

## ADVICE & GUIDANCE

### Safeguarding: county lines

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#### An overview

Over the course of the next few months, we will be producing a series of guidance pieces linked to 'Keeping Children Safe in Education', the statutory guidance produced by the Department for Education.

The nature of society is shifting at a gallop, fuelled by technological change and the rapid rise of social media, the problems facing young people and the professionals working with them are changing too. Schools are typically at the forefront of recognising and dealing with these problems, with high expectations that they will be effective, despite the often extremely complex and emotionally challenging nature of the issues.

#### Child criminal exploitation: county lines - what you need to know

There has been much media coverage of criminal gangs and 'county lines' over the course of the last year or so. They have been associated with an increase in knife crime in our biggest cities, particularly London. They have also been linked to modern slavery, sexual exploitation and the spread of class A drugs across the country.

Many people involved in 'county lines' are children, exploited by criminal gang leaders to provide them with huge profits from their illegal activities. All professionals working with children need to know about this and the signs that might be there if a young person is involved.

#### What is it?

A brief explanation of 'county lines' is given in 'Keeping Children Safe in Education', the statutory guidance produced by the Department for Education (see pages 78-79). It describes 'county lines' criminal activity as where drug networks or gangs groom and exploit children and young people to carry drugs and money from urban areas to suburban and rural areas, including market and seaside towns.

A 'county line' appears to be a single phone number maintained and protected by a gang for their 'trade' and operated often by a third party outside of the area. Customers will use the number to order drugs. The drugs are sold from a 'trap house' which might

be an abandoned building or could be the home of a vulnerable person such as an addict who has been coerced into giving it over for the gang's operations – a process known as 'cuckooing'.

### **What is the extent of the problem and who could be involved?**

There are an estimated 1500 to 2000+ 'county lines' in operation at present, which means that thousands of young people are vulnerable either as gang members, mules, or customers of the gangs (the Children's Commissioner, in a review of evidence on the well-being of children involved in gangs in England, estimated that there were over 370,000 young people aged between 10 and 19 who were gang members although the definition of 'gang' is quite broad).

Although children in care or from difficult family backgrounds are more likely to be recruited by the gangs, all children are vulnerable to exploitation with examples, for instance, of privately educated children from stable homes having been groomed too.

The council for Thurrock – a commuter belt area in Essex – has included a section on gangs on their website. It includes a look at the structure of gangs:

- **Teenies** – are usually children under the age of 10 – and therefore below the age of criminal responsibility – who are used to carry drugs and weapons for senior gang members.
- **Runners or shotters** are generally aged between 12 and 15. They move drugs between older members, sell drugs on the street, arrange street deals, transport drugs to out-of-town locations and stay in 'trap' houses where drugs are sold or made.
- **Youngers** are usually aged under 18 and have some level of authority over teenies and shotters. They are street dealers of class A or B drugs, can set up trap houses and recruit teenies and shotters. They report directly to elders.
- **Links is the** name given to girls used by members for sex. According to the Children's Commissioner's report on the well-being of children involved in gangs in England, they are regularly sexually abused. They will carry or hide weapons, drugs and money for members of any age.
- **Elders** are generally aged over 18 and oversee the running of street operations and trap houses. They deal in larger amounts of class A and B drugs, facilitate the purchase of firearms and other weapons and have authority over street dealers and youngers.
- **Faces or olders** are those at the top of the organisation. They have limited contact with street level operations and are not often seen or known by street level members.

### **What serious problems do the children involved face?**

Many children can be seduced into the criminal gangs by the lure of significant money or free drugs. Many are targeted and made to feel important and cared for. Others are terrorised into being involved; threats are made against them or their families. Frequently, these children will meet violent punishments if they make any mistakes such as bungling a transaction or if they are the victims of robbery by other gangs. In such a violent climate, most members will carry a weapon.

Girls can often be the victims of rape which can be used as a punishment. Gang members frequently have a very warped understanding as to what constitutes rape, seeing a girl who does not specifically say no as clearly signalling their consent for sex.

The young people involved in these gangs can frequently be seen as victims of modern slavery, forced to carry out the will of the more senior gang members. They will often be told that they owe a large amount of money and will have to work delivering drugs to pay it off.

### **What indicators of involvement should you be looking out for?**

- Changes in behaviour such as demonstrating an interest in gang culture, dressing in gang colours, using 'gang' language such as 'going country'
- Signs of ill health, tiredness, anxiety or malnutrition
- Truancy and regular absence
- A decline in school performance
- Unexplained bus or train tickets or being spotted around rail stations regularly
- Unexplained gifts, clothes and money
- Unexplained bruises or injuries
- Possession of more than one phone

The Home Office has produced a poster that shows the key indicators - [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/667308/ County Lines preventing vulnexploitation A4 editable poster1.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/667308/County_Lines_preventing_vulnexploitation_A4_editable_poster1.pdf)

## **What should you do if you have concerns?**

There is a series of first responder agencies, of which the most important for schools are the police and social services. These agencies will, in turn, make a referral to one of the two competent authorities (CAS) – the National Crime Agency’s Modern Slavery Human Trafficking Unit (MSHTU) and the Home Office Visas and Immigration (UKVI) – who will refer to the National Referral Mechanism to determine whether there are reasonable grounds to believe the child is a victim of human trafficking or modern slavery.

The first thing to do if you have reasonable suspicions regarding a child is to get multi-agency involvement to include the police and social services. You should also contact the family and are not part of the problem.

There is a sense that if the victim’s debt to the gang is relatively small, then in most cases, disruption of the gang’s work (throwing the phone away and keeping the child away) will not result in retribution. However, the police would lead on the strategies to be used. It is also likely that the child will be resistant to help and might even be very aggressive in their response.

## **Taking a proactive approach**

There are resources for both primary and secondary schools which might help steer children away from gangs in the first place. They include:

Gangs

[https://safe.met.police.uk/utilities/teachers\\_resource.html](https://safe.met.police.uk/utilities/teachers_resource.html)

<https://www.teachertoolkit.co.uk/2018/10/28/gang-youth-violence/>

<https://www.islingtoncs.org/system/files/Keeping%20Safe%20Out%20and%20About%20-%20lesson%20plans%20and%20resources%20for%20Year%206.pdf>

Sexual exploitation

<https://www.barnardosrealoverrocks.org.uk/>

## **Contact NAHT**

Should you need to discuss any of this information, advice and guidance with a member of the advice team, then please get in touch either by telephone on 0300 30 30 333 (option 1) or alternatively, you can e-mail us at [specialistadvice@naht.org.uk](mailto:specialistadvice@naht.org.uk).