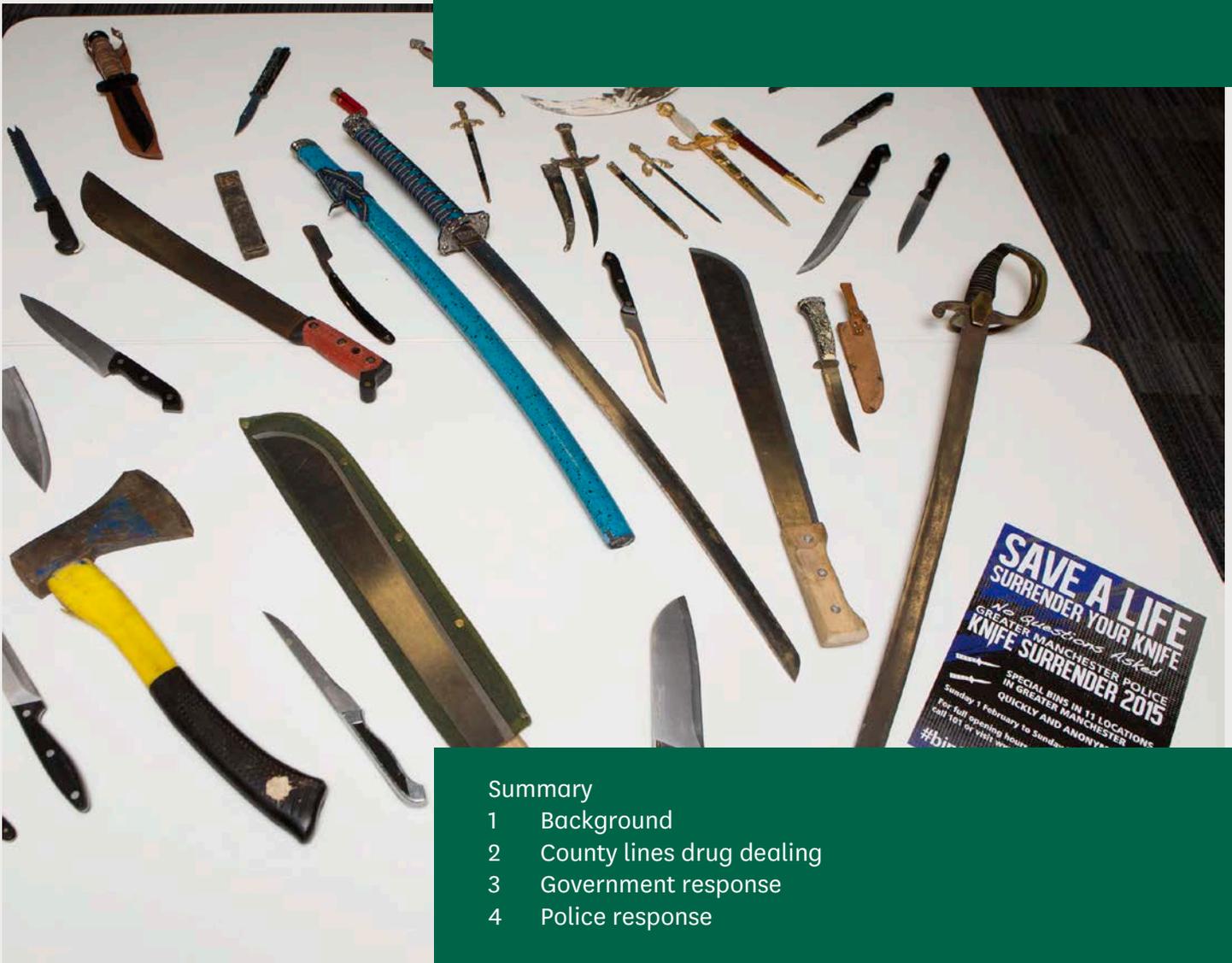


By Tirion Havard

4 February 2022

Serious youth violence: County lines drug dealing and the Government response



Summary

- 1 Background
- 2 County lines drug dealing
- 3 Government response
- 4 Police response

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Contents

1	Background	6
1.1	Key terms	6
2	County lines drug dealing	9
2.1	Prevalence	10
2.2	Children	11
2.3	Women and girls	13
2.4	Impact of coronavirus	16
3	Government response	17
3.1	Beating Crime Plan	17
3.2	Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill	18
3.3	Stronger enforcement	19
3.4	Public health approach to serious violence	20
4	Police response	22
4.1	How is the police response to county lines organised?	22
4.2	Inspection report	23
4.3	Modern slavery legislation	24

Summary

This briefing focuses on serious youth violence within the context of organised crime groups involved in county lines drug dealing. The Government has made “rolling up county lines” a priority for the police in recent years.

What is county lines drug dealing?

County lines drug dealing describes organised crime groups (OCGs) who supply drugs to suburban areas including market and coastal towns. County lines drug dealers use dedicated mobile phones or “deal lines” to assist in the transport of drugs.

This type of drug dealing is strongly associated with the coercion of children and vulnerable people. The dealers use children and vulnerable people to move drugs, money and sometimes weapons between their hometown and the coastal and market towns they are dealing in. In 2020 the NCA said exploitation in county lines drug dealing was “the most frequently identified form of coerced criminality, with children representing the vast majority of victims”. In 2021 they said that [“at least 14.5%”](#) of modern slavery referrals were related to county lines activity.

The NCA says [“violence at street level is often linked to drugs supply”](#) and “continues to be associated” with county lines drug dealing. The Government has concluded that [“changes to the drugs market, like the \(emergence of the\) county lines model of exploitation, is partly fuelling”](#) serious violence.

