rural, academia, safeguarding, youth offending and involvement in county lines.

1. The Academic researcher has written extensively about Organised Criminal Gangs and is one of the few Academics to have investigated the exploitation of children in county lines.
2. Youth Offending Team Practitioner who is responsible for referral orders and victim liaison. The role has brought her into contact with young



people who have been criminally exploited through county lines.

3. Two lead investigating Detective Constables from importing towns. Each Officer led investigations into modern slavery through county lines which cumulated in the successful prosecution of perpetrators. Information supplied by each Officer is within the public domain.
4. Designated Safeguard Lead for an alternative education provision for young people with social, emotional and mental health difficulties in North Manchester.
5. Detective Sergeant for Project Gulf. Project Gulf began in 2009 as a collaboration between Salford City Council and Greater Manchester Police to respond to organised crime. The unit now consists of twenty national organisations that work together to disrupt organised crime and protect victims of criminal exploitation.
6. A former manager of a county lines operation in Liverpool who contributed to a guest lecture by the Choose Life initiative. He spoke about his previous involvement in county lines and gave his permission to document his experiences within this research project.

## Ethical Considerations

When designing the research, the four main principles suggested by Diener and Crandall (1978), harm, consent, privacy, and deception, were considered (Bryman, 2018). Questions were designed to ensure there was no potential risk of stress to the participants. It is further acknowledged that through questioning, participants may disclose potentially sensitive information concerning the experiences of young people involved in county lines activity. To minimise the risk of identification, interviewee recordings transcriptions and will be safeguarded and comply with the Data Protection Act 2018 (HM Government, 2018). The research was designed to comply fully with the UCEN Manchester code of ethics. Following ethical approval from UCEN Manchester, each participant was contacted by email and provided with a full brief of the aims of the study. A strategy of informed consent was obtained by email. Interviews were arranged. Due to COVID-19 restrictions, face-to-face interviews were not feasible; therefore, interviews were conducted over Zoom and Microsoft Teams. All participants agreed to the recording of their interviews for transcribing. Microsoft Teams and Zoom both advise all participants of a meeting that a recording is in process. Attention was paid to ensure the research questions were professional, relatable to the research subject only, and did not infringe the private lives of the participants. Each participant reserved the right to withdraw themselves and their contribution from the project.

To safeguard the identity of each practitioner, they will be referred to by the following pseudonyms:

- Youth Offending Team Practitioner (YOT);
- Designated Safeguarding Lead (DSL);
- Academic Researcher (Academic);
- Detective Sergeant (DSPG);
- Detective Constable (DCOH);
- Detective Constable (DCOC);
- Former Organised Criminal Gang Manager of a County Line (CLM).

## Chapter Four: Discussion of Findings

### County Lines and Criminal Exploitation

The literature review analysed and contextualised the emergence of a drug-dealing model in which organised criminal gangs responded to the oversaturation of Class A drug markets' in urban cities in the United Kingdom (NCA, 2016). Although urban street gangs have been supplying drugs to rural and coastal locations for many years. The county lines model of supply differs because of the targeting of young and vulnerable people and the systematic exploitation through coercion, intimidation, violence, debt bondage, and the reliance on mobile technology (Harding, 2020). Indeed the consensus among the research participants was child criminal exploitation is new terminology for an age-old problem. The central feature of the county lines model is arguably the criminal exploitation of young and vulnerable people (NCA, 2016). The research established how criminal exploitation of young people in county lines manifests as an imbalance of power where criminal gangs groom and recruit young and vulnerable people to commit criminal acts that benefit the perpetrator. The notable commission of offences that criminally exploited young people commit are Possession and Possession with Intent to Supply substances controlled under the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971 (NCA, 2016). However, Robinson (2019) established the criminal exploitation of young people through county lines took forms other than just working the lines (Robinson, 2019). Indeed, the research found the criminal exploitation of young people to be broader than just the commission of offences under the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971. For example, DSPG explained how young people are often criminally exploited to commit serious violent offences, often to gain the respect and acceptance of organised criminal gangs. At the same time, YOT described how a young person was criminally exploited and trafficked to obtain firearms. The research unanimously concluded how criminal gangs employ a range of exploitative manipulation techniques to groom and recruit young people into county lines and use intimidation, violence including sexual violence, which is often exerted to ensure control and compliance of young and vulnerable people.

