

# **Professionals' views on responding to 'county lines' related criminal exploitation in the West Midlands, UK**

**Kristen Olver, UCL Security and Crime Science (corresponding author)  
Ella Cockbain, UCL Security and Crime Science**

**Pre-publication version accepted by Child Abuse Review on 31/1/21 for publication.**

Abstract:

While certainly not a new phenomenon, the exploitation of children and vulnerable adults in 'county lines' drug distribution and sales now attracts considerable attention and concern. In this study, we explored professionals' perspectives on understandings of and responses to this issue in the West Midlands, UK. We conducted in-depth interviews with 11 participants from policing, prosecution, government and the third sector. Participants typically saw 'county lines' related exploitation as insufficiently understood, especially where individuals who are both victimised and commit offences are concerned. They also characterised responses as hampered by factors such as variable use of legislation, inconsistent intelligence sharing and insufficient resources - particularly to support vulnerable people. More robust multiagency collaboration could help address these issues, although it also involves challenges. Our exploratory study focuses on criminal justice responses to 'county lines' related exploitation in particular, a relatively narrow set of professionals and one specific geographical location, meaning findings must not be overextended. Nevertheless, it provides novel insights into a complex, important and understudied phenomenon. We situate the work against the broader literature on exploitation, drawing parallels with child sexual exploitation and 'modern slavery' that could inform further research.

Keywords:

County lines; criminal exploitation; modern slavery; organised crime

Key practitioner messages:

- The term ‘county lines’ may obscure the complexities and harms of criminal exploitation of children and vulnerable adults in this context.
- There can be a challenging interplay between victimisation and offending. Although those exploited have agency, they also often face obvious power imbalances and heavily-constrained choices.
- Enforcement alone is insufficient: addressing vulnerabilities and complex needs is vital from a preventative perspective.
- Improved training on the use and applicability of relevant legislation would likely support investigations and prosecutions.
- Implementing and abiding by a consistent framework for information sharing could facilitate more effective responses.

## **Introduction**

‘County lines’ is a term widely used in the UK to describe the process of gangs and organised criminal networks using mobile phone lines to coordinate the supply of drugs from major urban centres to other communities within the UK (Home Office 2018a, 2018b). With activity reported across all 43 territorial police forces in England and Wales (NCA 2019), ‘county lines’ is said to involve grooming, trafficking and exploitation of children, particularly 15-17-year-old boys (NCA 2017) and vulnerable adults, as part of a ‘profit maximising’ model (Spicer 2019). Our study focuses on ‘county lines’ from a criminal exploitation perspective, namely the use of threats, debt bondage, violence and other manipulation to make people transport/sell predominantly class A drugs or - particularly in the case of vulnerable adults - give over their homes for storage: a practice known as ‘cuckooing’ (Coliandris 2015; Cooper *et al.* 2017; Home Office 2018a). Although ‘county lines’ describes, strictly speaking, a specific model of drug dealing, in practice the term is often used interchangeably to refer to the (child) criminal exploitation involved. While we endeavour to be as precise as possible in our own language, this conflation is evident in our interview data.

While human trafficking, exploitation, drug trafficking and sales, and related gang activity are not new phenomena (Spicer 2019), criminal exploitation in the ‘county lines’ context presents a particular challenge for practitioners. Tensions can arise between a duty to safeguard vulnerable persons and an expectation of enforcement against serious crimes they and others may commit, including drug dealing, sexual offences, weapons offences, assaults and even homicide (Home Office 2018a; NCA 2017).

With the introduction of the Modern Slavery Act 2015, individuals exploited through ‘county lines’ have increasingly been recognised as victims of ‘modern slavery’ (Home Office 2018a; NCA 2018). Exploitation is a broad and somewhat slippery concept, defined by the Modern Slavery Act 2015 as when someone ‘is subjected to force, threats or deception designed to induce him or her (a) to provide services of any kind, (b) to provide another person with benefits of any kind, or (c) to enable another person to acquire benefits of any kind.’ Complicating the situation, international law (United Nations 2000) stipulates that minors (under 18 year-olds) can be considered trafficked even without any force, threats, deception or other coercive ‘means’ because they cannot give informed consent to their own exploitation (Cockbain & Olver 2019).

Nationally, how to measure success in tackling ‘county lines’ has been unclear (National Audit Office 2017), potentially contributing to confusion among professionals (Ford 2018; HMICFRS 2017; Hudek 2018). The government’s intended response encompasses both prevention and enforcement, including multiagency collaboration across ‘education, health, social services, housing, youth services, and victim services’ (Home Office 2018a, p. 9). Emerging research into good practices calls for holistic, cross-sector responses, with an emphasis on community partnerships and shared understanding of the crimes and risks involved (Ford 2018; Hudek 2018). Multiagency work can be challenging in practice, involving coordination across numerous local and national parties, sharing sensitive information and collaboration amid divergent working cultures and priorities (Atkinson *et al.* 2007).

Our study explores professionals' perspectives on responding to 'county lines' – particularly within the criminal justice sector – in the West Midlands, UK. This region is regarded as a key hub for 'county lines' (Home Office 2018a, NCA 2017) and, crucially, includes Birmingham: the UK's second most populous city, home to some of England's most economically-deprived constituencies (Department for Communities and Local Government 2015) and a hotspot for gangs, drugs and serious youth violence (Anderson 2017). Through in-depth interviews we address two interlinked research questions:

- What are professionals' understandings of 'county lines' and the criminal exploitation it entails? and
- To what extent do they feel able to address this criminal exploitation effectively?

