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# New insights to County Lines drug supply networks: A research note on a study of police experiences of the intersectionality of victimhood and offending

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## Introduction

Urban-based suppliers trafficking drugs, particularly crack cocaine, and heroin into provincial areas in the UK to deal directly to local users was named 'County Lines' by the Home Office in 2013 (Glover and Finlay, 2019). The National Crime Agency (NCA) acknowledge it as a criminal business model that is defined as the 'transportation of illegal drugs, by gangs and organised criminal networks, from one area to another within the UK, using dedicated mobile telephone lines or other "deal lines"' (NCA, 2018: 1). The supply chain typically involves male children aged between 15 and 17 years and other vulnerable adults (often with drug addiction or mental health conditions), acting as 'runners' to courier commodities such as cash, drugs, and weapons (NCA, 2019), and is associated with high levels of exploitation, coercion, intimidation, violence, and weapons-related offences (Glover and Finlay, 2019; Moyle, 2019; NCA, 2019).

Two significant developments have occurred in the criminal justice response. First, the introduction of the National County Lines Co-ordination Centre (NCLCC) in 2018 with the remit to co-ordinate policing activity through improved information and intelligence sharing, strategic assessments, and planning and support for police operations (NCLCC, 2021). Second, the use of the National Referral Mechanism (NRM) for identifying and supporting those suspected of being victims of modern slavery and human trafficking (Home Office, 2014). However, the crime problem remains persistent and shows itself capable of consistently evolving. The adversarial nature of the criminal justice system creates a dilemma in the form of a unique intersectionality of victimhood and offending: the response to which is confounded by an ill-fitting framework derived from the *Modern Slavery Act 2015* and the NRM, since neither were intended nor designed for dealing with 'County Lines'. This research note provides a summary of an empirical study of police investigators' perceptions and experiences of dealing with 'County Lines' within this context. The legal, policy, and practice implications are considered.

## Aim and method

The aim of the study was to examine perceptions and experiences of specialist police officers engaged in investigating the 'County Lines' drug supply phenomenon. Specific focus was directed at potential issues with the effectiveness of the criminal justice framework, vis-à-vis that provided by the *Modern Slavery Act 2015*, section 45 statutory defence and the NRM. To this end, the research questions address: what challenges were faced in investigating offences; and how were issues of vulnerability, safeguarding, and referral perceived and acted upon? The study used a constructivist, qualitative approach in two stages. The first involved non-participant observation of 'in-house' police training about modern slavery and human

trafficking, complemented by observations of trainee detectives engaged in scenario-based training exercises. The second stage comprised semi-structured interviews with police officers of various ranks and roles. The sampling method was purposive since the research was conducted in a single, provincial police force in England, with negotiated access to a cohort of eight specialist officers. The cohort comprised two detective constables, two police constables engaged in 'disruption' operations, two detective sergeants, and two detective chief inspectors. Thematic analysis was conducted using NVivo qualitative data analysis software.

### **Key findings and discussion points**

The analysis identified three themes: the presence and role of violence and weapons; autonomy, coercion, and exploitation, and challenges in police investigation and case management. Each are summarised below.

#### ***The presence and role of violence and weapons***

Participants associated 'County Lines' with the habitual carrying of knives and episodes of serious violence. It was portrayed as an inherently more violent enterprise than historic drug supply models. There was a perception that violence was more visible and publicised, with incidents often recorded and distributed via social media, with the aim of instilling fear, and to assert control over operatives and rival supply networks. The presence and use of weapons and violence was linked to 'gang' involvement, although it was clearly recognised that the conceptual notion of 'gang' is disputed, and in practice inconsistently understood and applied by the authorities, including the police. Difficulty arose for the police, where children and vulnerable adults carried weapons, often for personal protection or as couriers, making them offenders and potential victims simultaneously.

#### ***Autonomy, coercion, and exploitation***

Several reasons were reported for the involvement of children and vulnerable adults, ranging from conscious agentic desire, being 'groomed', coerced, exploited or a combination. Participants differentiated those who appeared to have joined willingly and were later subjected to exploitation, and those who were 'groomed' or coerced from the outset. 'Debt bondage' was reported where children were forced to act, as payment for goods such as trainers and clothing, or for 'losing' drugs due to police actions or robbery by rivals. They also identified poor life choices and bounded decision making; many involved are representative of a cohort in which cognitive and emotional development sees a peak typically at 11-15 years of age, and sometimes as late as 19 (Lenroot and Giedd, 2006; Williams, 2012). Notably, training and screening for neurodiversity and neuro-maturation issues appear lacking, such that vulnerability is not recognised at early stages in the criminal justice process.

#### ***Challenges for investigation and case management***

Participants reported challenges concerning use of the section 45 defence (under the *Modern Slavery Act 2015*), NRM, and the efficiency and effectiveness of safeguarding referrals. They experienced difficulty in investigating lines of enquiry, due to 'no comment' interviews stifling opportunities to probe potential defences early on in the process, and late or scant defences being made.

An official response to the exploitation of 'County Lines' operatives has led to prosecutions of those responsible for offences under the *Modern Slavery Act 2015*. In summary, section 1 of the Act contains the offence of holding a person in slavery, servitude, forced or compulsory

labour. Section 2 contains the offence of trafficking a person for the purpose of exploiting them. Under section 45, a statutory defence is provided for those involved in criminal offences. For an adult accused of committing an offence, they would *not* be guilty if they could show that they were compelled to commit the offence, that the compulsion was as a result of exploitation or slavery, and that a reasonable person with the same characteristics would have had no realistic alternative. For children, compulsion is omitted from the offence wording.

Three specific issues were linked to section 45 defences: Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) charge authorisations being denied; discontinuance of cases; and evidence of the defence not being tested in open court. There was concern that the NRM process and section 45 defence may actively contribute to the use of children and vulnerable persons, because of inconsistent outcomes and CPS reluctance to proceed with cases. Participants expressed frustration that individuals were referred and arrested again in similar circumstances. In sum, the evidence suggests that the legal and policy practices fail both the police, as well as children and vulnerable persons.

### **Concluding remarks**

While significant attention has been paid to 'County Lines' and its disruption, it remains persistently stable as a model of operation. Uniquely, it consists in an intersectionality of victimhood *and* offending in many cases, wherein the response is confounded by an ill-fitted criminal justice framework, derived from the *Modern Slavery Act 2015* and the NRM. A review of *Hansard* demonstrates that the focus of the *Modern Slavery Act 2015* was never on such a hybridised form of victimhood and offending; consequently, making it 'fit' with the problem of 'County Lines' has become a matter of policy guidance only (see Home Office, 2019). While an official review concluded that the modern slavery legislation remains fit for purpose (Home Office, 2019), in practice it is clearly not appropriate for the specific circumstances and unable to meet the operational needs of the police, other agencies, and those being exploited.

The research study suggests that with the number of active 'County Lines' remaining stable, increasing numbers and inconsistencies in NRM referrals and safeguarding outcomes, incomplete statutory guardianship coverage—along with deficiencies in understanding of, and screening for, neuro-developmental and neurodiverse conditions among those involved—means the response is decontextualised from underlying causes. This in turn dichotomises many involved as either 'victims' or 'villains' rather than acknowledging that they can be both. Therefore, the research findings add to a growing recognition of the complex, nuanced relationship between victim and offender status, and calls for a criminal justice system reset.

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