Government response

The Government has been tackling county lines by investing in enforcement activities and early interventions to prevent at risk youth from becoming involved in county lines drug dealing and serious violence. It has invested:

- £65 million in county lines enforcement. This money has been used by police forces in the areas county lines dealers export from set up dedicated taskforces to pursue deal line holders.
- £28 million in a joint service approach to responding to drug misuse in places badly affected by county lines importing (known as Project ADDER).
- £105.5 million to set up eighteen [Violence Reduction Units](#) to coordinate early intervention work in areas worst affected by serious violence.
- £200 million in a ten-year programme to fund early intervention projects (known as the [Youth Endowment Fund](#)).

- £17 million in a programme to intervene with young victims of violence in A&E.
- £45 million in early intervention programmes in schools.

Alongside this significant investment the Government has also introduced legislative changes it says will help frontline workers combat county lines:

- The [Offensive Weapons Act 2019](#) introduced new offences associated with the possession of flick/ gravity knives. OWA provisions not yet in force will also place restrictions on the online sale of knives and introduce [Knife Crime Prevention Orders \(KCPOs\)](#) which will allow the courts to apply “positive requirements” to steer young people away from knife crime.
- The [Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill](#) (PCSC Bill) would introduce new legal duties on local actors to work together to combat serious violence. It would also require local services conduct a review following a homicide involving an offensive weapon. The PCSC Bill would also introduce Serious Violence Reduction Orders (SVROs). The courts would be able to apply an SVRO to offenders whose offence involved an offensive weapon.

The Government’s [Beating Crime Plan](#) (PDF, July 2021) outlines its strategy for cutting homicide, serious violence and neighbourhood crime. It provides more details on the above polices.

Successes

The Government says county lines enforcement action since 2019 has resulted in [“more than 1,100 lines closed, over 6,300 arrests, and more than 1,900 vulnerable adults and children safeguarded”](#). The number of operational county lines deal lines reported has reduced (from 2,000 in 2019 to 600 in 2021). The National Crime Agency says the reduction can be attributed to [better reporting and increased operational activity](#).

The police themselves say they have made [“huge inroads”](#) in tackling county lines. They say this has been possible “due to the enormous efforts across policing, the regions, the NCA and partner agencies”.

The police response to county lines has also been [praised by Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services \(HMICFRS\)](#). It says the police have benefited from a...

...clearer focus, better funding, a relentless pursuit of perpetrators and a clear sense that these are urgent national policing priorities.

HMICFRS has called on the police and Government to model their response to violence against women and girls on the success disrupting county lines drug dealing.

1 Background

The Government's 2021 [Beating Crime Plan](#) describes serious violence as "crimes that involve knives or guns".¹ The Government is measuring police effectiveness at reducing serious violence by counting the number of under 25s admitted to hospital for assault with a sharp object and the number of offences involving discharge of a firearm.² This means the Government does not use the term serious violence to describe other types of violent crime (for example, domestic abuse or violence against women and girls). However, other actors have used the term "serious violence" to encompass a wider range of violent crimes.³ This briefing focuses on serious youth violence within the context of organised crime groups involved in county lines drug dealing.

1.1 Key terms

Gangs

There is no agreed definition for the term "gang" and the term is sometimes used inconsistently.

There is a legal definition of "gang-related violence/ drug dealing" used by the courts when issuing gang injunctions. Violence/ drug dealing is "gang related" when it is conducted by a group consisting of at least three people that has "one or more characteristics that enable its members to be identified by others as a group".⁴

The Metropolitan Police Service (MPS) defines a gang as a

...relatively durable, predominantly street-based group of young people who:

- See themselves (and are seen by others) as a discernible group, and
- engage in a range of criminal activity and violence.

¹ UK Government, [Beating Crime Plan: Fewer victims, peaceful neighbourhoods, safe country](#), July 2021, p14

² Home Office, [National Crime and Policing Measures](#), undated

³ Local Government Association, [Taking a public health approach to tackling serious violent crime: Case studies](#), July 2020, p2

⁴ [s34\(5\)](#), Policing and Crime Act 2009

They may also have any or all of the following features:

- identify with or lay claim over territory,
- have some form of identifying structure feature,
- are in conflict with other, similar gangs.⁵

This definition is used by the MPS for the Gangs Violence Matrix.

The Gangs Violence Matrix

The [Gangs Violence Matrix \(GVM\)](#), launched in 2012, is a tool used by the MPS to identify and risk assess those involved in, or vulnerable to victimisation from, gang violence.⁶ The MPS use data held on the GVM to make operational decisions like how to target intervention and enforcement activity.⁷ As of 30 June 2021 the GVM holds information on 2,151 individuals. 99.8% of those whose information is on the GVM were male (2,146), 79% were Black (1,700) and 70% were under the age of 25 (1,508).⁸

In November 2018 the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO) issued an enforcement notice to the MPS when it found the GVM had led to multiple and serious breaches of data protection laws.⁹ The ICO opened its investigation after Amnesty International raised concerns about the criteria used to add people to the GVM. Amnesty argued that a lack of clarity about the definition of "gang" led to the MPS holding data on a disproportionate number of young Black men, many of whom were not involved in gang violence.¹⁰ Similar concerns were raised by David Lammy MP in his 2017 review into the treatment and outcomes for Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic people in the criminal justice system.¹¹ Following the ICO enforcement notice, London Mayor Sadiq Khan published a review of the GVM. The review set out nine recommendations the MPS were expected to implement by December 2019. In February 2020 the ICO confirmed it was satisfied with the progress made by