We did not limit our focus to *child* exploitation since we hoped to gain a fuller picture of exploitation in the 'county lines' context and because exploitation itself does not automatically cease or change format when a child turns 18 years. Nevertheless, although the Modern Slavery Act does not distinguish between child and adult victims, various other statutory and legal provisions *do* differ depending on age, which is a potential limitation of our study.

## **Methods**

For nuance and depth, we chose a qualitative approach and used semi-structured interviews to give participants space to explore issues important to them.

### ***Sampling and participants***

We used purposive sampling to identify professionals working on 'county lines'. A 'county lines' specialist within the West Midlands Police helped compile an initial list of potential participants, which we then expanded using snowballing. The final sample was

constrained by available resources and, at 11 participants, is modest in size (see discussion section for the study's limitations). Participants were largely recruited from law enforcement, in addition to prosecution, government and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), all with a remit and experience that included addressing 'county lines'. Most participants were based locally, apart from four key informants with particularly relevant roles in national policy-making, prosecutions and advocacy – as 'county lines' operate across regions and national policy/interventions can influence local responses. While potential participants were contacted from health and social services, they were either unable to participate due to scheduling or did not respond to our request. All interviews focused specifically on the West Midlands context.

To maintain confidentiality, information on the final sample is in broad terms only:

- Six policing professionals, variously from West Midlands Police, West Midlands Regional Organised Crime Unit (ROCU), and the local division of British Transport Police. Their ranks ranged from Police Constable to Detective Chief Inspector.
- Two policy-makers (Crown Prosecution Service and Home Office)
- Three from NGOs (one involved in local service provision and two in national research and advocacy).

### ***Interviews***

Ten interviews were held with the 11 participants in July 2018 (two NGO participants requested a joint interview). Focusing specifically on the West Midlands context, the interviews were loosely structured around participants' views on what 'county lines' and

associated exploitation entails, available resources to tackle it, relevant legislation, and ways of improving responses. We framed our questions about exploitation broadly, rather than asking specifically about either children or vulnerable adults, as we sought to explore participants' own understandings of the phenomenon and the key actors involved. All interviews were face-to-face, bar one telephone interview. Interviews took place in the West Midlands (local participants) and London (national-level participants). One interview was held in a coffee shop, the rest at participants' workplaces. The first author conducted all interviews, which lasted on average 44 minutes and were audio-recorded (with consent).

### ***Analysis***

The first author transcribed the interviews verbatim and then processed the data using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke 2006, Braun *et al.* 2019). Analysis was guided by a realist theoretical framework (Aronson 1994), meaning we endeavoured to present participants' views as they reported them. Focusing on the semantic level, we identified themes after coding the transcripts in the assistive software NVivo 12, using an inductive (bottom-up) approach rather than predetermined categories. We did not treat information mentioned only occasionally as a theme (Bryman 2016), but reflect on shared meanings and highlight where certain perspectives diverged (Braun *et al.* 2019). For transparency and to indicate typicality (May 2001), we specify how many participants raised a given theme: this information is not an indicator of generalizability, something qualitative research neither can, nor seeks to, deliver.

### ***Ethics***

This study was approved by the UCL Research Ethics Committee panel and the West Midlands Police's Evidence Based Practice Team. The project was also supported by the

West Midlands Strategic Governance Group for County Lines. Key ethical considerations included confidentiality, anonymity and informed consent. To maintain anonymity, we identify participants using randomly assigned numbers 1 to 11.

## **Results**

We identified five key themes, detailed below. Notably, participants diverged as to whether they saw current responses as adequate and resources as sufficient, although most felt there was some or much room for improvement.

### ***1) The term 'county lines' is unhelpful (n=9)***

All 11 participants expressed a similar understanding of the central elements of 'county lines', typically pointing to organised crime/gang involvement, drug possession/dealing, minors as victims and exploitation. Despite this interpretative consistency among participants (all of whom had developed their understandings through specific experience around this phenomenon), most expressed dissatisfaction with the term 'county lines' itself. They argued that it obscures the actual crime/exploitation involved and impedes understanding among practitioners unfamiliar with the phenomenon and the general public:

'County lines' is a really strange title, you know what does 'county lines' mean? And I think people generally don't understand that either internally within the police or externally as the public and our partners.

Participant 5

It doesn't really describe the kind of violence and exploitation that this kind of criminal model involves.

Participant 8

I don't like the term 'county lines' actually, because it doesn't really encompass what we are trying to do, because the other aspect of what I would call criminal exploitation is the exploitation of young and vulnerable people that don't leave the city. That doesn't get captured if you just talk about 'county lines'.



Participant 1

**2) Adequate implementation of existing legislation is more important than introducing new laws (n=9)**

No participants felt additional legislation was needed. The policy-makers particularly emphasised that the Modern Slavery Act 2015 sufficed to prosecute individuals criminally exploiting people in ‘county lines’, although police and NGO participants typically felt available legislation was yet to be well-understood:

There’s legislation out there that’s underused because there’s lack of understanding around what it is. The human trafficking element of it is underused...before we start putting more legislation out, we need to look at what legislation we have that works and use it to the fullest.

