



The Impact of COVID-19 on Child Criminal Exploitation

Interim research briefing, Oct 2020¹

Initial findings of an ongoing research project indicate that restrictions introduced in response to COVID-19 have forced adaptations in the methods used by County Lines drug supply networks and have impacted upon the ways in which frontline professionals work to detect and effectively safeguard children and young people.

Summary

COVID-19 restrictions hamper the ability of frontline agencies to risk-assess child exploitation, and exacerbate the potential for County Lines related exploitation and harm to remain hidden. Ongoing concerns include:

- **Safeguarding capacity** - reduced contact with young people due to lack of resources; doorstep/telephone communication replacing face-to-face interaction; and victims of exploitation falling through the net due to school closures.
- **Evolving County Lines supply methods** - increased levels of cuckooing with young people remaining in trap-houses for longer; greater use of local children involved in transporting drugs; perpetrators claiming to have COVID-19 in order to avoid being stopped, questioned and arrested; and use of supermarket carparks to co-locate with customer shopping routines.
- **Implications for children and young people** - heightened risk of exploitation due to greater social media and internet use; feelings of isolation, and greater substance misuse among children residing away from family members.

Despite an assumption that County Lines drug distribution, and enforcement efforts, must have changed in response to COVID-19 restrictions, there is little agreement about what precisely these changes have been, and the broader implications they have had on efforts to prevent and detect crime and exploitation, and safeguard those most at risk.

Notwithstanding recognition from practitioners that COVID-19 had significantly inhibited detection and safeguarding, the number of child referrals to the National Referral Mechanism (NRM) in the first half of 2020 was similar to 2019, with unexplained quarterly fluctuations.² However, difficulties in collecting and reporting quantitative indicators including crime statistics and missing children reports, a lack of qualitative reporting by frontline practitioners or other sources, and a reliance on the speculative and often divergent accounts of sector experts and journalists, means that building a clear picture has been difficult.

The pandemic has created challenges for child protection services, the police, the courts and other frontline services, both changes to working patterns, and to the services they are able to provide. Lockdown inhibited opportunities for face-to-face safeguarding and risk assessment, fuelling concerns over online harms and grooming while young people were confined to their homes. Court and school closures, and delays to CPS processes, further exacerbated risk to vulnerable young people.

Some areas reported reductions in the numbers of children identified as missing and fewer incidents of serious crime, potentially obscuring increases in the vulnerabilities of children and young people. Children continued to be identified far away from their homes and carrying large quantities of cash or drugs.³

British Transport Police (BTP) benefitted from increased available resource due to the closure of the night-time economy, and reported early disruption successes because of reduced use by *bona fide* passengers of the rail networks. However, the risk of travel using public transport has pushed County Lines operations towards the use of private vehicles, with more bulk drug deliveries to provincial areas, so that children that *were* reported missing, were often missing for longer. Increased intelligence from residential areas (because of more working from home) has contributed to changes in point-of-sale tactics, with supermarket carparks now preferred due to the concealment offered by large amounts of public footfall.

From a positive perspective, some professionals reported greater flexibility in terms of establishing multi-agency meetings and forums, resulting in stronger partnership working and communication. Some police also documented enhanced engagement with members of the public, giving rise to greater awareness of the signs of County Lines activity and a subsequent rise in the levels of intelligence received.

¹ This report was prepared by Dr. Ben Brewster, Dr. Grace Robinson, Vicky Brotherton, and Prof. Sir Bernard Silverman from the University of Nottingham's Rights Lab, and Prof. Dave Walsh from the De Montfort University School of Law. The ongoing project, 'COVID-19 and Child Criminal Exploitation: Closing Urgent Knowledge and Data Gaps on the Implications of Pandemic for County Lines,' is funded by UKRI.

² UK Home Office, "Modern Slavery: National Referral Mechanism and Duty to Notify Statistics UK, Quarter 2 2020 – April to June," 2020,

<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/modern-slavery-national-referral-mechanism-and-duty-to-notify-statistics-uk-quarter-2-2020-april-to-june>.

³ Jamie Grierson and Amy Walker, "Gangs Still Forcing Children into 'County Lines' Drug Trafficking," *The Guardian*, April 13, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2020/apr/13/gangs-still-forcing-children-into-county-lines-drug-trafficking-police-covid-19-lockdown>.

Research overview

Through an analysis of primary interviews and a review of published sources (including media articles and institutional reports) this project aims to unpack the contours of risk related to the exploitation of young people in County Lines drug supply during the pandemic. The interviewees (N=13) were drawn from law enforcement, local authorities and a care-providing NGO, across a variety of geographic counties in England. Participants were asked to reflect on their personal experiences of working during the pandemic, its effect on the risk to service clients and observed impacts on activity related to the County Lines drug supply model.