⁵ MPS, [Gangs violence matrix](#), [last accessed 23 June 2021]

⁶ MPS, [Gangs violence matrix](#), [last accessed 23 June 2021]

⁷ Ibid

⁸ MPS, [Gangs Matrix figures – Headlines 2020/2021 Q4](#), undated

⁹ ICO, [ICO finds Metropolitan Police Service's Gangs Matrix breached data protection laws](#), 16 November 2018

¹⁰ Amnesty International, [Trapped in the matrix: secrecy, stigma, and bias in the Met's gangs database](#), May 2018; ICO, [Data Protection Act 1998, supervisory powers of the Information Commissioner: Enforcement Notice to the Commissioner of the Police of the Metropolis](#), 13 November 2019, para 20

¹¹ Ministry of Justice, [The Lammy Review: An independent review into the treatment of, and outcomes for, Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic individuals in the Criminal Justice System](#), September 2017, p19

the MPS.¹² In January 2021 the Mayor's Office published a further update on the progress made against the review recommendations.¹³

Organised Crime Groups (OCGs)

An OCG is a group of three or more people whose purpose (or one of its purposes) is the “carrying on of criminal activities”.¹⁴ The National Crime Agency (NCA) estimated there were 4,772 OCGs in the UK in April 2020. A quarter of these groups (around 1,200) were estimated to be involved in violent criminal activity.¹⁵ Other OCGs are involved in fraud, cybercrime and immigration crime.¹⁶

¹² London Mayor, [Review of the Metropolitan Police Service Gangs Violence Matrix: Update on the implementation of the MOPAC recommendations](#), January 2021, p1

¹³ Ibid

¹⁴ [s45\(6\)](#), Serious Crime Act 2015

¹⁵ National Crime Agency, [National Strategic Assessment of Serious and Organised Crime 2020](#), undated, para 21

¹⁶ Ibid

2

County lines drug dealing

County lines drug dealing describes organised crime groups (OCGs) who supply drugs to suburban areas including market and coastal towns. The dealers use dedicated mobile phones or “deal lines” to assist in the transport of drugs.

This type of drug dealing is strongly associated with the coercion of children and vulnerable people. Dealers use children and vulnerable people to move drugs, money and sometimes weapons between their hometown and the coastal and market towns they are dealing in. In 2020 the NCA said exploitation in county lines dealing was “the most frequently identified form of coerced criminality, with children representing the vast majority of victims”.¹⁷ In 2021 they said that “at least 14.5%” of modern slavery referrals were related to county lines activity.¹⁸

County lines drug dealing is also strongly associated with serious violence. The NCA says “violence at street level is often linked to drugs supply” and “continues to be associated” with county lines drug dealing.¹⁹ The Government has concluded that “changes to the drugs market, like the (emergence of the) county lines model of exploitation, is partly fuelling” serious violence.²⁰

The Government’s definition of county lines incorporates all these elements of county lines drug dealing. It describes 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.²¹

¹⁷ NCA, [National Strategic Assessment of Serious and Organised Crime 2020](#), undated, para

¹⁸ NCA, [National Strategic Assessment of Serious and Organised Crime 2021](#), undated, para 60

¹⁹ NCA, [National Strategic Assessment of Serious and Organised Crime 2020](#), undated, para 69

²⁰ HM Govt, [Beating crime plan](#), 6 September 2021, p14

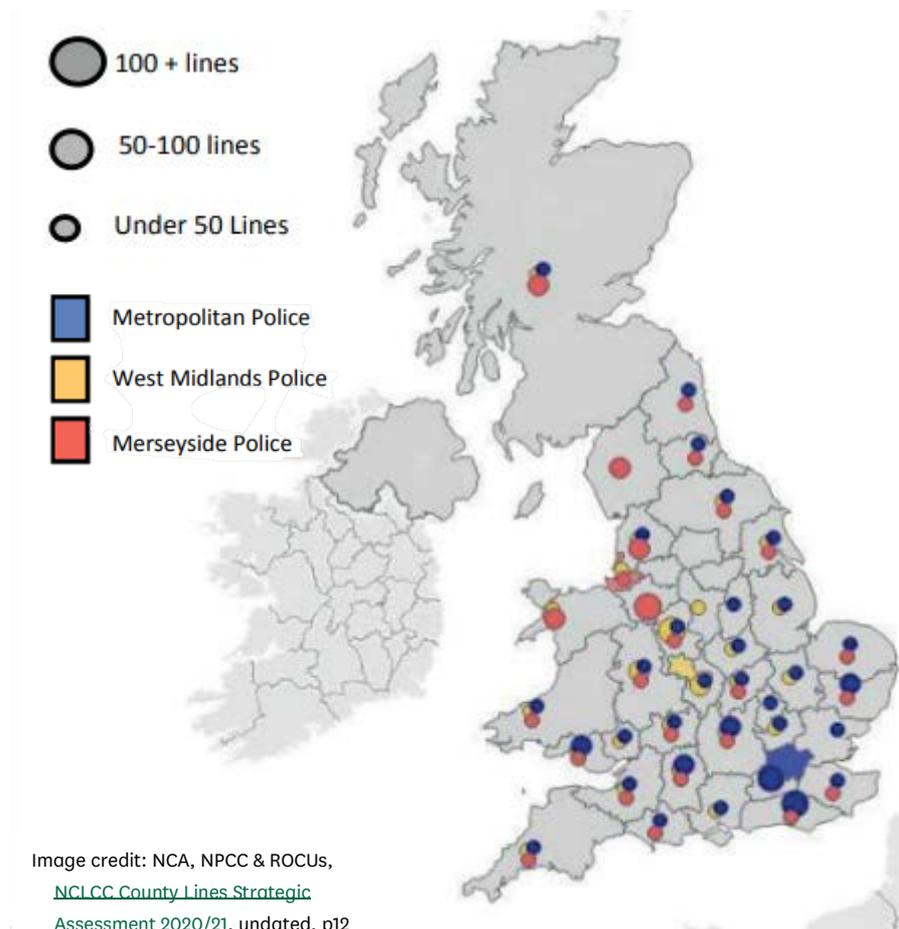
²¹ Home Office, [Criminal exploitation of children and vulnerable adults: county lines](#), 7 February 2020