While the National Crime Agency describes county lines as the migration of drug markets from urban cities to rural and coastal towns and villages (NCA, 2016),

research suggests that the county lines model is far broader than that described by the NCA. Young people exploited to transport drugs does not always involve crossing county borders and can occur within the Police force and local authority boundaries (Clarke, 2021). Confirming this, DSPG explained that due to the severe retribution for dealing drugs on other dealers patches, the district did not experience a problem with young people trafficked into the area. Still, they did experience significant issues with young people trafficked to rural and coastal outposts as in the traditional model of county lines. Additionally, it was further detailed how the region experienced a considerable challenge with the trafficking of young people to local areas within Greater Manchester, particularly Piccadilly Gardens<sup>1</sup>.

Organised criminal gangs continually evolve the county lines business model to mitigate the risk of intervention with the Police (NCA, 2016). DCOH explained the challenges of using young people to transport drugs is the risk of stop and search by the Police and their consequential arrest if found in possession of illegal substances. Therefore to reduce those risks, young people are physically used to transport substances internally. Plugging<sup>2</sup> is highlighted by the NCA (2017) as a common tactic that is used to store and transport illegal drugs (NCA, 2017). Plugging further illustrates a clear link between child criminal and sexual exploitation (HMICFR, CQC, Ofsted, 2018). DCOH explained how the arrest of children during a county lines operation led to the discovery of Class A wraps of heroin and crack cocaine plugged. The investigation consulted a toxicologist who ruled that had the packages split inside their bodies, it would have led to their deaths. DCOH described gang members continually adapt their methods to remain ahead of the Police.

"The concealment of commodities inside the body is an adaptation of how drugs are transported. Historically, crime groups did not go to that extent. Still, because the Police are aware of the issue, they must adapt how they hide the substances to evade the Police, resulting in further exploitation. When they are hidden within a body, that can cause real harm (DCOH, 2021)."

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<sup>1</sup> R v Motroc [2019] EWCA Crim 1255 – there is no specified distance in which a person must travel to be considered trafficked.

<sup>2</sup> Plugging – concealment of substances in the anal and vaginal cavities.

The impact of lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic further illustrates how organised criminal gangs have altered their business model. Research conducted by the University of Nottingham (2021) established various adaptations to the county lines model forced by the COVID-19 lockdown, including a deviation from traditional transport methods such as cars, taxis, and trains to the use of waterways. Additionally, retail exchanges were established in hospital and supermarket car parks, and young people were dressed in key worker uniforms (Brewster, et al., 2021). Further evidence suggests that gangs are recruiting children local to the importing regions (NCA, 2018). Highlighting the recruitment of local children, DCOH explained how before the national lockdown, the visibility of young people who are not recognised as local to coastal importing regions is not generally of significant concern. Coastal towns, after all, are magnets for holidaymakers. However, during the lockdown, those children stand out; they are viewed with suspicion and are an obvious concern. Although there was existing evidence to suggest the shift towards the recruitment of local children, this had accelerated significantly since the onset of the national lockdown:

"gang members will travel down to [importing region] from [exporting region] to identify vulnerable young people who already live here... People who already live here are not seen as suspicious; they blend in; they know the area (DCOH, 2021)".