Participant 2

Further complicating the situation, while some participants acknowledged that the defence clause in the Modern Slavery Act is a potential resource for people exploited into offending in ‘county lines’, two participants (from different professions) suggested that it has been abused:

In county lines cases, we know that there is abuse of the statutory defence by drug dealers, who as soon as they’ve been apprehended by the police, they already know the exact clause and the next thing to say, which is ‘I’ve been trafficked, I’ve been recruited, I’m invoking the statutory defence.’ So, they either raise it then, or they raise it in court under oath when there is no opportunity or chance for the police to investigate.

Participant 7

Despite these challenges, around half the participants (across various professions) saw the Act as a largely positive tool to address ‘county lines’ criminal exploitation.

Some participants had concerns about other legislation that could be used in ‘county lines’ cases, such as Drug Dealing Telecommunication Restriction Orders (DDTROs).

DDTROs enable police to shut down phone lines used to deal drugs. Introduced in December 2017 in direct response to ‘county lines’ (Home Office 2018a), at the time of the interviews these orders had reportedly yet to be used around ‘county lines’ in the West Midlands. While some police participants questioned their likely effectiveness in practice – calling them a ‘short term disruption measure’ (Participant 4) or bluntly arguing ‘it doesn’t work’ (Participant 6) – another suggested they could be beneficial, if only they were actually used.

Similarly, police participants’ views varied around Slavery and Trafficking Risk Orders (STROs) and Slavery and Trafficking Prevention Orders (STPOs), both of which can be imposed to regulate the behaviour of individuals who exploit others via ‘county lines’. For example, one described them as ‘best practice’ (Participant 6), whereas another stated they were simply not used locally around ‘county lines’ (Participant 4). Participants also raised concerns that those involved in exploiting others, who they described as generally young, vulnerable, and with complex support needs themselves, may be relocated to other areas for safeguarding following such orders. Consequently, they said people in need of support services who have built relationships with service providers in one location are then isolated from their support networks and forced to seek services elsewhere.

### ***3) Information sharing is a challenge - both within and between agencies (n=11)***

All participants characterised disjointed information and intelligence-sharing – between and within organisations, locally, regionally, and nationally – as a key barrier to tackling ‘county lines’ criminal exploitation. Although everyone mentioned the value of good information-sharing, police participants particularly stressed it. They stated that

intelligence is not always entered into both force databases and the centralized Police National Database (PND), leading some intelligence to ‘fall through the cracks’

(Participant 1):

The British Transport Police and the ROCU and the forces aren’t joined up on the same intelligence platform...if I’m an intelligence officer in [town], and I see a log that talks about somebody going from A to B on a train, and it’s a ‘county line’, what doesn’t always happen is that that isn’t always shared.

Participant 4

Although ROCUs are designed, among other things, to aid communication between forces, one participant stated that local police often bypass the ROCU in ‘county lines’ cases and just communicate directly with other forces. This detour in the intelligence flow, (s)he said, can leave the ROCU left out of the wider intelligence picture. Suggestions for improving police intelligence-sharing included an increased number of intelligence coordinators, adding local police officers to the central team to provide ‘bespoke’ (Participant 6) insights into local crime contexts, reducing bureaucracy, and creating a ‘county lines’-specific remit for intelligence dissemination.

NGO participants emphasised that they too could offer valuable insights into ‘county lines’ as they collect information via the people they help, the calls and tips they receive and the research they conduct. They felt, however, that that their resources were under-used by police investigating ‘county lines’. Around half the participants mentioned local multi-agency partnerships, all of them emphasising the positive results.

From a local level it seems we’ve got quite a good partnership response to the issue. We’re by no means near to dealing with it, but we have been working really well as a partnership to identify the trends we’re seeing in this area.

Participant 11

Another one we do work with in terms of our eyes and ears...are railway staff. If they see anything that looks suspicious, looks particularly vulnerable then also we've got those partners to work with to be our eyes and ears.

Participant 3

#### **4) The victim-offender dichotomy needs rethinking (n=11)**

All participants emphasised that many people involved in 'county lines' have themselves been exploited, i.e. through deception, coercion or other manipulation into moving, storing and/or selling drugs for example. They said responding to 'offenders' who are also victims of criminal exploitation could be challenging.

It causes a real dilemma with the legislation about if you find [a 'county lines' offender] with loads of drugs and a weapon, what do you do with him? Do you charge him for that offence? Or do you say they're vulnerable and you don't charge him? I don't know.

Participant 5

Moreover, around half expressed uncertainty about how to respond if these people also committed 'modern slavery' offences by recruiting or manipulating other victims.

Then you add in the complication that many of the groomers are previously exploited children. Where do you draw the line between perpetrator and victim?

Participant 10

Participants also highlighted that children and vulnerable adults exploited in 'county lines' had agency, and that involvement in 'county lines' could, they said, in itself be seen as rational behaviour as it offers social and financial benefits.

The problem is the children don't see themselves as exploited, they are part of a family, they are entrusted in that family, they're making money, so to them it's a win-win situation. They're not [drug] users so they're not self-harming. They are looking after their social needs and they can go buy their designer clothes.

Participant 2

All participants stressed that exploited individuals only sometimes self-identify as victims, making it hard for professionals unfamiliar with ‘county lines’ related exploitation to see them as such.

