



Drug Gangs, Teenage Mules and County Lines

What is county lines?

It is a relatively new model of drug dealing in which gangs expand their operations from their big city bases – London, Liverpool, and Birmingham – to smaller cities, towns and rural areas across Britain. The term ‘lines’ refers to the dedicated mobile phone lines, “deal lines”, that dealers use to supply drugs. According to the National Crime Agency (NCA) there are over 2,000 established county line networks. Often these networks are linked to child exploitation, human trafficking and the systematic use of violence.

How to the operations work?

A frequent business model utilised by county lines gangs sees them operate under the style of a franchise. Gangs set up branded phone lines using anonymous disposable mobile phones known as “burners”, which are given specific names. The phones are used to send out group messages, advertising what drugs are available. Promotions such as free samples and two-for-one deals are regularly offered. “County” customers reply with their orders and runners are used to deliver the drugs and collect payment. The lines are often so profitable that gangs resort to high levels of violence to protect them, bringing a wave of knife and gun violence to areas in which it isn’t usually present.

How are the drugs delivered?

It is a business built on the exploitation of vulnerable adults and children. School-age children, mostly between 15 and 17 although some as young as 11, are used to ferry drugs and cash between the urban hub and the target area. In some cases they stay in the target areas for long periods. This is commonly known as “going country” or going OT (out there) and can involve premises in the target area being taken over by coercion, a practice known as “cuckooing”.

Cuckoos in the nest

Growing in tandem with county lines, the practice of “cuckooing” – victims’ homes being taken over by gangs as bases for illegal activity – is now estimated to affect thousands of people across the UK. Urban dealers typically befriend vulnerable people in rural and coastal towns, offering drugs to gain their trust. Victims often include those who are addicted to drugs, or who have mental health issues, or both. One common scenario is that a drug user gets into debt, and is forced to let a gang member move in, using their home to store, process and sell drugs.

How are they recruited?

Young people, often those who are excluded from school, or from broken families, are recruited in both “exporting” and “importing” areas. Many are already drug users. Some are hooked using threats or “debt bondage”, in which notional debts are inflated beyond the victim’s ability to pay. Others are lured by money, designer gifts or – particularly in the case of girls or young women – the promise of a romantic relationship. Once recruited, they are exposed to violence and abuse, taking all the risks for the upstream dealers.

Why is this happening now?

It may be in response to increasingly violent competition among drug gangs in their traditional territories, which has caused market saturation and growing numbers of dealers fighting over the same customer pools. The significant increase of knife crime in London is thought to be partially a result of drug dealing and “turf wars”. This has brought a surge of police interest and media attention. Against this background, gangs have been leveraging their big-city reputations to take over lucrative but less dangerous regional markets, where there is a high demand for drugs but a relatively low police presence.

How big is the problem?

County lines is a considerable problem for police forces in the UK that is quickly getting worse. The number of identified county line networks has tripled in the past year (this may be partly due to increased police awareness of the problem). The phenomenon was first identified earlier this decade, but in 2017 38 out of the 43 police forces in England and Wales reported county lines activity. Many areas where gangs have set up lines are experiencing spikes in cases of youth violence and sexual exploitation. Often, a sudden increase in knife crime is the first sign that a county lines operation has set up in the area.

What is being done to counter the threat?

One considerable problem is the lack of coordination between regional police forces. Last September, the National County Lines Coordination Centre (NCLCC), based in Birmingham, was launched. Jointly led by the NCA and the National Police Chief’s Council (NPCC), the NCLCC enables police forces and welfare agencies to share intelligence and to target gangs operating over wide areas. Alongside this, the police are using anti-slavery and anti-trafficking laws to charge perpetrators resulting in gang members being convicted of human trafficking.

