New approaches to understanding County Lines: A risk terrain analysis of cuckooing in Lincoln

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This paper details professional doctoral research at Keele University, part funded by the College of Policing bursary scheme and utilising software awarded by the RTMDx Gratis Program of the Rutgers Center on Public Security. It summarises how risk terrain modelling (RTM) analysed the geographical context of homes subjected to cuckooing by county line drug dealers. Importantly, the research sought to determine whether the RTM was a valid and practical analytical tool that could provide meaningful insights and direct intervention.

County lines is a marketing and retail approach for gangs and organised criminal networks to export illegal drugs into other areas using a dedicated form of 'deal line'. The line is promoted to local users and those holding the line use individuals within the market area to retail the drugs (Home Office, 2022). To facilitate the sale and distribution or crack and heroin, those controlling the line will rely on exploitation of children and vulnerable adults to move and store drugs via enticements, coercion, intimidation, and violence. The use of weapons is commonplace in the intimidation and violence associated with the running and maintenance of the line.

One of the tactics used by county lines is to gain access to the homes of vulnerable people to use as an activity base. Homes can be taken over by members of a line to the extent where the resident is forced to abandon their home; others may be forced to become actively involved in the lines' activities. In some cases, the addresses will be used to store drugs or money, with the risk of debt bondage—having to work for the line to repay debt—a real possibility through real or alleged loss of commodities, or 'taxing' when other lines or dealers steal it. Known as cuckooing, the approach targets vulnerable members of the community (Coliandris, 2015) exacerbating their situation (Spicer et al., 2020). Those targeted may fail to see themselves as victims and even perceive themselves as gaining a benefit for allowing such activities in their property. Consequently, the safeguarding of these individuals is a complex problem requiring the cooperation of emergency services, social services, local housing providers and charitable organisations.

Lincoln, a small city in the East Midlands, has a growing county lines problem; lines are exporting crack cocaine and heroin from Nottingham, London, and the West Midlands. Cuckooing is one of the consequential issues faced by Lincolnshire Police in its effort to deter, detect, and defy county lines exploiting vulnerable residents and profiting from the city’s illicit drug market. In order that law enforcement, on a regional and national scale, can understand and react to the evolving county line drug dealing model, all police forces in England and Wales are obliged to submit ongoing information to the National County Lines Co-ordination Centre. This includes details on persons involved in county lines, whether as a cuckooed victim, local runner, or line holder. This information on a local, and national level aims to develop knowledge and understanding of who county lines are exploiting and how this exploitation is occurring. However, there is a lack of knowledge and understanding around how individuals become targeted and involved with county lines.
The range of vulnerabilities acknowledged in academic literature which can lead to exploitation by cuckooing include mental or physical disability, health issues, isolation and drugs or alcohol dependency (Spicer et al., 2020). Moyle and Coomber (2017) acknowledge that social, cultural, and street ‘capital’ alongside socio-economic position impacts on those persons who are more at risk to involvement in user-dealing activities, and consequently cuckooing. These risk factors were included in a risk analysis approach to determine whether there is evidence that risk terrain analysis can be a practical and viable method of understanding county lines cuckooing in Lincoln.

Risk Terrain Modelling (RTM) was developed to assess place-based risk for future criminological activities. Within RTM the spatial influence of risk factors is operationalised as ‘1. presence or absence of features, 2. density of features, or 3. distance from features’ (Caplan, 2011:63). A step-by-step approach diagnoses spatial risk factors within a common geography to articulate spatial vulnerabilities (Kennedy & Dugato, 2018). It uses several criminological concepts in relation to crime location including the theory of risk places (Kennedy & Caplan, 2012), crime concentration (Eck & Weisburd, 1995), routine activity theory and rational choice theory (Clarke & Felson, 1993) and opportunity theory (Brantingham & Brantingham, 1995). The modelling process results in a composite map of multiple terrains of identified risk, with a risk value for each place representing the compounded risk of the unique combinations of criminogenic risk (Caplan, 2011).

Complementing the visual representation of high-risk spatial locations, the risk terrain approach identifies those criminogenic factors which are contributing to the increased risk. They not only offer an insight into understanding why a location might be at risk to future victimisation, but also, place-based factors to target intervention, and a baseline to assess the success of any place-based intervention.

The RTMDx software was used to conduct risk terrain analysis for locations of cuckooed properties identified in 2020 to identify those residential properties within Lincoln that are at risk to future incidents of cuckooing. Spatial data was obtained to represent possible geographic, socio-demographic, and criminogenic influences on properties which could increase their risk of cuckooing and the analysis run against locations identified in 2020. The potential influences on increased risk were selected based on academic research of victim vulnerability; lifestyle factors of potential victims and their routine activities; local officer insights and practitioner knowledge as a county lines intelligence analyst.

The resulting output identified those areas susceptible to future occurrences of cuckooing. The significant risk factors were identified as the proximity to young persons’ accommodation, areas of constrained city dwellers and the density of support services. The total area identified as significantly high risk to future cuckooing was only 2.97% of the analysed area. Locations which are identified as high risk in the analysis and in areas of previous exposure will be the most vulnerable to future offences. Map one shows those areas of significant risk that are within one hundred metres of properties targeted in 2020.
So how can this information be of practical policing use? On a tactical level it points to areas where extra vigilance is needed to ensure vulnerable persons are not exploited. It provides support to understand the factors which are contributing to that risk, and an evidence base with which to approach partners and engage in collaborative work. It focuses attention on areas which might otherwise be dismissed for intervention, prevention, or educational activities. Finally, a risk terrain analysis is generated using spatial criminogenic contexts which do not typically change. Thus, the resulting analysis can function as a baseline for assessing if future intervention has had an impact on the volume of occurrences, any subsequent displacement, and changes in contributing risk factors.

RTM has been used internationally across crime types, but typically in high density, high crime urban areas; this research demonstrates the wider relevance of the approach. In a policing environment which promotes partnership working, academic collaboration and best evidence to direct policing response and resources, this could be a pragmatic method of combining theoretical environmental criminology and risk forecasting to engage partners. In addition, it could provide a method to truly incorporate evaluation into ongoing policing responses to the evolving drug market known as county lines.

References