**5) Addressing victims’ vulnerability ought to be a priority (n=10)**

‘Vulnerability’ was generally characterised as a person’s susceptibility to being ‘tempted’ (Participant 8) into the ‘county lines’ criminal lifestyle, and variously said to involve mental health problems, youth, social status and/or being disconnected from their community. One participant emphasized that victims are not exclusively from deprived backgrounds, saying they had known victims from ‘really good schools’ and ‘professional families’ (Participant 9). Some participants drew parallels around vulnerability between criminal exploitation in ‘county lines’ and child sexual exploitation (CSE). All participants bar one stressed that addressing vulnerability was equally important as law enforcement, if not more so:

But what is really important is, targeting not just the ‘Pursue’ through the warrants, the police-led activity, but the safeguarding, the protecting of the vulnerable people. So at least we’re trying to do as much as we can to remove the vulnerability.

Participant 4

It's not about sending people to prison for drugs offences. There will be really top level, you know, huge quantities of drugs. Lots of money to be made. Yes, we should do those jobs. But I think if we're talking about a 14-year-old found in possession of some drugs, we probably need to look at that person's vulnerability first.

Participant 5

Yes, we can arrest people and that's happening, but it's a bigger issue there around prevention, early intervention with building resilience and capital in young people so they don't feel so enticed into the offer of supplying drugs.

Participant 8

Several ways of preventing exploitation and improving early intervention were widely mentioned, including improving multiagency work, educating young people, engaging with communities to strengthen relationships with police and social services and training professionals. A few participants also suggested existing victims' friends and family members are likely next targets for exploitation, meaning focused intervention in these networks could be helpful.

We look at the familiars, brothers, sisters, who are likely to be the next person that will be exploited, [to see] what can we do before we start hearing about them in a criminality.

Participant 2

Several participants also emphasised the importance of support services for vulnerable people seeking to disengage from criminal groups and reintegrate into 'normal' lifestyles. Among the perceived barriers to exiting 'county lines', a key one reported was limited support services for adults or young people transitioning into adulthood.

The stage where a young person goes from being 16, 17 to 18 as well is a key thing because...as soon as they don't qualify for children and young people services anymore, there's nothing.

Participant 9

Participants also noted that more social and health care services need to be accessible beyond regular daytime working hours to meet vulnerable people's immediate needs.

## **Discussion**

### ***Professionals' understandings of 'county lines' and the criminal exploitation involved***

Coined by the NCA (2015), the term 'county lines' does not yet seem to be used beyond the UK to describe similar phenomena. Although considered a police term (Coliandris 2015), police participants in our study shared other professionals' criticisms: the term was seen as confusing for those unfamiliar with the phenomenon and as insufficiently

capturing the crimes and exploitation involved, thereby failing to adequately communicate the risks to the public and key stakeholders. Perhaps part of the challenge is that a ‘county line’ refers to the modus operandi (used variously to denote a particular telephone line or route), but is also now widely used to refer to the exploitation itself. This conflation likely arises, at least in part, from the way in which (child) exploitation has been centred in police and government discourse around ‘county lines’ in recent years.

Notably, recent government documents refer to ‘county lines criminal exploitation’, a term that is both more precise and explicitly highlights the exploitative element (Home Office 2018a). ‘Child criminal exploitation’ (CCE) is also proliferating and often used interchangeably with ‘county lines’ but it seems both too broad and too narrow here: because CCE also covers numerous criminal contexts beyond ‘county lines’ and because it is not just children who are exploited in ‘county lines’.

Despite our questions around exploitation being framed broadly and inclusively, participants’ responses centred primarily around how children - rather than adults - were involved and affected. That they responded in a such a way may be influenced, at least partially, by the growing focus on CCE, but it may also reflect where harms and challenges are perceived to concentrate and/or be the most acute.

Participants’ overtly sympathetic views about people exploited in ‘county lines’ and their emphasis on vulnerabilities seems to echo the last decade’s shift from practitioners all-too-often treating CSE victims as consenting ‘child prostitutes’ to recognising them as

victims of serious abuse (Barrett & Melrose 2003; Chase & Statham 2005; Cockbain 2018). Perhaps in future, calling children ‘drug runners’ will be equally unacceptable. Compared to CSE, however, it may be even harder to change attitudes around ‘county lines’ criminal exploitation since its harms extend much more obviously beyond those suffered by victims themselves (Windle & Briggs 2015). While our participants notably did not discuss gender in the context of vulnerability and victimhood, it is also worth highlighting that Ford (2018) found that girls involved in ‘county lines’ are typically viewed more overtly as victims, despite boys making up the bulk of those exploited.

Another parallel with CSE (and indeed other forms of ‘modern slavery’) is the issue of ‘victim-offender hybrids’ (Cockbain 2018; Cockbain & Brayley-Morris, 2017; Hudek 2018) and how to balance safeguarding them and others they can endanger. Recognising that people may be both abused and abuse others challenges neat binaries of ‘victim’ and ‘offender’ common in trafficking-related discourses (Broad & Turnbull 2018). It also creates challenges for responding effectively, proportionately and fairly (Cockbain 2018) and those who diverge most from ‘ideal victim’ stereotypes (Brown 2017; Christie 1986; Pyrooz *et al.* 2014) may be the most disadvantaged.

