Vulnerability & Policing Futures Research Centre

County lines, policing and vulnerability

Key points

- In county lines, there has been a significant shift in policing approaches towards young people and vulnerable adults who are increasingly seen as victims of criminal exploitation, rather than simply as suspects or offenders.
- The extent to which vulnerable individuals are seen and processed as victims and safeguarded, or criminalised, varies enormously between and within police forces. This results in a policing and outcomes postcode lottery with serious implications for procedural justice.
- Local area safeguarding partnerships also often lack robust baseline processes for those subject to criminal exploitation.
- There needs to be a national policing strategy on child and adult criminal exploitation to effectively address these issues within policing and local safeguarding.

Summary

This is the UK's first national study of police responses to county lines drug distribution and related child and adult criminal exploitation.

The study examined how the police identify and process young people and vulnerable adults involved in drug distribution in cross-border and local drug markets.

The findings show that police forces are changing how they consider and process young people and vulnerable adults involved in drug markets. However, while they increasingly recognise vulnerability and investigate possible criminal exploitation, policing practice varies significantly between and even within forces.

The findings suggest that to help establish an appropriate minimum baseline safeguarding response, consistent across all forces, there needs to be more detailed national guidance, policy, and centralised oversight in this area.

Background

"County lines" is the term given to the practice of drug dealers from cities e.g. London, Liverpool, Manchester and Birmingham moving in on drug markets in smaller towns to sell Class A drugs. The gangs involved usually operate across several police force and local authority areas.

County lines have expanded rapidly across the UK to become the dominant drug market model for the supply of heroin and crack cocaine outside large urban areas.

Vulnerable people, including children, are often recruited (groomed, manipulated and/or coerced) into carrying and selling drugs, with supply managed via the use of dedicated mobile phone lines. Increased awareness of vulnerability and exploitation connected to county lines, and other local drug markets, has changed how the police perceive and handle young people involved in selling, transporting, or storing illicit drugs in the UK.

County lines drug supply has highlighted the use of child criminal exploitation (CCE) and criminally exploited vulnerable adults (CE) in criminal activity. Whilst CCE is not new, the spread of county lines has increased the numbers of, and geographical spread of, criminally exploited children in the drug trade to unprecedented levels. However, because of this, county lines has also made CCE and CE victimhood more visible and better understood.

Until recently, young people and vulnerable adults involved in the supply of drugs would have been perceived simply as offenders. Now, they may be perceived as vulnerable and as victims of exploitation by organised crime groups.

This often presents a dilemma for law enforcement. For example, a young person found in possession of large quantities of Class A drugs would be suspected of supply rather than use - a serious offence in the eyes of the law. However, the young person may themselves be a victim of grooming and/or threats of violence. Because of their circumstances, they may also be reluctant to talk to the police and may even be antagonistic – both attributes that can lead to vulnerability and exploitation being missed or dismissed.

This illustrates how it can be a challenge for the police to categorise and process people who are both exploited and criminally involved, particularly when a child or vulnerable adult do not see themselves as exploited or wish to hide it for fear of reprisals. Whether someone is viewed as a victim or offender also changes over time. For example, a person might be groomed and entrapped in county lines drug supply and therefore viewed as a victim. However, over time they might act more purposively by exploiting other young people or taking a more senior role where they would tend to be seen as an offender. These dilemmas are apparent when young people turn 18 and are legally seen as adults. This is a "cliff-edge" moment when greater culpability and lesser vulnerability is often assumed because of their "adulthood" even if initial grooming and exploitation occurred and persisted when younger.

Vulnerable people and victims of exploitation being effectively recognised and then processed appropriately is a concern to the police and other safeguarding agencies who acknowledge that there remain significant challenges to achieving this.

What we did

Phase 1 involved conducting 50 semi-structured interviews with representatives from 44 of the 45 UK territorial police forces and British Transport Police about their response to criminal exploitation in drug markets. Almost all interviewees were police officers who were force leads on county lines or exploitation, with ranks ranging from Sergeant to Superintendent. Several interviews were undertaken with civilian police analysts.

Phase 2 involved conducting rapid appraisals of three locations to gain a better understanding of how vulnerability and exploitation within drug markets is perceived and responded to by police and partner agencies. The research team spent a week in each location and conducted 58 semi-structured interviews with police officers (n=26), statutory agencies and NGOs (n=15), and people with lived experience (PWLE) of exploitation in the context of drug markets (n=17) .The researchers also undertook several observational ("ride-along") accompaniments of county lines related police operations.