2.1

Prevalence

The recording of county lines activity is relatively new and there are few detailed statistics currently published. The best available statistics are published by the NCA in its “strategic assessment” of county lines activity. The [2020/21 strategic assessment](#) (published April 2021) reported that roughly 600 county line deal lines are operational in any given month.²² This is lower than the NCA has previously estimated. In January 2019 it estimated there were 2,000 individual deal lines in the UK.²³ The NCA says the reduction can be attributed to better reporting and increased operational activity.²⁴

Approximately 80% of the known deal lines in 2021 were exported from just three police force areas: Metropolitan Police, West Midlands and Merseyside.²⁵



²² NCA, NPCC & ROCUs, [NCLCC County Lines Strategic Assessment 2020/21 \(PDF\)](#), April 2021, p7

²³ NCA, [County lines drug supply, vulnerability and harm 2019](#), January 2019, para 4

²⁴ NCA, NPCC & ROCUs, [NCLCC County Lines Strategic Assessment 2020/21](#), undated, p6

²⁵ Ibid, p12

2.2

Children

Approximately 20% of people identified as being involved in county lines are children.²⁶ According to the NCA the average age of children involved in county lines drug dealing is 15.8 years old.²⁷ Although, there have been reports of children as young as 12 years old being identified as involved in county lines.²⁸ Children mostly play a “workforce role” in county lines drug dealing. They are used to run drugs from urban areas to county and coastal towns.

Vulnerability

Some children are vulnerable to county lines exploitation. Factors that “heighten a person’s vulnerability” include:

- having prior experience of neglect, physical and/or sexual abuse
- lack of a safe/stable home environment, now or in the past (domestic violence or parental substance misuse, mental health issues or criminality, for example)
- social isolation or social difficulties
- economic vulnerability
- homelessness or insecure accommodation status
- connections with other people involved in gangs
- having a physical or learning disability
- having mental health or substance misuse issues
- being in care (particularly those in residential care and those with interrupted care histories)
- being excluded from mainstream education, in particular attending a Pupil Referral Unit.”²⁹

²⁶ NCA, NPCC & ROCUs, [NCLCC County Lines Strategic Assessment 2020/21](#), undated, p29

²⁷ Ibid

²⁸ Home Office, [Criminal exploitation of children and vulnerable adults: county lines](#), February 2020

²⁹ Home Office, [Criminal exploitation of children and vulnerable adults: county lines](#), February 2020

Exploitation

The Government recognises that the criminal exploitation of children is a “typical feature of county lines activity”.³⁰

There is no statutory definition of child criminal exploitation (CCE), but the Government has adopted the following definition in guidance:

[CCE occurs] when an individual or group takes advantage of an imbalance of power to coerce, control, manipulate or deceive a child or young person under the age of 18 into any criminal activity

- in exchange for something the victim needs or wants.
- for the financial or other advantage of the perpetrator or facilitator.
- through violence or the threat of violence.

The victim may have been criminally exploited even if the activity appears consensual. Child criminal exploitation does not always involve physical contact; it can also occur through the use of technology.³¹

Making child criminal exploitation a criminal offence?

Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS) has said the lack of a statutory definition of child criminal exploitation is a problem because it “can lead to public services making different decisions about the levels of risk surrounding an exploited child, or how much support the child needs.”³²

Safeguarding

Government guidance on safeguarding children ([Working Together to Safeguard Children](#)) counts “exploitation by criminal gangs and organised crime groups such as county lines drugs gangs” as a risk to child welfare.³³ [Working Together](#) and Home Office guidance on the [criminal exploitation of children and vulnerable adults](#) both advise frontline staff to follow their local

³⁰ Home Office, [Criminal exploitation of children and vulnerable adults: county lines](#), February 2020

³¹ HM Government, [Working Together to Safeguard Children: A guide to inter-agency working to safeguard and promote the welfare of children](#), July 2018, p110; Home Office, [Child Exploitation Disruption Toolkit: Disruption Tactics](#), April 2019, p3

³² HMICFRS, [Both sides of the coin: The police and National Crime Agency’s response to vulnerable people in ‘county lines’ drug offending](#), January 2020, p4

³³ HM Government, [Working Together to Safeguard Children: A guide to inter-agency working to safeguard and promote the welfare of children](#), July 2018, para 40

safeguarding process when they believe a child may be involved in county lines activity.³⁴

The Home Office guidance lists the following “signs to look out for” which may indicate a child is involved in county lines activity:³⁵

- persistently going missing from school or home and / or being found out-of-area
- unexplained acquisition of money, clothes, or mobile phones
- excessive receipt of texts / phone calls and/or having multiple handsets
- relationships with controlling / older individuals or groups
- leaving home / care without explanation
- suspicion of physical assault / unexplained injuries
- parental concerns
- carrying weapons
- significant decline in school results / performance
- gang association or isolation from peers or social networks
- self-harm or significant changes in emotional well-being