From a theoretical perspective, participants’ views on why involvement in ‘county lines’ might (especially) appeal to marginalised young people or vulnerable adults speak to opportunity theories of crime (Clarke & Cornish 1985). Their focus on tangible benefits – e.g. money, status, luxury goods and a sense of community – echoes prior research on ‘county lines’ and UK drug markets more generally (Coliandris 2015; Coomber & Moyle 2017; Ford 2018; Hudek 2018; Irwin-Rogers 2019; Spicer 2019; Storrod & Densley 2017;



Windle & Briggs 2015). It also implicitly recognises that victims can act as ‘rational’ agents: at least within the boundaries of potentially limited knowledge about consequences, clear power imbalances and heavily-constrained choices and alternatives (in individual, social and/or structural terms) that render the capacity for meaningful and informed consent debatable (Pyrooz *et al.* 2014). Recognising agency should not be misconstrued as blaming victims or minimising harms they face; instead, it means rejecting simplistic and idealised stereotypes of passive victims and engaging with the complex and challenging dynamics around victimisation and offending in ‘county lines’ criminal exploitation (Irwin-Rogers 2019).

***Professionals’ abilities and constraints around responding to ‘county lines’ related exploitation***

Many challenges participants reported in responding to ‘county lines’ have been comparatively well-documented for CSE, e.g., barriers around insufficient understanding, disjointed information-sharing and supporting individuals who may not self-identify as victims or want help from services (e.g., Cockbain 2018; Harvey *et al.* 2015; Jago & Pearce 2008; Jago *et al.* 2011). This latter point has also previously been highlighted for ‘county lines’ criminal exploitation specifically (The Children's Society *et al.* 2018; Shuker 2013a) and presents obvious tensions vis-à-vis professionals’ safeguarding obligation to minors and vulnerable adults (Brown 2017).

Notably, despite the police-heavy sample, participants widely characterised ‘county lines’ as too complex an issue for criminal justice agencies alone and stressed that enforcement was not necessarily the most appropriate measure – again echoing prior research on ‘county lines’ (Irwin-Rogers 2019). Overall, very few participants felt adequately

equipped to tackle ‘county lines’. Participants appeared to face interwoven barriers at organisational and systemic levels. For example, on-going budgetary cuts and limited resources make it hard to build and share good practices and an enforcement-centric logic can jar with a genuinely victim-centric response.

The disparities in awareness and use of relevant legislation suggest more training around the Modern Slavery Act and associated Prevention and Risk Orders might help in ensuring all legislative tools available are considered – although professional discretion remains important in practice (Bjelland 2019). Notably, legal precedent now exists showing ‘county lines’ criminal exploitation can be prosecuted under modern slavery legislation (*Regina v K, W & A* [2018] EWCA Crim 1432).

Participants, including NGO staff, commonly described inadequate information and intelligence-sharing as impeding responses. Improving the flow of information/intelligence (including from non-police sources) might therefore yield benefits, although data protection and safeguarding factors alike require consideration (HM Government 2018). Police and NGO participants both stressed the need for clarity around who is leading responses. Both these findings echo similar calls in the emergent literature on ‘county lines’ (Coliandris 2015; Hudek 2018).

Participants also highlighted numerous challenges with accessing services, not least their widespread under-funding. Tools such as Prevention and Risk Orders were felt by some to increase risk to vulnerable victims - who had also exploited others via ‘county lines’ - by removing them from their support systems (Hudek 2018), which can be problematic

for safeguarding those exiting ‘county lines’ (Firmin 2019; Shuker 2013a, 2017). Nationally, safeguarding provisions to address risk outside the home are insufficient (Wroe 2019). Moreover, for exploited or ‘at risk’ children the focus can be overwhelmingly on physical safety at the neglect of relational and psychological needs (Firmin 2019; Shuker 2013a, 2013b). Relocating someone may not remove them from access/exposure to ‘county lines’ networks and associated risks and harms, especially since connections can be maintained or built over social media (Irwin-Rogers 2019). Insufficient funding for youth services (including care provisions for looked-after children) that are tailored to individuals’ unique needs & exploitation contexts (Wroe 2019) may also increase risks of revictimization and/or reoffending.

Generally, participants characterised improving prevention – including addressing vulnerabilities seen as ‘root causes’ for ‘county lines’ – as equally if not more important than enforcement (e.g., arresting street-level drug dealers). In contrast, the UK’s ‘modern slavery’ agenda has been criticised for focusing overwhelmingly on arrests and prosecutions (HMICFRS 2017; Home Office 2018a). Recognising broader systemic issues underpinning criminal exploitation in ‘county lines’ and reorienting towards prevention requires, however, changes in working practices, different metrics of success and adequate resourcing (Irwin-Rogers 2019). As with CSE (Cockbain and Tufail, 2020), other services (e.g. NGOs or grassroots initiatives) may be better-placed to deliver various interventions than police and other statutory agencies – especially where tensions and mistrust are pronounced. Targeted prevention/early intervention in ‘county lines’ criminal exploitation also requires effective identification of those at risk, which can be challenging in practice (Hudek 2018; Machura *et al.* 2018).

Treating vulnerability as the ‘norm rather than the exception’ (Bartkowiak-Théron & Asquith 2012, p. 48) may help shift the focus from profiling individual-level risk factors to examining other commonalities such as the physical and social environments of exploitation and the ‘context of harm’ (Wroe 2019). Here, ‘contextual safeguarding’ may be valuable, as it diverges from dominant safeguarding models geared around addressing risks within the home and it pays greater attention to risky contexts that may persist even if individuals are relocated (Firmin 2013; Firmin *et al.* 2016).