The NCA detail the demographic most at risk of being criminally exploited are from poor backgrounds, have previously engaged in offending behaviour and are therefore known to both the Police and Youth Offending Services, in the care of local authorities, excluded from mainstream education, and are listed as missing (NCA, 2016). A review by St Helens established seventy-three per cent of young people involved in county lines were under local authority care (Sweeney, et al., 2020). The research reaffirmed how certain characteristics increased the risks of criminal exploitation. DCOH described in the course of a county lines investigation that resulted in a prosecution of gang nominals, the majority of children exploited were under local authority care and reported as missing. However, the Academic stated that while those characteristics make a young person a prime target for organised criminal gangs, it is far from the

whole story. It was stressed, in reality, any young person is a potential target for gangs. DCPG, DOCH, and DCOC all explained how gangs have recognised that young people with specific vulnerabilities are more likely to be known to law enforcement, and all the units had witnessed a move towards the targeting of clean skins<sup>3</sup>. DSPG explained that many of the cases that had come to the attention of the division were children from what you would describe as good families, children who had never been in trouble with the Police and attend school regularly. The parents have paid thousands of pounds to criminal gangs, they had run out of money, and there was no other option than to approach the Police for help.

“a lot of our issues stem from families who have paid debts upwards of 10K, and there is no more money left, and they are in real trouble... (DSPG, 2021).”

### **Information Technology and Social Media**

The Home Office acknowledges that the exploitation of children within county lines does not always occur face to face and often occurs through the use of technology (Home Office, 2018). Ruthless and complex criminal organisations have embraced information technology, especially mobile telephones, which has transformed the transactional practice for ordering, supplying, and distributing illicit substances. Burner phones<sup>4</sup> are used to establish deal lines<sup>5</sup> to both advertise products through aggressive marketing campaigns and receive orders (NCA, 2016). All participants highlighted how the advancements and availability of mobile technology, coupled with the explosion of social media platforms, have resulted in organised criminal gangs afforded unprecedented access to young people. DSL stated that despite e-safety being a critical feature of the curriculum, the school recorded and responded to incidents daily.

Social media platforms, including Facebook; Snapchat; YouTube and Instagram, provide an accessible platform through which gangs advertise their brand. Gangs can

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<sup>3</sup> Clean skins describes a young person who has not been in contact with the Police, and do not have a criminal record.

<sup>4</sup> Burner phones are unregistered sim cards.

<sup>5</sup> Deal lines or brand lines are telephone numbers that are managed centrally by organised criminal gangs and will often be given a name, for example 'The Bee Line'. Orders received by the deal line are then forwarded to the dealer in the rural markets who in turn delivers the drugs to the customer.

effortlessly glamourise their lifestyle by sharing images and videos depicting the benefits of involvement in drug supply through county lines. Social media has proved to be an integral tool that gangs utilise to target, access, groom and recruit young people (Harding, 2020; McLean, et al., 2020). Illustrating this, DCOC described how video footage available on YouTube, Facebook, Snapchat and Instagram of a gang which was submitted as evidence in the prosecution of a county lines operation, depicted gang members in a hotel room with money strewn over the floor. Further footage showed a senior gang nominal holding a stack of money between his hand and elbow. A statement obtained from the Bank of England confirmed he was carrying more than one hundred thousand pounds.

Social media and information technology is also used by gangs to monitor the movements and achieve control and compliance of their workforce (Storrod & Densley, 2017). The Academic further explained how in addition to the role of technology in recruiting young people, the advancements and sophistication of GPS applications such as find my iPhone has facilitated the monitoring of young people by gang members in a process known as remote mothering.

“it started off by young people having to send photos of their location to gang members. However, technology has advanced to the point that their movements are monitored by apps such as Find my iPhone. It is all very sophisticated (Academic, 2021).”

### **Grooming and Recruitment**

The Children's Society (2019) details how organised criminal gangs begin the grooming process by targeting young, often primary children. They describe a process in which gangs groom, test and finally trap young people into county lines. The grooming phase commences with gang members identifying and providing for a want or need in a young person's life and often includes consumer goods that a child needs or desires to achieve status among their peers. For many young people, material wants and needs are unachievable by legitimate means due to poverty and deprivation; for others, the wants or needs may be a sense of belonging and kinship (Turner, et al., 2019). The research provided multiple examples of the tactics that

organised criminal gangs identified and exploited a young person's vulnerability. Both the YOT and DSL detailed how perpetrators identify and provide for an emotional need that a young person lacks at home or socially with their peers. DSPG further elaborated on how gangs target young people experiencing bullying and marginalisation. Identifying the vulnerability gangs will provide a young person with the protection and a sense of identity they crave, notoriety and street status, which they later exploit. DSPG described how a young male had been reported missing and found in [importing region]. The gang had identified that the young male had been a victim of bullying, they provided him with protection, and there was a sense of invincibility about him.