Recommendations

1. In the event of additional or ongoing COVID-19 restrictions, practitioners should endeavour to **maintain face-to-face contact with young people** where appropriate, enabling a safe environment for disclosures, the opportunity for ongoing risks to be assessed, and tailored support to be delivered. In cases where young people responded well to remote engagement, a blended approach should be considered.
2. Where resource permits, **neighbourhood policing approaches** should be used in high risk communities and neighbourhoods affected by the drug supply.
3. Public and third sector organisations should continue to use social and traditional media to **maintain the momentum of efforts to raise awareness** among the public and peripheral stakeholders of exploitation risk, providing education on indicators, risks, and reporting channels.
4. Multi-agency stakeholders should continue to **build on fruitful remote working arrangements** and online meetings to continue to develop the cohesion of local responses.

Impact on frontline services

Even prior to COVID-19, the resources of frontline statutory services, such as Youth Justice agencies, were already stretched, and the complications of lockdown have only exacerbated their concerns.

The situation with law enforcement is more complex. Police reported successful disruption efforts on the rail network in the early stages of lockdown, and closures to the night-time economy freed up resources for detection and targeted enforcement activities.

Beyond resourcing, reflections on the effectiveness of safeguarding during lockdown were stark. Professionals that usually rely on face-to-face interaction with young people at risk found that remote interventions made it more difficult to maintain the quality and quantity of their engagement, making it almost impossible to accurately assess vulnerability and monitor ongoing risks. School closures had a considerable impact because of their role in identifying young people

involved in, or at risk of, crime and exploitation. There was therefore a shared concern over the potential for CCE cases to fall through the net. As one participant explained:

“The decrease in face-to-face visits from social care [and] a huge proportion of children not in school [means] a lot of these children who would be in situations of exploitation are no longer interacting with professionals who would be able to identify concerns and then take the appropriate safeguarding actions.”

The move to online working gave rise to a number of positive outcomes for frontline services. With most agencies reporting a decline in the number of cases of CCE and County Lines and the police highlighting a drop in referrals, British Transport Police (BTP) remained consistent in their identification and disruption efforts, initially aided by a reduction in passengers across the national railway network. It was reported that children continued to be found on the train network during lockdown, far away from their homes and carrying large quantities of cash or drugs.⁴

Some professionals reported greater flexibility in terms of establishing multi-agency meetings and forums, resulting in stronger partnership working and communication. Police documented enhanced engagement with members of the public, with greater awareness of the signs of County Lines activity and a subsequent rise in the levels of intelligence received.

Impact on Crime and Criminal Justice

Lockdown restrictions have encroached upon every aspect of the Criminal Justice System. This has especially been felt within the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS). Significant delays in dealing with criminal cases have increased the number awaiting trial, especially the backlog of first-time offenders. The number of cautions has risen, possibly associated with an increase in COVID-19-related offences, and the number of court orders has decreased. Delays in court procedure have created uncertainty among frontline service providers as referrals are halted, exacerbating the risk to, and vulnerability of, young people who are left in limbo as a result.

Closures to the night-time economy and huge reductions in the amount of passenger traffic through the country's rail networks bolstered enforcement efforts to disrupt County Lines in the initial months of lockdown. Despite a 94% reduction in rail travel due to restrictions, one police force claimed they had not seen a similar reduction in runners using the rail networks, having made ten County Lines arrests by mid-April.⁵ The first few months of lockdown gave BTP grounds and capacity to question reasons for passengers' travel, simultaneously increasing the visibility of unaccompanied young people on the rail network. Police quickly learned to recognise fraudulent travel justifications being used by young people, such as the claimed need to visit foodbanks or to travel for the funerals of recently deceased relatives who had died as a result of COVID.

The increased possibility of detecting children and young people moving drugs on public transport almost certainly encouraged distribution networks to change their tactics towards the use of cars.⁶ This was verified by our

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Helen Pidd, “County Lines Gangs Disguised Drug Couriers as Key Workers during Coronavirus Lockdown,” *The Guardian*, July 5, 2020,

respondents, with some professionals witnessing a spike in the use of the road network to transport young people and drugs, with those operating more sophisticated lines synchronising their journeys with police shift handovers, particularly through the night. However, there was recognition that these methods were probably already used before the COVID-19 outbreak.