### ***Limitations***

Our study was exploratory and focused on a modest sample of professionals largely from the criminal justice sector and one specific location, and as such should not be overextended. Most importantly, it does not represent the views or experiences of individuals who have directly experienced such exploitation. The study should complement rather than replace much-needed research engaging directly with those with lived experience of exploitation. As well as exploited children and vulnerable adults, other stakeholders such as their families and various other professionals (e.g. those in health or social care) may well have very different views from those in our study about ‘county lines’ related exploitation. Further research with such groups and into other aspects of this complex issue would likely yield novel insights, uncover tensions and suggest further opportunities for improved responses. Moreover, although geographically-specific research is valuable in understanding local nuance, our findings should not be over-extended to other areas – where, for example, patterns in exploitation and offending and/or multiagency dynamics may differ.

In addition, while we present a fuller picture of the exploitation entailed in ‘county lines’ by not limiting our focus to child exploitation, our discussion does indeed draw more heavily from literature on safeguarding vulnerable and exploited children. More work is required to understand the specific support needs of vulnerable adults exploited in ‘county lines’ so as to develop promising practices and improve professionals’ responses. Responses to children and vulnerable adults exploited in ‘county lines’ will likely need to be tailored differently, not least because of the different legal and statutory frameworks involved (Ford 2018, Hudek 2018).

As with any interview research of this nature, there is obvious potential for self-report bias (Andrees & van der Linden 2005); for example, we suspected some self-censoring from the two policy officials, unlike others who seemed to speak more frankly. This may be a reflection of participants’ differing experiences and strategic priorities; where law enforcement may have been drawing more on their personal experience in responding, civil servants seemed to draw instead more on their organization’s official position. Self-selection bias may be an issue too, if the participants differed systematically from those who declined/did not respond (eight individuals). Since a police specialist initially helped identify potential participants, they may have suggested people of a similar or sympathetic outlook (although the subsequent snowballing may have mitigated this bias). While it is important to recognise these limitations, they should not detract from the study’s original contributions to an underdeveloped literature.

### ***Directions for future research***

Further research into the scale and nature of ‘county lines’ nationally and across specific regions, parallels and overlaps with other phenomena like CSE and going missing (e.g., Sidebottom et al. 2019) and evaluations of interventions (e.g., Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel 2020) would all be useful contributions to the knowledge base. There is also a need for more research with those directly affected by ‘county lines’ (e.g., Windle & Briggs 2015), including children and vulnerable adults with lived experiences and their families (see, e.g., Hudek 2018; Moyle 2019). Although there are numerous research gaps around ‘county lines’ and responses to the criminal exploitation involved, one particularly fruitful area from a prevention and disruption perspective might be the role of social structures in spreading and sustaining the phenomenon (such as the victim peer recruitment mentioned by interview participants). There is previous research evidence of gang members grooming young boys (specifically via online social networking sites) to participate in ‘county lines’ (Irwin-Rogers 2019; Pyrooz *et al.* 2014; Spicer 2019; Storrod & Densley 2017). Elsewhere, Cockbain’s (2018) study of complex CSE cases underlined how interpersonal networks helped spread and sustain both offending and victimisation, indicating possible ‘social contagion’. Sensitive to ethical considerations in mapping (and acting on) such relationships, further research into social contagion in the ‘county lines’ context could be helpful in opening up new avenues for prevention, early intervention and disruption, such as network-based risk analysis (Cockbain 2018) and contextual safeguarding of risky groups and spaces (Firmin 2013; Firmin *et al.* 2016).

With ‘county lines’ ascending the policy agenda, it is clear far more research is needed to support nuanced responses’ that take into consideration the complexities of offending and

safeguarding in this model. While participants varied in how well-equipped they felt to deal with 'county lines', most described at least some concerns. Inconsistencies in information/intelligence-sharing, tensions in multiagency partnerships and limited resources for law enforcement and support services alike were all seen as barriers to effective responses. Adequate resourcing, more nuanced responses and targeted research all have a role to play in better preventing 'county lines' criminal exploitation, meeting victims' safeguarding needs and responding more effectively to those exploiting others in this context.

## **Acknowledgements**

We would like to thank all of the participants for taking the time to share their ideas and provide input into this research. We are also particularly grateful to West Midlands Police for their enthusiasm for this project and helping to facilitate the research. The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare and received no specific funding for this research.