“The kids get a bit of swagger about them once people know they are in a gang (DSPG, 2021).”

A former manager for a county lines operation described how he would send out his supervisors to local parks to target and befriend young people drinking and smoking cannabis.

“They were told to show them how much money they had... show them what they could get if they were involved (CLM, 2021).”

DCOC described how gangs in an exporting area began the grooming process by targeting young primary aged children in areas of extreme socio-economic deprivation. Identifying a need, gang members started handing out food. As their target audience matured, their tactics altered, and the young people were gifted designer clothes, trainers and the latest mobile phones. By the time the young people had reached fourteen, they were actively participating, and gangs would hand out business cards advertising OT spots<sup>6</sup> in the school playground.

"Due to the economic circumstances in which some of the children lived, the promise of free food was enough to sway them to work for the gangs... A top of the range smartphone for some is something they are never going to see,

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<sup>6</sup> OT spots, 'Out There' spots refers to the rural marketplace. The practice is also known as going country.



then all of a sudden someone is giving them a brand new iPhone (DCOC, 2021)."

DCOC further explained how once a young person is involved with the Police, this is used by criminal gangs to their advantage and deepen the involvement of young people.

"Once a young person is involved with the Police, they are led to believe their chances of a legitimate future are over. They get into their heads; they tell them their life is with them now, their future involves the supply of illegal drugs (DCOC, 2021)."

### **Debt Bondage**

Described by the National Crime Agency as a key element in county lines (NCA, 2016), debt bondage<sup>7</sup> emerged as the main risk associated with county lines. Falling into debt was described by the Academic as probably the worst thing that could happen to a young person involved in county lines.

"that debt is very serious... it follows you home and can lead to you being killed! (Academic, 2021)."

The Academic further described how families who were oblivious to their child's involvement in county lines had received threatening phone calls, homes daubed with paint, and there have even been instances of homes being firebombed. DSPG also affirmed how the main risks are those that are associated with debt bondage.

"Kids placed into debt bondage is massive. It starts with them owing £50, then is £300, before they know it, they owe thousands. Realistically it is never going to be paid off, and they are stuck. The debt then has a knock-on effect that affects their families (DSPG, 2021)."

Research conducted by Robinson (2019) established cannabis as a gateway drug, but rather than a gateway to further drug use, she evidenced cannabis as a gateway to criminality. Reaffirming this, DCOH described how the young people in a county lines operation were initially supplied with small amounts of cannabis on tic<sup>8</sup>. Eventually,

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<sup>7</sup> Debt bondage occurs when a person is often tricked into working for little or no pay until that debt is cleared.

<sup>8</sup> Tic, drugs supplied on a buy now pay later basis.

the gang demands that the debt is repaid, and with no financial means to pay, they are forced to work the lines until the debt is cleared. However, the reality is that the debt will never be repaid, and they are then brought into a hard world that they struggle to leave. DCOC described how young people would be trusted to transport an illegal substance. The gangs would then ensure the substance was taken from that young person in a staged robbery. The young person is then placed into debt bondage and forced to work until the debt is cleared, again emphasising it would never be repaid. The CLM stated how he would make sure that a young person was put into debt (CLM, 2021). YOT also described how once young people were groomed and recruited into county lines, were quickly put into debt bondage. Those debts are incurred through staged robberies or the supply of cannabis for personal use, but once they were in debt, she described them as trapped. Once they are trapped, there is a whole scale risk that affects them and their families.

