

County Lines

What are County Lines? County Lines is a form of **criminal exploitation** where urban gangs persuade, coerce or force children and young people to store drugs and money and/or transport them to suburban areas, market towns and coastal towns (Home Office, 2018). **It can happen in any part of the UK and is against the law and a form of child abuse.**

County Lines is where illegal drugs are transported from one area to another, often across police and local authority boundaries (not always though), usually by children or vulnerable people who are coerced into it by gangs. The "County Line" is the mobile phone line used to take the order of the drugs. Importing areas (areas where the drugs are taken to) are reporting increased levels of violence and weapons-related crimes as a result of this trend.

A common feature in county lines drug supply is the exploitation of young and vulnerable people. The dealers will frequently target children and adults - often with mental health or addiction problems - to act as drug runners or move cash so they can stay under the radar of law enforcement.

In some cases the dealers will take over a local property, normally belonging to a vulnerable person, and use it to operate their criminal activity from. This is known as **cuckooing**.

People exploited in this way will quite often be exposed to physical, mental and sexual abuse, and in some instances will be trafficked to areas a long way from home as part of the network's drug dealing business.

As we have seen in child sexual exploitation, children often don't see themselves as victims or realise they have been groomed to get involved in criminality. So it's important that we all play our part to understand county lines and speak out if we have concerns.

Some signs to look out for include:

- An increase in visitors and cars to a house or flat
- New faces appearing at the house or flat
- New and regularly changing residents (e.g different accents compared to local accent)
- **Change in resident's mood and/or demeanour (e.g. secretive/ withdrawn/ aggressive/ emotional)**
- Substance misuse and/or drug paraphernalia
- **Changes in the way young people you might know dress**

- **Unexplained, sometimes unaffordable new things (e.g clothes, jewellery, cars etc)**
- **Residents or young people you know going missing, maybe for long periods of time**
- Young people seen in different cars/taxis driven by unknown adults
- Young people seeming unfamiliar with your community or where they are
- Truancy, exclusion, disengagement from school
- An increase in anti-social behaviour in the community
- **Unexplained injuries**

Children are often befriended by these gangs and are exploited in a family, brotherhood/sister hood manner to gain children's trust.

Advice for parents

Be on the look-out for warning signs that suggest your child may be involved in a gang.

Visual signs

- Gang symbols: on schoolbooks, pencil cases, bags, bedroom posters and personal possessions.
- Clothing: young people wearing certain colours relating to specific gangs.
- Hand signals: sometimes hand signals are given by individuals to show which gang they are aligned.
- Postcodes: young people often align themselves to postcodes.

Behaviour

- A rise in skipping school.
- Sudden changes in your child's selection of friends.
- An increased number of social groups with unusual 'gang' names your child is hanging around with.
- Your child may experience bullying and pressure to join a gang.
- They may be vague or secretive about their activities.
- Possessing relatively large sums of money or bringing expensive items home.
- Getting in trouble with the police.

Online

- Be aware of the websites your child is viewing. Social networking sites can give access to images and words promoting gang culture.
- Chat rooms and texts can be used to bully young people into joining gangs.

Music

- Rap music associated with gangs can be threatening and violent.
- Know what your children are listening to.

There are things you can do to help stop your child from being involved in gangs.

- Talk to your child and listen
- Encourage them to get involved in positive activities and to think about their future employment
- Get involved in your child's school activities
- Know your child's friends and their families
- Always know where your child is and who they are with
- Help them to cope with pressure and how to deal with conflict without use of violence
- Speak to them about the serious consequences that occur from violent or illegal behaviour. Help them to understand the dangers of being in a gang and find constructive alternative ways to use their time
- Keep lines of communication open
- Be aware of what your child is doing on the internet
- Look for ways of disciplining children that do not involve harshness, anger or violence
- Work with other parents and schools to watch their behaviour
- Contact local voluntary organisations that provide mentoring and other support for young people
- Talk about your child's behaviour with their school and other parents

[This leaflet](#), produced by the government, contains advice for parents and carers on what to do if you suspect your child is becoming involved in a gang, and also explains the reasons why young people might be tempted to join a gang.

Why do young people join street gangs?

Young people can join gangs for a number of reasons. They can join for:

- recognition
- excitement
- friends
- acceptance
- a sense of belonging
- power over other people
- money from crime
- protection
- territory
- respect

Gangs and the law

Although there are no laws banning gangs or gang membership, there are laws to prevent the criminal activities linked to gangs.

- It is illegal to have or carry drugs like cannabis, cocaine and ecstasy.

- It is illegal to carry any knife if there is intent to use it as a weapon (even if it belongs to someone else).
 - It is illegal to carry or keep a gun without a licence, including fake or replica guns.
 - Police can (and will) search anyone they think may be carrying a gun or a knife.
 - Police and school staff can also search young people for weapons at school.
 - Offenders who are members of a gang could face longer sentences if they have to appear in court.
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- **What to do if you have concerns**
- The best advice is to trust your instincts. Even if someone isn't involved in county lines drug dealing, they may be being exploited in some other way, so it's always worth speaking out.
 - You can speak to your local police by dialling 101, or in an emergency 999.
 - If you would rather remain anonymous, you can contact the independent charity [Crimestoppers](#) on **0800 555 111**.
 - If you notice something linked to the railways, you can report concerns to the **British Transport Police by texting 61016 from your mobile. In an emergency dial 999.**
 - If you are a young person who is worried about your involvement, or a friend's involvement in county lines, a good option is to speak to an adult you trust and talk to them about your concerns.
 - You can also call **Childline on 0800 1111**. Childline is private and confidential service where you can talk to specially trained counsellors about anything that is worrying you.#
 - Or visit [Suffolk.gov.uk – Youth Support and Advice](https://www.suffolk.gov.uk/youth-support-and-advice)
 - [Gangs, Criminal Exploitation & County Lines » Suffolk Safeguarding Partnership \(suffolksp.org.uk\)](#) provide detailed information for parents and carers.