In some areas, police reported increases in the amount of intelligence coming through from residential areas, due to more neighbourhood policing, and the ability of residents to notice and report irregular behaviour, such as frequent visitors to properties.

Others have suggested that the supply of drugs from metropolitan centres to provincial or seaside towns increasingly involves medium bulk deliveries in cars rather than sending young people on empty trains and buses.⁷ We also received information suggesting that although missing children reports had reduced during lockdown, children whom were reported missing, were often missing for longer, suggesting that substances were being supplied and dealt in larger quantities, but less frequently. The use of private hire vehicles and personal cars were identified ways in which transport restrictions were being overcome.

Tactics such as drug runners dressing up as key- or delivery-workers were anecdotally confirmed, however their prevalence remains unclear, and there are likely to be regional differences in the ways in which dealing networks adapted.

We received conflicting reports regarding the cuckooing of properties. Some reports suggested that the challenges associated with travel meant that trap houses were increasingly important, with young people remaining in properties (and therefore missing) for longer. The use of local dealers was also highlighted, as was a reversing in the County Lines model where dealers from provincial areas were travelling into metropolitan areas to collect product to distribute. One respondent suggested:

“What we saw was [that] most areas evolved and recruited local kids to do the distribution. That stopped [victims] from being picked up as missing, because when a kid goes missing, alerts [are] raised and that was disrupting the business model”

There were vague reports of the increased exploitation of young people who do not fit existing runner/dealer stereotypes (including females), as County Lines perpetrators grew weary of increased stop and searches of young, predominantly black, males.⁸

The co-option of, or adherence to, COVID-19 guidance by drug distribution networks was also suggested. For example,

<https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2020/jul/05/county-lines-gangs-drug-couriers-key-workers-coronavirus-lockdown-cocaine-heroin>.

⁷ Simon Harding, “How Gangs Adapted to Coronavirus – and Why We May See a Surge in Violence as Lockdown Lifts,” *The Conversation*, June 22, 2020, <https://theconversation.com/how-gangs-adapted-to-coronavirus-and-why-we-may-see-a-surge-in-violence-as-lockdown-lifts-140653>.

⁸ Harding, *op. cit.*

⁹ Niamh Eastwood, Jack Spicer, and Judith Aldridge, “I Was Quite Surprised - How Are Drug Dealers Adapting to Lockdown?,” *Vice*, May 11, 2020, https://www.vice.com/en_au/article/k7qek9/release-uk-drug-market-

a survey conducted by Release, the national centre for expertise on drugs and drugs law, found that dealers were ‘practising the two-metre rule’, ‘wearing gloves and masks’ and ‘refusing to accept cash’ relying instead on digital forms of payment.⁹ While for some the use of masks was a convenient attempt at ‘disguise’, drug dealers may actually be protecting themselves.¹⁰ It has also been suggested that people distributing drugs within local areas on bikes had been using ‘daily exercise’ as an excuse for movement. However, it is unclear whether this is founded on the experiences of police officers, other frontline practitioners or speculation. Our participants were not able to verify or dispel these claims, but it seems likely localised approaches to evading detection have included some, or all, of what has been described.

There was also strong consensus regarding adaptation of point-of-sale tactics, with supermarket and shopping centre carparks – as places where there was still moderate footfall to disguise activity – increasingly being used. One interviewee revealed that in some cases young people were even given supermarket uniforms as a disguise.

Impact on children and young people

Reductions in the number of children reported missing from home or care have been cited as evidence that exploitation through County Lines has reduced.¹¹ However, professionals cited concerns that issues are simply not being recorded and that cases of criminal exploitation are roughly the same, if not worse.

Rising concern over possible COVID-19-related sanctions meant some parents were less comfortable in disclosing when their children went missing from home. Others reported that the number of missing vulnerable children ‘soared’ as the effectiveness of safeguarding was cut.¹² In either case, changes in recorded incidence may reflect differences in reporting. In addition, children go missing, and serious violence can occur, for a variety of reasons which may be affected by the pandemic but are not all associated with County Lines.

Some respondents reported increases in calls by parents to helplines because of home-working arrangements, which enabled them to spot behaviour that would, under normal circumstances, go unnoticed.

While most children and young people remained at home, the use of social media became an even more intrinsic part of social interaction. Frontline professionals saw increasing cases of online harms and abuse, with perpetrators using platforms such as Snapchat, Instagram and Tik Tok to introduce new forms of grooming for the purposes of criminal exploitation. These platforms also continue to be used as mechanisms of control and a means of exposing young people to the aspirational lifestyle of being involved in the lucrative illegal drug economy.

survey; Harding, “How Gangs Adapted to Coronavirus – and Why We May See a Surge in Violence as Lockdown Lifts.”