“It affects every part of their life. It removes them from their families, from their support networks, it completely isolates them. If they refuse to pay their debts, refuse to work, there are very real risks, risks of serious violent attacks, even a risk to life (YOT, 2021).”

Debt bondage further increases the chances of young people experiencing significant physical harm and sexual exploitation (NCA, 2018). DSPG described how the father of one young person who was in debt to a gang member tried to negotiate terms to clear the debt ended up the subject of a serious violent assault. He further described instances where young people being taxed<sup>9</sup> and bagged<sup>10</sup> due to the debts that they had incurred. Concerningly, despite the severity of the punishments, they were both determined to be acceptable and proportionate. DCOC and DSL described how young people placed into debt bondage are at increased risks of being exploited sexually through sexual assaults, which are often recorded and distributed. What often begins as a positive relationship that provides a young person with the sense of belonging, identity, and status that they crave quickly develops into a negative, harmful

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<sup>9</sup> Taxed/ Taxing, a serious violent assault used as a punishment and to serve as a deterrent to others.

<sup>10</sup> Bagged/ Bagging describes an attack that results in a person requiring a colostomy bag for the rest of their life.

relationship. Experiences of violence and servitude ensure that a young person remains controlled and trapped by organised criminal gangs (Turner, et al., 2019).

### **Victim or Offender?**

Robinson (2019) identified that the vast majority of young people involved in county lines had never heard of the term child criminal exploitation. Neither did they recognise the manipulative relationships with gang members and other drug dealers. Instead, they saw their exploiter as a person who provided money, safety, protection and a sense of belonging. Furthermore, many young people considered their relationship with perpetrators to be a positive one, rejecting the label of the victim (Robinson, 2019). Payne and Hamdi (2008) describe how positive relationships can be formed between young people and their exploiters in which they identify as a form of street love. Reaffirming this, DCOH described how many exploited young people begin to look up to their abusers.

“It’s like Stockholm syndrome; they start to look up to their abusers, and they start to get attached to them, almost like family ties (DCOH, 2021).”

DCOC further explained how in general, it is not until they are hundreds of miles from home, isolated from their families and working for free to pay off their debts that they begin to question their situation. The Academic further explained how young people are brought into the situation with their friends, and because everyone else is doing it, they perceive it to be normal—again, reinforcing how young people only began to question their situation when things start to go wrong, they are working for free and being physically and sexually abused.

“They think they are going to make it big, and make a lot of money, be the real G! But it’s a load of rubbish; it rarely happens. Instead, they find themselves making chicken change if they are lucky. They are abused, punched up or locked up, and it becomes a real mess (Academic, 2021).”

Poverty, deprivation, marginalisation, and inequality, exacerbated by ten years of economic and fiscal austerity, have led many young people to become willing

participants in county lines activities (Harding, 2020; Robinson, et al., 2018). County lines have provided some young people with an alternative to legitimate employment that provides an opportunity for some marginalised young people to take part in mainstream society and attain consumerist goals that are otherwise out of reach (Robinson, 2019). DSL confirmed this, emphasising how the impact of austerity has deepened already socially deprived regions and effectively removed legitimate opportunities for young people. DCOH also emphasised how the potential financial gains drive many young people who actively choose to become involved in county lines.

“All too often, young people who are drawn into county lines have nothing; they are living in poverty, and there is a lack of legitimate opportunities open to them. They are recruited into county lines; often, with the promise of money, they are promised the glamorous lifestyles that gang members brag about online. They see gang members dressed in nice clothes, driving nice cars, and they have got plenty of money, and they want that. It results in choices being made. But does that make them an offender?”