2.3

Women and girls

The extent of women and girl’s involvement in county lines is unclear. The NCA acknowledges that there is a “disconnect” between the number of women reported as involved in county lines by law enforcement and statutory/voluntary partners.³⁶

The NCA says 13% of people identified as being involved in county lines are women.³⁷ It says it cannot “distinguish clearly between the victim and

³⁴ HM Government, [Working Together to Safeguard Children: A guide to inter-agency working to safeguard and promote the welfare of children](#), July 2018, para 26; Home Office, [Criminal exploitation of children and vulnerable adults: county lines](#), February 2020

³⁵ Home Office, [Criminal exploitation of children and vulnerable adults: county lines](#), February 2020

³⁶ NCA, NPCC & ROCUs, [NCLCC County Lines Strategic Assessment 2020/21](#), undated, p30

³⁷ Ibid

suspect/offender role in every case” but a “small number” of women have been clearly identified as the suspect/offender.”³⁸

London’s ‘Rescue and Response County Lines Project’ has identified that women face particular challenges in county lines:

Factor 1: Young women carry an emotional burden for the group and its members; often being relied upon for emotional support and counsel.

Factor 2: Young women tend to suffer more sexual exploitation and abuse than young men.

Factor 3: Young women in a relationship with an exploiter face an additional emotional obstacle in escaping the relationship as well as the exploitation.³⁹

Sexual exploitation

Sexual violence is used to control those exploited as part of county lines offending. As detailed by the NCA:

- A minority of female victims may also be sexual exploited for financial gain.
- County lines offenders may “offer” children and females to other offenders for sexual activity.
- County Line offenders ‘cuckoo’ properties (sometimes the properties of sex workers) to use as part of the county line organisations. Sometimes women are encouraged to take drugs at these properties and subsequently held in “debt bondage by offenders” and “sexually exploited... as a form of ‘payment’”.⁴⁰

The Children’s Commissioner report [It’s wrong but you get used to it](#) identified three strategies of exploitation within OCGs.

- A young woman might be sexually assaulted or have a sexual relationship with a male member of a rival OCG.
- Young women are used to allure opposing OCG members. Both strategies are designed to provoke or disrespect a male member of an opposing OCG.

³⁸ Ibid

³⁹ Rescue and Response County Lines Project, [Year 2 Strategic Assessment](#), September 2020, p22

⁴⁰ NCA, [County lines drug supply, vulnerability and harm 2019](#), January 2019, paras 38 to 44

- Sexual exploitation as part of an initiation ceremony known as ‘sexing-in’, which can involve multiple OCG members.⁴¹

Many children, especially those estranged from their family, can be attracted by the security of an intimate relationship. So called ‘lover boys’ target these girls and young women and create the impression of romantic relationships. They are then used as ‘sexual accessories’⁴² offered around and abused by other gang members for their gratification. Young women associated with OCGs through casual sex with one or more gang-involved young men, often from different OCGs, are called ‘links’.⁴³

The practice of multiple men/boys having sex consecutively with one young woman/girl is known as “running trains”⁴⁴. This usually involves high rates of unprotected sex which leads to increased risks of sexually transmitted infections and pregnancy. Some children are becoming sexually active at 10 (or younger). The average age of girls in OCGs having sex is 13/14 years⁴⁵⁴⁶. Some girls and young women normalise the abuse and do not see themselves as being exploited.⁴⁷

Sexual and criminal exploitation must be viewed within the wider issue of consent. This is complicated by OCGs’ cultures of heightened objectification and disempowerment of young women, and a sense of entitlement on the part of young men. It results in a high-risk environment for young women, in which their sexual experiences are primarily determined and shaped by the agendas of others.⁴⁸

A girl or young woman may not understand what she is consenting to, or may be too afraid of the consequences to say no. The consequences can be long term such as the end of a relationship and the protection that comes with it, the loss of financial security or homelessness. The process of duress or coercion is seldom understood.⁴⁹ Kim Johnson, MP for Liverpool Riverside, said women may not acknowledge that they are victims due to the nature of their grooming—they will often believe that they are in relationships—and

⁴¹ Quinn, K. *et al.* (2019) “Running Trains” and “Sexing-In”: The Functions of Sex Within Adolescent Gangs’, *Youth and Society*, 51(2), pp. 151–169. doi: 10.1177/0044118X16667375

⁴² Centre for Social Justice. Dying to Belong p74

⁴³ Children’s Commissioner “[It’s wrong-but you get used to it](#)”: a qualitative study of gang-associated sexual violence towards, and exploitation of, young people in England.. 2013

⁴⁴ Quinn, K. *et al.* (2019) “Running Trains” and “Sexing-In”: The Functions of Sex Within Adolescent Gangs’, *Youth and Society*, 51(2), pp. 151–169.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Wesche, R. and Dickson-Gomez, J. (2019) ‘Gender Attitudes, Sexual Risk, Intimate Partner Violence, and Coercive Sex Among Adolescent Gang Members’, *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 64(5), pp. 648–656.

⁴⁷ PCC [Breaking Barriers](#): A report into gang affected females in Nottingham : An evaluation of coercion , consent and potential harm’.

⁴⁸ Children’s Commissioner “[It’s wrong-but you get used to it](#)”: a qualitative study of gang-associated sexual violence towards, and exploitation of, young people in England.. 2013, p23.