The team had several meetings with an advisory group comprising police, NGOs and academic experts on county lines. Working with Revolving Doors, the team held two meetings with a group of PWLE known as Experts by Experience. Advisors were consulted on the orientation and methods of the study, guiding development of findings. Additionally, the team interviewed key people from national organisations working on county lines and local drug market criminal exploitation.

Key findings

County lines activity varies and is changing over time.

Most forces used "county lines" to describe a significant change in previous approaches to drug supply and increased drug market activity, violence, and involvement and exploitation of young and vulnerable people. However, the term was seen by many as too rigid, particularly at the local level and as a result sometimes hindered local access to county lines dedicated resources connected to non-local activity.

CCE/CE is now a more important focus than county lines in drug market policing.

Many forces reported having more local supply within their areas than out-of-town supply or a mix of the two. Both utilised CCE and CE. Consequently, some forces had broadened their definitions of county lines to include locally dedicated dealer lines and local forms of exploitation. This had developed over time with county lines being seen as a changing entity. Therefore, it appears that criminal exploitation in all drug markets is the primary defining characteristic that should concern policing rather than the shape markets take.

Although CCE/CE is increasingly important in county lines policing, unhelpful cultural barriers remain.

Police and partners agreed that there had been a significant shift in recent years towards police better recognising CCE/CE and preparing to take a safeguarding approach to young people and vulnerable adults rather than solely focusing on investigation and prosecution. However, this is not embraced by all officers "on the ground". PWLE were also suspicious that policing could change to an extent that trusting safeguarding relationships could be developed.

A need to guard against complacency.

The increased use of terms like "vulnerability", "trauma-informed" and "exploitation" in policing has positive and negative impacts. Whilst it is important for safeguarding agencies such as the police to become familiar with relevant terminology and to integrate it into operational practice, using these terms routinely can create the impression among police that more has changed than is actually the case. This can lead to unintended complacency and a belief that appropriate baseline safeguarding standards are being adopted when they are not. Several safeguarding structures, including policing, commonly use trauma-informed dialogue but this is often not reflected in their practice.

Policing of CE/CCE is a postcode lottery.

There is no clear baseline or threshold response to CE/CCE in county lines or other drug markets by police forces nationally. Organisational structures and procedures varied hugely between police forces and between divisions within the same force. Some forces had dedicated teams e.g. Child Centred Policing Teams, whilst some had none. Some teams were able to operate effectively, whereas others were hamstrung by colleagues or commands with a less sympathetic CE/CCE lens.

The current national training approach around CCE is largely deficient.

Most officers have not received CCE/CE awareness training. Consequently, the shift from a purely enforcement policing lens to one that is informed by vulnerability is being hindered. CCE training is complex, and several senior respondents embedded in CCE training suggested that cheap online modules are insufficient. They believe that individual police forces should not determine if CCE training takes place, and that it should not be hidden within generic training around many vulnerabilities. Those with responsibilities for CCE/CE are also rarely trained – this should not be the case.

Policing challenges around CCE/CE are not simple.

Differentiating between offenders and victims was complex and difficult. Young people's status changed over time: they might begin as victims but when they maintained their involvement in county lines and rejected support or started moving up the chain and exploiting others, they tended to be treated as offenders. Their physicality and demeanour could also be crucial; young people who looked older were less likely to be seen as vulnerable. Gender and race could also be key in attributing victimhood (or otherwise). For example, girls and young women, following gendered norms and stereotypes are often assumed, or pre-judged, by police to not be couriers or sellers and more likely to be sexually exploited. There is also evidence that Black young men, in a process known as adultification, are more often seen as older than their years and thus more culpable than White young men.

Multiagency partnership working was seen as the best approach.

Although PWLE were sceptical about the police's potential to move beyond their enforcement role, broadly, agencies appeared to be working increasingly well together, despite their different outlooks. Having specialist Child Centred Policing Teams or specialist officers co-located with Social Work, Youth Justice/ Services and/or NGOs was viewed positively by partner organisations, including the police.

The team recommends a National Policing Strategy for child and adult criminal exploitation.

This would aim to provide strong informed guidance on what baseline structures, processes, practice and desired outcomes might look like both nationally and at individual force levels.

Next steps

Going forward, the team will work with partners on the research's implications for policy and practice.

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For further information

Read more about this project at: **vulnerabilitypolicing.org.uk/county-lines**

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