YOT also explained;

“Some of the young people I have worked with are involved because they think it is funny. They are looking for that thrill or buzz. That worries me because you have got to be able to get that thrill or buzz from some sort of activity, but when those activities are costly, they can't, can they? (YOT, 2021)”

The research established the most challenging aspect for law enforcement dealing with county lines was establishing the victim and offender roles. DCOH stated that by definition, young people and vulnerable people participating in a criminal enterprise; it would be hard not to conclude that all young people involved are victims. However, the research established that it is not that straightforward. DSPG explained that any offence involving the exploitation of a child, even if that child initially appears complicit, in the vast majority of cases, they are a victim. DCOC stated how young people are groomed, recruited and systematically exploited in most cases are victims. There is, however, a minority that are knowledgeable; they may be slightly older, but they understand the entire workings of county lines, the benefits and rewards, and it is a

calculated choice. Both the YOT and DSL explained that although young people brought into county lines are considered victims; difficulties then arise when those young people recruit other young and vulnerable people.

“They are shown a new way of life. If they are strong enough, they take on the mantle from who has recruited them. It is very difficult because they have been exploited and brought into that world. They will then try to exploit others because that is the only world that they know (DSL, 2021).”

What did emerge was the unanimous conclusion by all participants was how integral the role of the Complex Safeguarding teams are to help victims identify their status. DSL stated that generally, children have no idea that they have been exploited, and it takes a lot of work afterwards for them to understand the gravity of their situation. DCOH explained that one of the biggest challenges that the police face is that young people involved in county lines are reluctant to talk and cooperate with the Police. Many young people had grown up witnessing their family and peers involved in criminality from a young age. Therefore the behaviour is normalised. DSPG further described the challenges of engaging with young people.

“A lot of them have grown up in those circles, and they will not engage with us even if they know what they have been through is wrong. They don’t want to be seen as a grass. It's very much them and us (DSPG, 2021).”

## Responses

### Multi-Agency Practice

The legal framework that defines the responses to children has come under criticism for being complex and producing inconsistent responses in safeguarding and law enforcement (Turner, et al., 2019). Those criticisms were reinforced during interviews. The Academic stated that although there are currently two definitions used to describe child criminal exploitation<sup>11</sup>, the lack of statutory definition and the inconsistent sharing

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<sup>11</sup> The Home Office definition – Child criminal exploitation occurs where an individual or group takes advantage of an imbalance of power to coerce, control, manipulate or deceive a young person under the age of 18. The victim may have been criminally exploited in the activity appears consensual. Criminal exploitation does not always involve physical contact and can occur through the use of technology.

of data and collaborative working between authorities have led to variable results. Despite the legislative requirements of the Children Act 1989 that necessitates the collaborative working of authorities to promote the wellbeing and safeguarding of young people. The serious case review into the death of child C, a fourteen-year-old boy, concluded that despite evidence to suggest the child had been groomed and criminally exploited, there was a catastrophic failure in the sharing of information between the relevant authorities (Drew, 2020).

DCOC also raised concerns about the variations in partnership working. Although there were positive examples of collaborative working in regions including Manchester, an example following an arrest of a young girl in an importing region for drug offences provided an example of poor practice.

“she told us everything. Her exploiters lived a stones through from her home. I needed to get her and her family an urgent house move to prevent further exploitation. She lived in social housing; if I had phoned, I would have been fobbed off. So I drove from Plymouth to North London and explained that it was an emergency, and we could not safeguard her from Plymouth. The council's response was, it's a four-month wait! The child was at an increased risk of further exploitation; their response was, that is for you to deal with (DCOC, 2021).”

## Legislation

Child trafficking is defined in the United Nations Palermo Protocol as the 'recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of a child for the purpose of exploitation. And within the UK, trafficking is concerned as a form of modern slavery (HMICFR, CQC, Ofsted, 2018). The research established that there is a range of legislative powers available to respond to the commission of offences in county lines, including the Modern Slavery Act 2015, which facilitates the prosecution of individuals who traffick and exploit young people. DCOH explained how because both county lines and the Modern Slavery legislation is new, it is something that the Police and the

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The Children's Society definition - when someone you trusted makes you commit crimes for their benefit.