⁴⁹ PCC [Breaking Barriers](#): A report into gang affected females in Nottingham : An evaluation of coercion , consent and potential harm’.

those exploited are subjected to sexual violence control as part of county lines offending⁵⁰

2.4 Impact of coronavirus

The NCA says “lockdowns have likely contributed to a continued rise in...county lines offending”.⁵¹ There are multiple potential factors driving this, including:

- Children spending more time online. This has given OCGs more opportunities to recruit children into county lines drug dealing.⁵²
- Absence from school. This has reduced or removed the positive influence of teachers.⁵³
- Ability of county lines OCGs to adapt to the new environment.⁵⁴

There has been some success disrupting county lines drug dealing during the pandemic. Fewer train passengers made it easier for the police to identify exploited children using the railway network. However, this has pushed county lines into private vehicles with drug exchanges happening locally or in in supermarket car parks where people traffic has been consistently higher.⁵⁵

Some areas have reported lower rates for missing children, but those who were missing were missing for longer. The University of Nottingham’s Rights Lab believe this is because of increased levels of cuckooing (a practice whereby drug dealers take over the home of a vulnerable person and use it as a base for their operation) with children and young people forced to stay in trap houses for longer.⁵⁶

⁵⁰ [Hansard](#) 6th October 2020.

⁵¹ NCA, [National Strategic Assessment of Serious and Organised Crime 2021](#), undated, para 60

⁵² Children’s Commissioner [Still not safe: The public health approach to youth violence](#), February 2021, p4

⁵³ Office for the Police and Crime Commissioner in Gwent [Understanding the Triggers](#)

⁵⁴ Children’s commissioner [Still not safe. The public health approach to youth violence](#), 2021, p3; NCA, [National Strategic Assessment of Serious and Organised Crime 2021](#), undated, para 89

⁵⁵ University of West London, [Researcher explores how county lines gangs are adapting to Covid-19 lockdown](#), 7 May 2020

⁵⁶ University of Nottingham Right’s Lab, [The Impact of COVID 19 on Child Criminal Exploitation](#), October 2020

3 Government response

3.1 Beating Crime Plan

The Government's [Beating Crime Plan](#) (published July 2021) outlines its strategy for cutting homicide, serious violence and neighbourhood crime. The plan recognises that serious violence is “often concentrated around ‘hotspots’”, “often driven by drugs” and “disproportionately involve(s) repeat offenders.”⁵⁷ It therefore proposes targeting interventions to the places and people most at risk of serious violence.

Many of the Beating Crime Plan's policy commitments concerning serious violence have their origins in the Government's 2018 [Serious Violence Strategy](#). That strategy set out the previous Conservative Government's commitment to combat county lines drug dealing through a combination of greater enforcement and early intervention with at risk young people.

National “directional measures”

The Beating Crime Plan sets “reducing serious violence” and “disrupting drugs supply and county lines” as two of the six priority areas for the police. The Government is monitoring the following metrics for these priority areas and expecting to see “significant improvements” within three years.⁵⁸

- Hospital admissions of under 25s for assault with sharp object.
- Offences involving discharge of a firearm.
- Drug-related homicides.
- Police referrals into drug treatment.

Drug strategy

The Government commissioned Dame Carol Black to conduct a review of drugs in February 2019. Dame Carol conducted the review in two phases. [Phase one](#) (published in February 2020) provides “detailed analysis of the challenges posed by drug supply and demand, including the ways in which drugs fuel serious violence”. [Phase two](#) (published in July 2021) focused on prevention, treatment and recovery.

The Government published its [response to Dame Carol Black's review of drugs](#) alongside its Beating Crime Plan. It says it is “determined to go further and be

⁵⁷ UK Government, [Beating Crime Plan](#), July 2021, p16

⁵⁸ Home Office, [National Crime and Policing Measures](#), undated

more innovative to address the complex relationships between drugs, crime, poor health outcomes and deprivation in our communities”. The response commits the Government to publishing a new drugs strategy by the end of 2021. The [last Drugs Strategy](#) was published in 2017. The Government has also committed to publish a “national outcomes framework with the purpose of setting out a clear set of measurable goals for the combating drugs programme across government”.⁵⁹ It says it will report to Parliament annually on its progress. The first report will be delivered in 2022 (a year after the publication of the new drugs strategy).

3.2 Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill

The [Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill](#) is a wide-ranging Government Bill that would make significant changes across the criminal justice system. At the time of writing, the Bill has recently been considered by the House of Lords and is due to be returned to the House of Commons. The Libraries of both Houses have published extensive briefing papers on the Bill which can be found by navigating through the [Bill’s publications](#) on Parliament’s website.

Three of the Bill’s provisions relate to the Government’s response to serious violence and county lines drug dealing:

- **Part 2, Chapter 1** would introduce a new legal duty requiring local public authorities to collaborate and plan to prevent and reduce serious violence.
- **Part 2, Chapter 2** would require police, local authorities and clinical commissioning groups (public health boards in Wales) to conduct Offensive Weapon Homicide Reviews when an adult’s death involves the use of an offensive weapon. Offensive Weapon Homicide Reviews would be similar to Domestic Homicide Reviews. DHRs are carried out when an adult dies as a result of domestic violence, abuse or neglect.

These provisions relate to the Government’s public health approach to serious violence (see below).

- **Part 10, Chapter 1** would introduce Serious Violence Reduction Orders (SVROs). The courts would be able to apply an SVRO to offenders whose offence involved an offensive weapon. Once applied, the SVRO would require the offender to provide information to the police (name, address, changes to address, etc.) and could impose on the offender additional requirements of prohibitions. Where someone is subject to an SVRO, a constable would be entitled to search them without reasonable grounds

⁵⁹ Department of Health & Social Care and Home Office, [Government response to the independent review of drugs by Dame Carol Black](#), July 2021

for the purposes of ascertaining whether the offender has a bladed article or offensive weapon.