¹⁰ Harding, *op. cit.*

¹¹ Joe Caluori, “County Lines after COVID - a New Threat?,” CREST Advisory, May 19, 2020, <https://www.crestadvisory.com/amp/county-lines-after-covid-a-new-threat>.

¹² Mark Townsend, “Number of Missing Vulnerable Children Soars as Safeguarding Is Cut during Pandemic,” *The Guardian*, June 6, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2020/jun/06/alarmed-rise-in-cases-of-missing-children-following-safeguarding-cuts>.

For professionals, remote telecommunication became the new way to 'meet' one-to-one with service users, and frontline workers documented the difficulty in engaging 'at-risk' young people. Engagement was compounded for those with mental health issues and learning difficulties, as they struggled to understand, and adapt to the new changes. Care practitioners that relied upon gauging body language and using alternate measures to engage young people, such as driving and walking, or getting a drink from a local café, were concerned about participation dwindling and the likelihood of maintaining telephone contact with clients as the weeks went on. One interviewee stated:

"Particularly with this kid that I've got [the] best engagement was in the car because you're not face-to-face. He likes to be on the move because he's got ADHD. The best way to engage with him would be; I pick him up, we probably go through McDonald's drive thru, I'd get him a drink and we'd chat on the drive. To then have to switch to speaking over the phone was so difficult."

Young people who did remain in regular contact with professionals were much less comfortable in making disclosures over the telephone. Doorstep meetings also significantly impacted the safeguarding abilities of frontline services. Where previously professionals could identify potential indicators of familial harm during meetings outside of the home, they had become restricted in their ability to offer the usual safe environment that would encourage disclosures from young people. Indeed, increased exposure to domestic violence at home is a risk factor that might push people towards exploitation by criminals. Not only were children more likely to be at risk of exposure to domestic violence, but the 'postcode lottery' of service provision was exacerbated during the period as child protection and other services were disrupted.¹³

For many children and young people, lockdown restrictions meant being separated from family members, contributing to growing levels of isolation. With few forms of entertainment and very little social interaction, reports of substance misuse among some young people was also reported as a concern.

Knowledge gaps

Despite some clarifications emerging during the initial phases of our research, the exact nature and breadth of COVID-19 related impacts on County Lines and Child Criminal Exploitation remains unclear. It is difficult to assess whether some of the changes reported are speculative or based on anecdotal examples only occurring in one place, rather than providing evidence of national or regional trends. It is also difficult to ascertain whether reports which appear to corroborate one another are drawing on speculative or anecdotal evidence from the same places.

What is clear however is that the impacts of COVID-19 continue to amplify existing issues. The suitability of the NRM and its benefit to young people remains strongly questioned by practitioners, as do proposals to pilot devolved decision making to local authorities, with strong concerns over the existence of expertise and resources to do this effectively.

An additional lack of clarity and awareness surrounds the extent to which young people are being exploited financially,

as their bank accounts are used to hold and transfer money gained from the distribution and sale of illegal drugs. The characteristics of those chosen for this type of criminal exploitation remain unclear, however the lasting implications are concerning. Young people exploited through CCE may struggle to open and maintain bank accounts in the future, inhibiting opportunities for legitimate employment and adequate accommodation.

Significant question marks remain as to the long-term implications of COVID-19 related shifts, as government restrictions continue to change. Backlogs in the judicial system continue to cause significant concerns, as does the time lost in working with young people who are already affected.

Ongoing Risks

The focus on the identification of stereotypical victim profiles is an increasing concern as County Lines supply networks and dealing crews adapt to groom and exploit young people, increasingly girls or those from more affluent backgrounds, who are less likely to be picked up by police. There is also anecdotal evidence that groups - including Albanian, Vietnamese and Somali diaspora - with existing involvement in drug supply may also be involved in drug supply related child criminal exploitation. The concern is that this remains unrecognised as national attention is fixed on the exploitation of British nationals from disadvantaged backgrounds through the County Lines supply model.

The long-term impact on the County Lines model, and broader exploitation of young people in drug supply remains unclear, but it is likely that lessons learned by criminals during the pandemic will inform practices that make offending harder to detect, and increasingly resilient to disruption by law enforcement. As police develop their understanding, County Lines actors develop their tactics.

¹³ Elaine Wedlock and Julian Melina, "Sowing the Seeds: Children's Experience of Domestic Abuse and Criminality," *Victims Commissioner*, 2020, <https://victimscommissioner.org.uk/>.