Judiciary are adapting to, and how they are wanting to charge and convict the correct people while protecting the victims. Nonetheless, the division has been successful in applying the Modern Slavery Act to successfully prosecute organised criminal gangs whilst providing a defence for victims. Section 45 is a statutory defence for victims of modern slavery without the fear of prosecution for offences that they are forced to commit. The legal burden of proof falls to the prosecution to prove that they are not victims (HMICFR, 2020). However, the research established that many young people who are victims of Modern Slavery Offences are unwilling to raise the defence due to the fear of repercussions. DSPG stated:

“A lot of young people feel they are unable to raise the defence because they are scared of the repercussions, so they take a possession with intent to supply charge rather than face the wrath of whoever is exploiting them (DSPG, 2021).”

DCOH and DCOC explained how they have managed to successfully prosecute organised criminal gangs under conspiracy to supply Class A substances. DCOC further explained the benefits of conspiracy charges is that they can attack the entire hierarchy, and the young people do not have to attend court to give evidence.

“When dealing with county lines as a conspiracy, it means we can catch the whole hierarchy. We don’t need to separate it into too many jobs; it is like a big melting pot. Kids don’t want to be in the courtroom physically or virtually. They have told us everything, and they should now be safeguarded (DCOC, 2021).”

In addition, it was explained how one of the additional benefits of conspiracy charges and without having to name the child individually, the use of children under eighteen is used as an aggravating factor.

“They don’t have to be named; they are known as Child A, B, C. The judge then gets a full picture of what has gone on; they take into account all the evidence, and they know that there is a massive element of modern slavery. (DCOC, 2021).”

DPSG further explained how the division often utilised Child Abduction Warning Notices (CAWN). For young people under the age of sixteen or eighteen, if they are

under the local authority's care, the Police require a statement from whoever has parental responsibility. The CAWN is then applied against the adult who is associating with the young person, and breach of the order results in the adult's arrest. Other options that have been used include Slavery Protection Orders; although, it was stressed how notoriously difficult they are to obtain by the courts. Police Protection Orders facilitate the removal of a young or vulnerable person to place them in the care of the Police or Social Services for seventy-two hours. The main difficulties experienced with legislation were the burden of proof being beyond all reasonable doubt and evidence coupled with the cooperation of an often reluctant young person.

### **National Referral Mechanism**

The National Referral Mechanism (NRM), launched in 2009, identifies and supports potential victims of modern slavery (NCA, 2020). The Modern Slavery Police Transformation Unit reported criminal exploitation was the primary type of slavery in 370 Police operations in April 2019, an increase of 1956% in two years (NCA, 2020). However, despite the upsurge, there is currently no category to record those referrals. Furthermore, the NRM has no official status in a criminal court. Although the burden of proof in a criminal court is beyond all reasonable doubt, the NRM requires the balance of probabilities to establish if someone is a victim of trafficking. This results in children who are victims of human trafficking, exploitation and/or modern slavery endure criminal proceedings alongside the process to recognise their victim status and often results in a child who receives status as trafficked and criminalised (Turner, et al., 2019).

The NRM was criticised in the research as being a system that is not fit for purpose. For example, DCOC described an incident in which the unit had arrested some young people with a couple of G packs<sup>12</sup>, hundreds of miles away from home. A child in possession of Class A substance presents a safeguarding issue, and it was identified that they had been groomed for five years. Consequently, they were referred to the NRM, and the referral was returned, stating they were not suitable. The YOT

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<sup>12</sup> G packs is urban slang for £1000 of crack cocaine or heroin.



experienced similar problems and described a recent case in which a fifteen-year-old girl was involved with an older gang member:

“She thought it was a loving relationship, but he was using her. He took her to London to do a deal to pick up firearms. He used her to do it, and it was undercover Police officers. They arrested her, and she spent a few nights in custody in London, on her own, hundreds of miles from home. Our team referred her to the NRM, and she was given status as trafficked and as a victim, but she still got given a custodial sentence! Why would that happen? She was clueless as to what happened; she had no idea; she was petrified. Why have a mechanism that says yes, this person is a victim, then criminalise them? (YOT, 2021)”

The YOT provided a further example of how gang nominals from a county line had driven from [importing region] to [exporting region], bundled a young male in the back of their car and drove him back to [importing region].