This builds on recent Government activity which has supported stronger enforcement to tackle serious violence (see below).

3.3 Stronger enforcement

In recent years the Government has supported increased enforcement to tackle county lines. It has invested £65 million in county lines policing operations since November 2019 and a further £28 million into Project ADDER.⁶⁰ Project ADDER brings together the police, local councils and health services in the areas with the highest rates of drug misuse (currently being piloted in Blackpool, Hastings, Middlesbrough, Norwich and Swansea). The funding ensures that the police can dedicate resources to tackling local gang leaders whilst other services better support those addicted in the area.

Alongside investment in policing the Government has encouraged enforcement activity by relaxing stop and search guidance and introducing new offences relating to offensive weapons.

Relaxing voluntary guidance concerning pre-condition search powers

The police have a variety of powers to stop and search individuals and vehicles. Their search powers allow them to allay or confirm their suspicions without making an arrest. Most police stop and search powers require officers to have “reasonable grounds” to suspect the person they are searching has the item they are searching for. However, there is a power which allows senior officers to authorise “no suspicion” searches to support the investigation of serious violence. These searches are known as “pre-condition searches” because senior officers must satisfy themselves that certain conditions have been met to authorise them.

In March 2019 the Government announced that it was no longer asking the eight forces which police areas affected by serious violence to follow [best use of stop and search guidance](#) (BUSS) on the authorisation of pre-condition searches.⁶¹ In August 2019, following Boris Johnson’s appointment as Prime Minister, this was extended to all English and Welsh forces.⁶² Commenting on the relaxation of BUSS guidance, Home Secretary Priti Patel said stop and search is a vital tool in combatting the scourge of serious violence and keeping people safe”.⁶³ The Library has discussed the change in guidance and

⁶⁰ Home Office, [£148 million to cut drugs crime](#), 20 January 2021

⁶¹ Home Office, [Greater powers for police to use stop and search to tackle violent crime](#), March 2019

⁶² Home Office, [Government lifts emergency stop and search restrictions](#), 11 August 2019

⁶³ Ibid

the impact of stop and search in detail in the paper [police powers: stop and search](#).

Offensive Weapons Act 2019

The Offensive Weapons Act 2019 (OWA) introduced new restrictions on the online sale of bladed articles, introduced [Knife Crime Prevention Orders \(KCPOs\)](#) and created a new offence associated with the possession of flick/gravity knives. The [Library's briefing](#) on the Act provides more details. A surrender scheme for the knives it is now illegal to possess closed on 1 March 2021.⁶⁴ However, the OWA's provisions relating to KCPOs and restrictions on the online sale of knives have not come into force. The commencement of these provisions has been delayed by the coronavirus pandemic.⁶⁵ KCPOs are now being piloted by the Metropolitan Police (the pilot commenced in July 2021).⁶⁶

3.4 Public health approach to serious violence

As part of the implementation of the [Serious Violence Strategy](#) the Government gradually adopted the term “public health approach” to describe its serious violence prevention policies. The Government has:

- Invested £105.5 million to fund eighteen [Violence Reduction Units](#) in areas “worst affected by violent crime” up to March 2022.⁶⁷
- Made £200 million available over ten years to the [Youth Endowment Fund \(YEF\)](#). The YEF funds early intervention projects across England and Wales. The YEF will invest up to £30 million via two grant rounds in 2021.⁶⁸
- Investing £17m in early intervention in hospital to support those admitted to A&E with a knife injury or following contact with police.⁶⁹
- Investing over “£45 million to in specialist teams in both mainstream schools and Alternative Provision in serious violence hotspots to support young people at risk of involvement in violence to re-engage in education.”⁷⁰

The [Library's briefing on Part 2 of the PCSC Bill](#) provides further information on Violence Reduction Units and the YEF.

⁶⁴ Home Office, [Offensive Weapons Act surrender and compensation scheme](#), 10 December 2020

⁶⁵ PQ100312: [Knives: Sales](#), 22 March 2021; HC Deb, [Knife crime](#), 14 December 2020, cc7

⁶⁶ PQ173177: [Knives: Crime](#), 12 June 2021

⁶⁷ Home Office, [Additional £35 million for Violence Reduction Units](#), 29 December 2019; HM Govt, [Beating Crime Plan](#), July 2021, p6

⁶⁸ UK Government, [Beating Crime Plan](#), July 2021, p26

⁶⁹ Ibid, p6

⁷⁰ Ibid

What is a public health approach?

A public health approach focuses on the health, safety and wellbeing of entire populations. It is multi-disciplinary and should involve different services working together. A public health approach looks for short and long-term solutions to health problems using data and evidence.⁷¹

A public health approach to violence recognises violence is a public health problem. Typically, it seeks to identify what is causing individuals to become violent. This information is used to design, implement and evaluate interventions intended to stop violence occurring.⁷²

Support for a public health approach to violence

There is broad support for adopting a public health approach to serious violence. The cross-party Youth Violence Commission has supported the adoption of a public health approach since 2018.⁷³ The Home Affairs Select Committee have “welcomed” the Government’s adoption of a public health approach.⁷⁴ Labour Party spokespeople have said a “genuine public health approach” to violence “does work”.⁷⁵ The Local Government Association says early council work to implement a public health approach to violence has shown “signs of promise”.⁷⁶ College of Policing research has found that “public health approaches” have a “positive impact” on knife crime.⁷⁷

