



A guide to County Lines

#KnowTheSigns

Everything you need to know to understand county lines, as well as guidance and where to find support.



The Kent & Medway Violence Reduction Unit is a multi-agency partnership using a public health approach to tackle violent crime in our communities.



Kent Fire & Rescue Service



Kent Police



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What are County Lines?

The Home Office define County Lines as “a term used to describe gangs and organised criminal networks involved in exporting illegal drugs into one or more importing areas within the UK, using dedicated mobile phone lines or other form of 'deal line'. They are likely to exploit children and vulnerable adults to move and store the drugs and money and they will often use coercion, intimidation, violence (including sexual violence) and weapons.” [[Home Office, 2020](#)]

County lines refer to a crime where drug gangs exploit and traffic children and vulnerable adults (who are often lonely, isolated, have addiction or mental health issues) to make them a courier of drugs and money (often referred to as 'drug running') from the gang's base to customers in towns across the UK. They operate out of major UK cities such as London, Liverpool and Birmingham, and they distribute illegal drugs across rural, suburban and seaside towns via 'runners'.

The Home Office found that in 2019 there were over 1,000 different County Lines operating across the UK.

County Lines Statistics

The Children's Commissioner's research has suggested that children as young as 10 were being recruited into gangs and estimated that 46,000 children in England are involved in gangs. Children aged 15 to 17 years are those most commonly identified as victims of County Lines exploitation, although those younger and older are also at risk of exploitation ([National Crime Agency, 2019](#)).

91% of those involved in County Lines are male, however, females are underrepresented in the data as their involvement is less likely to be discovered/suspected by services. Both females and males may be subject to sexual exploitation linked to County Lines. [[National Crime Agency, 2019](#)].

Research from the [NCA](#) has shown that importing areas are reporting increased levels of violence and weapon-related crimes as a result of this trend. This type of crime is often associated with other serious crimes such as sexual exploitation, violence, money laundering and human trafficking.

How do County Lines work?

County Lines operations have evolved and become more sophisticated over time in response to local policing, safeguarding practices and COVID-19. This has significantly increased the risk of recruitment and exploitation through a process of grooming vulnerable young people over social media and online gaming platforms.

Gangs use children and young people to maximise profits while also distancing themselves from the criminal act of physically dealing drugs ([National Crime agency, 2018](#)). Runners do the majority of the work and take the most risk.

Mobile phone lines or 'deal lines' are used to help facilitate County Lines drug deals. Phones are usually cheap, disposable and old-fashioned and are changed frequently to avoid detection by the police. Gangs use the phones to receive orders and to contact 'runners' with instructions of where to deliver the drugs. This may be to a local dealer or drug user, or a dealer or drug user in another county.

Gangs will often establish a base in a particular location, sometimes by force, coercion or by convincing a vulnerable person to take up residence in their home (this is known as 'cuckooing') so that it can be used for drug dealing in exchange for free drugs, food or utilities. It's common for gangs to use a property for a short amount of time, changing address frequently to stay under the radar of law enforcement.

Please see the figure below showing how a County Line operation works.

Figure.1





How to spot the signs for County Lines exploitation in your neighbourhood?

There are several signs to look out for that may indicate someone is a victim of cuckooing. Some signs to look out for include:

- Has there been an increase in visitors and cars to a house or flat?
- Are there new faces appearing at the house or flat, with different cars at unsociable hours?
- Are the new faces familiar to your community?
- Has there been a change in the resident's mood or demeanour (e.g. secretive, withdrawn, aggressive or emotional)?
- Has your neighbour been misusing substances or drug paraphernalia?
- Have you noticed a change in the way young people you might dress?
- Unexplained, sometimes unaffordable new things (e.g clothes, jewellery, cars etc)
- Does your neighbour go missing for long periods of time?
- Has there been an increase in anti-social behaviour?
- Are they in a new relationship with someone who seems controlling?
- Are there any unexplained injuries?
- Have there any been changes in your neighbour's daily routine?
- Have there been any unusual smells coming from the property?



What are the signs to look for?

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. However, not all the signs of exploitation are obvious and therefore it is our role to look closer to identify and protect them from further harm.

If we all learn to spot the possible signs of a young person being exploited, we can help to keep them safe and stop this abuse from happening. Some of the signs of county lines involvement and exploitation are:

- Have they gone missing from school or home and can they account for their missing episodes?
- Are you able to contact/get a hold of the young person?
- Does the young person have any unexplained bus or train tickets?
- Are they meeting with unfamiliar adults or is there a change in their behaviour?
- Are they using drugs and alcohol?
- Has the young person had any significant changes in their emotional well-being?
- Have you noticed or believe that the young person is self-harming or notice any unexplained injuries or malnutrition?
- Have they acquired clothing, expensive gifts or money they can't account for?
- Have you noticed any unknown or suspicious looking individuals/ vehicles coming and going from a neighbour's residents or your own?
- Have you noticed more people calling at a neighbour's home? Often at unsociable hours?
- Have you noticed that they have more than one phone/number or are they receiving a high number of texts or calls and being secretive about who they are speaking to?
- Has your child or a young person started a relationship with a controlling individual who is older with potential gang associations?



Services and Support for young people and families

People being exploited 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.

If you see or suspect any of the following mentioned above in relation to County Line activity, please seek help and support from the following services:

Crimestoppers

Crimestoppers is an independent charity that gives people the power to speak up and stop crime anonymously. They offer information about county lines and if you need help and support you can call them on 0800 555111 or contact them online via their website.

Fearless

Fearless is an anonymous website where young people can access non-judgemental information and advice about crime and criminality.

SafeCall

SafeCall is run by the Missing People helpline and supports young people and their families who have been affected by county lines. If you have been affected you can call 0208 392 5710 or email: safecall@missingpeople.org.uk

Childline

Childline is a free, private and confidential service where children and young people can talk about anything. You can call 0800 111 or contact them online for help, support and advice.

Safeguarding

If you are worried about the safety of your or another child or young person. Call [Kent County Council](#) 03000 41 11 11 or [Medway Council](#) 01634 334 466.

Kent Police

If you're concerned about county lines and drug-related crime in your area or think someone may be a victim of county lines and drug exploitation, please call 101. If it's an emergency, please call 999. If you're deaf or hard of hearing, use our [textphone service 60066](#). Or text 999 if you've pre-registered with the [emergencySMS service](#). Or can talk to Kent Police on [Live Chat](#) which is available 24/7.

Silent 999 calls

If you're in danger but you can't talk on the phone, you should still call 999, then [follow these instructions](#) depending on whether you're calling from a mobile or a landline.

British Transport Police

If you're on a train, you can text the British Transport Police on 61016. Information on routes of travel, addresses, appearances and behaviour of a vulnerable person can help to protect them.

National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children

The NSPCC helpline is staffed by trained professionals who can provide expert advice and support if you're concerned about a child.

Kent County Council

A list of youth centres and the activities can be found on the [KCC](#) website for education and young people.

Medway Council

A list of youth centres, their opening times and the activities they offer can be found on the [MC](#) website.