“He was a victim, yet sentenced to a referral order! So, as if being bundled into the back of a car and driven to the other side of the country isn’t enough, the system told him he was a criminal (YOT, 2021).”

## Chapter Five: Conclusion

To conclude, Gangs have embraced the advancements in mobile technology, established deal lines and systematically exploit young people to transport Class A substances between market locations. It also discovered that although the traditional county lines model involves the movement of illegal drugs across counties, inner cities experienced significant problems with young people exploited to transport drugs within county boundaries. The research established how an imbalance of power results in the exploitation of young people to commit criminal offences that benefit the perpetrator. Although the commission of crimes most associated with county lines is Possession and Possession with Intent to Supply substances controlled under the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971 (HM Government, 1971), the commission of crimes was recognised to be broader than drugs offences. The ingenuity of organised criminal gangs to mitigate risks during the national lockdown witnessed an adaption to traditional methods of transportation and retail (Brewster, et al., 2021) and the move towards recruiting local young people to avoid unwanted attention. The physical use of young people to store and transport drugs was also highlighted as an adaptation of tactics to evade Police detection, a demonstration of the link between child criminal and sexual exploitation, and an example of the extreme harms that young people are exposed to whilst transporting the commodities. Although the research established that any young person is a potential target for organised criminal gangs, it did highlight specific characteristics that significantly increased a young person's vulnerability to criminal exploitation. Indeed, research undertaken by St Helens Council established almost three-quarters of young people involved in county lines were under the care of the local authority (Sweeney, et al., 2020).

Organised criminal gangs have embraced the advancements in mobile technology and the explosion of social media. It has created an opportunity to alter the way illegal substances are distributed, ordered and supplied, and created opportunities for gangs to build and market their brand and recruit a workforce. The availability of mobile technology and the popularity of social media platforms has presented organised criminal gangs with unprecedented access to young people. As a result, they are able to exhibit images of wealth and glamourise the involvement in the supply of drugs to entice young people to work for them. The Children's Society describes how

organised criminal gangs groom, test then trap young people into working for them (Turner, et al., 2019). The research identified how organised criminal gangs began the grooming process by identifying the needs or wants of a young person. The research evidenced how gangs began the grooming process with primary age children and continually evolved their tactics providing for the young peoples wants and needs as they matured. It also established how those wants and needs were not always material; many young people crave a sense of belonging, identity, or protection.

Debt bondage emerged as the leading risk factor associated with county lines. Young people were placed into debt in ways including staged robberies or the supply of cannabis for personal use. The debts quickly escalate, and young people are forced to work until those debts are settled. Debt bondage increases the risk of significant physical harm, sexual exploitation and a risk to life. Furthermore, those risks are not limited to the young person but extend to their wider family.

The research established most of the young people involved in county lines, even if their participation appeared to be complicit, were considered victims. Despite their exploitation, there even appears in some cases to be positive relationships between the perpetrator and victim. For others, the gravity of their situation hits them once they are in debt bondage, hundreds of miles from home and subjected to physical or sexual assaults. It further established that despite their exploitation, many young people are reluctant to engage with the Police. The role of Complex Safeguarding teams are integral in the journey for young people to identify the extent of the exploitation and their legitimate victim status.

The research reaffirmed existing evidence concerning the inconsistent sharing of data and partnership working between authorities. The introduction of the Modern Slavery Act facilitates the prosecution of individuals who traffick and exploit young people and provides a defence for victims exploited to commit criminal acts. However, through both the fear of repercussions and the unwillingness to give evidence in a courtroom, young people are reluctant to raise the defence. To prevent young people from having to endure the courtroom, importing regions have successfully attacked organised

criminal gangs, gaining convictions under conspiracy legislation with the use of children used as an aggravating factor. The mechanism to identify and support potential victims of modern slavery also received criticism that reflected the those of the Children's Society regarding how young people have received status as trafficked and victims whilst also being criminalised.

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