## References

- Anderson C. 2017. 'Uniting to improve safety'. Commission on Gangs and Violence. Retrieved from: <https://www.westmidlands-pcc.gov.uk/media/473563/Gangs-and-Violence-Commission-Full-Report.pdf>
- Andrees B, van der Linden, M. N. J. 2005. Designing Trafficking Research from a Labour Market Perspective: The ILO Experience. *International Migration*, 43(1-2): 55-73.
- Aronson J. 1994. A pragmatic view of thematic analysis. *Qualitative Report*, 2(1).
- Atkinson M, Jones M, Lamont E. (2007). *Multi-Agency Working and its Implications for Practice: A Review of the Literature*. Retrieved from <https://www.nfer.ac.uk/media/2001/mad01.pdf>
- Barrett D, Melrose M. 2003. Courting Controversy—Children Sexually Abused Through Prostitution—Are They Everybody's Distant Relatives But Nobody's Children? *Child and Family Law Quarterly*, 15(4): 371-382.
- Bartkowiak-Théron I, Asquith N. 2012. The Extraordinary Intricacies of Policing Vulnerability. *Australasian Policing: A Journal of Professional Practice and Research*, 4(2): 43-49.
- Bjelland H. 2019. Facing Complexity: Police officers' reasoning and response to human trafficking, PhD Thesis, Oslo: University of Oslo.
- Braun V, Clarke V. 2006. Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2): 77–101. DOI:10.1191/1478088706qp063oa
- Braun V, Clarke V, Hayfield N, Terry G. 2019. Thematic Analysis. In: Liamputtong P. (eds) *Handbook of Research Methods in Health Social Sciences*. Springer, Singapore. DOI: 10.1007/978-981-10-5251-4\_103
- Broad R, Turnbull N. 2018. From Human Trafficking to Modern Slavery: The Development of Anti-Trafficking Policy in the UK. *European Journal on Criminal Policy and Research*. 1-15. DOI: 10.1007/s10610-018-9375-4
- Brown K. 2017. The governance of vulnerability: regulation, support and social divisions in Action. *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy*, 37 (11-12), 667-682. Retrieved from: <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJSSP-04-2016-0049>
- Bryman A. 2016. *Social research methods* (5th ed.). Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press.
- Chase E, Statham J. 2005. Commercial and sexual exploitation of children and young people in the UK—A review. *Child Abuse Review*, 14(1): 4-25. DOI:10.1002/car.881
- Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel. 2020. Safeguarding children at risk from criminal exploitation: review. Retrieved from: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/870035/Safeguarding\\_children\\_at\\_risk\\_from\\_criminal\\_exploitation\\_review.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/870035/Safeguarding_children_at_risk_from_criminal_exploitation_review.pdf)
- Clarke R. V, Cornish D. 1985. Modeling offenders' decisions: A framework for research and policy. In M. Tonry & N. Morris (Eds.), *Crime and justice: A review of research*. Chicago, IL:University of Chicago Press. 6:147-185.
- Cockbain, E. and Tufail, W. 2020 Failing victims, fuelling hate: challenging the harms of the 'Muslim grooming gangs' narrative, *Race and Class*. 61(3), 3-32.
- Cockbain E. 2018. *Offender and Victim Networks in Human Trafficking*. Abingdon: Routledge.

- Cockbain E, Brayley-Morris H. 2017. Human trafficking and labour exploitation in the casual construction industry: An analysis of three major investigations in the United Kingdom involving Irish Traveller offending groups. *Policing: A Journal Of Policy And Practice*, 12(2):129-149. DOI: 10.1093/police/pax032.
- Cockbain E, Olver K. 2019. Child trafficking: characteristics, complexities and challenges. In I. Bryce, W. Petherick, & Y. Robinson (eds.), *Child Abuse and Neglect: Forensic Issues in Evidence, Impact, Evidence and Management*. San Diego: Elsevier.
- Coliandris G. 2015. County Lines and Wicked Problems : Exploring the need for improved policing approaches to vulnerability and early intervention. *Australasian Policing*, 7(2).
- Coomber R, Moyle L. 2017. The Changing Shape of Street-Level Heroin and Crack Supply in England: Commuting, Holidaying and Cuckooing Drug Dealers Across “County Lines.”. *The British Journal of Criminology* (August). 1-20. DOI: 10.1093/bjc/azx068
- Cooper C, Hesketh O, Ellis N, Fair A. 2017. *A Typology of Modern Slavery Offences in the UK*. United Kingdom. Retrieved from: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/a-typology-of-modern-slavery-offences-in-the-uk>.
- Department for Communities and Local Government. 2015. The English Indices of Deprivation. Retrieved from: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/465791/English\\_Indices\\_of\\_Deprivation\\_2015\\_-\\_Statistical\\_Release.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/465791/English_Indices_of_Deprivation_2015_-_Statistical_Release.pdf)
- Firmin C. 2013. Busting the ‘gang-rape’ myth: Girls’ victimisation and agency in gang-associated sexual violence. In M. A. Horvath & J. Woodhams (Eds.), *Handbook on the Study of Multiple Perpetrator Rape*. Abingdon: Routledge; pp.97-115.
- Firmin C, Warrington C, Pearce J. 2016. Sexual exploitation and its impact on developing sexualities and sexual relationships: The need for contextual social work interventions. *The British Journal of Social Work*. 134.
- Firmin C. 2019. Relocation, relocation, relocation: home and school- moves for children affected extra-familial risks during adolescence, *Children's Geographies*, DOI: 10.1080/14733285.2019.1598545
- Ford S. 2018. County Lines – a national summary and emerging best practice. ATCM Violence and Vulnerability Unit. Retrieved from: <https://www.local.gov.uk/sites/default/files/documents/County%20Lines%20National%20Summary%20-%20Simon%20Ford%20WEB.pdf>
- Harvey J. H, Hornsby R. A, Sattar Z. 2015. Disjointed service: An english case study of multi-agency provision in tackling child trafficking. *British journal of criminology*, 55(3), 494-513. DOI: 10.1093/bjc/azu115.
- HM Government. 2018. *Working Together to Safeguard Children: A guide to inter-agency working to safeguard and promote the welfare of children*. Retrieved from: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/942454/Working\\_together\\_to\\_safeguard\\_children\\_inter\\_agency\\_guidance.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/942454/Working_together_to_safeguard_children_inter_agency_guidance.pdf)
- HMICFRS. 2017. *Stolen freedom: the policing response to modern slavery and human trafficking*. London. Retrieved from:

- <https://www.justiceinspectors.gov.uk/hmicfrs/wp-content/uploads/stolen-freedom-the-policing-response-to-modern-slavery-and-human-trafficking.pdf>
- Home Office. 2018a. *Serious Violence Strategy*. HM Government. Retrieved from [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/698009/serious-violence-strategy.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/698009/serious-violence-strategy.pdf).
- Home Office. 2018b. Criminal Exploitation of children and vulnerable adults: County Lines guidance. Retrieved from: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/741194/HOCountyLinesGuidanceSept2018.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/741194/HOCountyLinesGuidanceSept2018.pdf)
- Hudek J. 2018. County Lines Scoping Report. Retrieved from: <https://stgilestrust.org.uk/general-attachments/view?id=12>.
- Irwin-Rogers K. 2019. Illicit drugs markets, consumer capitalism and the rise of social media: a toxic trap for young people. *Critical Criminology* (27), 591-610. <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007%2Fs10612-019-09476-2>
- Jago S, Arocha L, Brodie I, Melrose M, Pearce J, Warrington C. 2011. *What's going on to safeguard children and young people from sexual exploitation? How local partnerships respond to child sexual exploitation*. Luton: University of Bedfordshire.
- Jago S, Pearce J. 2008. *Gathering evidence of the sexual exploitation of children and young people: a scoping exercise*. Luton: University of Bedfordshire.
- Machura S, Short F, Hill V. M, Suddaby C. R, Goddard F. E, Jones S. E, Rouse, C. A. 2018. Recognizing Modern Slavery. *Journal of Human Trafficking*, 0(0): 1-19.
- May T. 2001. *Social Research: Issues, Methods and Process*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.
- Moyle L. 2019. Situating Vulnerability and Exploitation in Street-Level Drug Markets: Cuckooing, Commuting, and the “County Lines” Drug Supply Model. *Journal of Drug Issues*. 49(4), 739-755.
- National Audit Office. 2017. *Reducing modern slavery*. Retrieved from: <https://www.nao.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Reducing-Modern-Slavery.pdf>
- National Crime Agency. 2015. *NCA Intelligence Assessment: County Lines, Gangs, and Safeguarding*. Ref. 0129 – FRM. V.1. 12th Aug. London: NCA.
- National Crime Agency. 2017. *County Lines Violence, Exploitation & Drug Supply 2017*. Retrieved from: <http://www.nationalcrimeagency.gov.uk/publications/832-county-lines-violence-exploitation-and-drug-supply-2017/file>
- National Crime Agency. 2018. *National Strategic Assessment of Serious and Organised Crime*. Retrieved from: <http://www.nationalcrimeagency.gov.uk/publications/905-national-strategic-assessment-for-soc-2018/file>
- National Crime Agency. 2019. *National Referral Mechanism Statistics – End of Year Summary 2018*. Retrieved from: <https://nationalcrimeagency.gov.uk/who-we-are/publications/282-national-referral-mechanism-statistics-end-of-year-summary-2018/file>
- Pyrooz D. C., Moule Jr, R. K. & Decker S. H. 2014. The Contribution of Gang Membership to the Victim–Offender Overlap. *Journal of research in Crime and Delinquency*, 51(3), 315-348.

- Regina v K, W & A. 2018. EWCA Crim 1432.
- Shuker L. 2013a. 'Constructs of Safety for Children in Care Affected by Sexual Exploitation' in Melrose M., Pearce J. (eds) *Critical Perspectives on Child Sexual Exploitation and Related Trafficking*. Palgrave Macmillan, London. 125-138.
- Shuker L. 2013b. Evaluation of Barnardo's Safe Accommodation Project for sexually exploited and trafficked young people. University of Bedfordshire.
- Spicer J. 2019. 'That's their brand, their business': how police officers are interpreting County Lines. *Policing and Society*, 29:8, 873-886, DOI:10.1080/10439463.2018.1445742
- Storrod M. L, Densley J. A. 2017. "Going viral" and "Going country": the expressive and instrumental activities of street gangs on social media. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 20(6): 677-696. DOI:10.1080/13676261.2016.1260694
- The Children's Society, Victim Support, The National Police Chief's Council. 2018. *Children and young people trafficked for the purpose of criminal exploitation in relation to county lines: A toolkit for professionals*. London: T. C. s. Society.
- United Kingdom. 2015. *Modern Slavery Act*. Retrieved from: [http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2015/30/pdfs/ukpga\\_20150030\\_en.pdf](http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2015/30/pdfs/ukpga_20150030_en.pdf).
- United Nations. 2000. *Protocol to prevent, suppress and punish trafficking in persons especially women and children*. Vienna: United Nations.
- Windle J, Briggs D. 2015. 'It's like working away for two weeks': The harms associated with young drug dealers commuting from a saturated London drug market. *Crime Prevention and Community Safety*, 17(2): 105-119. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1057/cpcs.2015.2>
- Wroe L. 2019. Contextual Safeguarding and County Lines. Retrieved from: [https://www.contextualsafeguarding.org.uk/assets/documents/Contextual-Safeguarding-and-County-Lines-Briefing\\_-Wroe-Oct-2019-FINAL.pdf](https://www.contextualsafeguarding.org.uk/assets/documents/Contextual-Safeguarding-and-County-Lines-Briefing_-Wroe-Oct-2019-FINAL.pdf)