⁷¹ Public Health England, [A whole-system multi-agency approach to serious violence prevention](#), October 2019, p14

⁷² Public Health England, [A whole-system multi-agency approach to serious violence prevention](#), October 2019, p16

⁷³ Youth Violence Commission, [Youth Violence Commission: Final Report](#), July 2020, p12

⁷⁴ Home Affairs Committee, [Serious youth violence: Sixteenth Report of Session 2017–19](#), April 2019, para 28

⁷⁵ Labour, [Passing responsibility on violent youth crime won't work – Diane Abbott](#), April 2019

⁷⁶ Local Government Association, [Taking a public health approach to tackling serious violent crime: Case studies](#), July 2020, p3

⁷⁷ College of Policing, [Knife crime evidence briefing](#), January 2020, p6

4 Police response

4.1 How is the police response to county lines organised?

Three key police actors work together to combat county lines: the National Crime Agency (NCA), Regional Organised Crime Units (ROCU) and police forces.

The NCA

The National Crime Agency (NCA) is responsible for leading the UK's response to serious and organised crime. The NCA's focus concerning county lines is disrupting the financing and supply chains of county lines drug dealers.⁷⁸

The NCA runs the **National County Lines Coordination Centre (NCLCC)**. The NCLCC collects, analyses and disseminates intelligence on county lines to police forces.⁷⁹ The NCA can use its [tasking powers](#) to require forces to act on the intelligence gathered by the NCLCC. For example, in October 2018 the NCA used these powers to require forces take action against 21 known county lines networks. This work resulted in "significant arrests".⁸⁰

The NCLCC also provides them with provides tactical support to forces including operational advice and training and development.⁸¹

ROCU

Regional Organised Crime Units (ROCU) provide specialist policing capabilities to the forces in their area. They can assist force level investigations or lead regional investigations into county lines line holders.

Police forces

Police forces are ultimately responsible for detecting and investigating crime in their area. The main exporting forces for county lines drug dealers (Metropolitan Police, Merseyside Police, West Midlands Police and British Transport Police) have used Home Office funding to establish dedicated

⁷⁸ NCA, NPCC & ROCUs, [NCLCC County Lines Strategic Assessment 2020/21](#), undated, p41

⁷⁹ HMICFRS, [Both sides of the coin: The police and National Crime Agency's response to vulnerable people in 'county lines' drug offending](#), January 2020, p10

⁸⁰ Ibid, p19

⁸¹ Ibid, p10

county lines taskforce teams.⁸² The [2020/21 strategic assessment of county lines activities](#) (published by the NCA) describes the work of these teams (see section three).

There are several legal remedies police officers (and others where relevant) can use to disrupt county lines and serious violent activity. The Government has provided some guidance to help law enforcement including a [child exploitation disruption toolkit](#) and guidance on criminal exploitation of [children and vulnerable adults in county lines](#).

4.2 Inspection report

As part of its [Serious Violence Strategy](#) (published April 2018) the Government asked Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS) to inspect the police response to county lines offending. HMICFRS published its report [Both sides of the coin The police and National Crime Agency's response to vulnerable people in 'county lines' drug offending](#) in January 2020. The report concluded that forces "don't understand enough about county lines criminality to tackle it as effectively as possible".⁸³ The inspectors said that forces:

- inconsistently identified vulnerable people involved in county lines.
- did not prioritise attention on county lines.
- could improve how they work together and with their local partners to combat county lines.
- were not using drug dealing telecommunication restriction orders effectively. The inspectorate recommended the NCA coordinate the application of these orders.

Drug dealing telecommunication restriction orders

Senior police officers can apply to the courts for a drug dealing telecommunication orders (DDTROs) to be applied to a drug dealer's phone service. The courts can apply a DDTRO when they are satisfied that the phone in question has been or has likely to have been/to be used in connection with drug dealing offences and it reasonable grounds to believe that an order would prevent the use of the phone for drug dealing. Once applied mobile service providers must deny phone service to the relevant phone number.⁸⁴

⁸² NCA, NPCC & ROCUs, [NCLCC County Lines Strategic Assessment 2020/21](#), undated, p2

⁸³ HMICFRS, [Police response to violence against women and girls: Final inspection report](#), 17 September 2021, p3

⁸⁴ The Drug Dealing Telecommunications Restriction Orders Regulations 2017; HMICFRS, [Both sides of the coin: The police and National Crime Agency's response to vulnerable people in 'county lines' drug offending](#), January 2020, p29

Response

The police have made changes to their approach to county lines following the HMICFRS inspection. This has been supported by Government funding for county lines enforcement activity (see section 3.3 of this paper). The Metropolitan Police Service, Merseyside Police, West Midlands Police and the British Transport Police were able to set up dedicated “county lines taskforce teams” with Home Office funding.⁸⁵ The NCLCC has also taken on a key strategic role. It has published guidance on county lines recording which has improved intelligence on deal lines.⁸⁶ It has also created a dedicated DDTR team.⁸⁷

The police themselves say they have made “huge inroads” in tackling county lines. They say this has been possible “due to the enormous efforts across policing, the regions, the NCA and partner agencies”.⁸⁸

The Government says county lines enforcement action since 2019 has resulted in “more than 1,100 lines closed, over 6,300 arrests, and more than 1,900 vulnerable adults and children safeguarded”.⁸⁹

The improved police response to county lines has also been praised by HMICFRS. It says the police have benefited from a...

...clearer focus, better funding, a relentless pursuit of perpetrators and a clear sense that these are urgent national policing priorities.⁹⁰

HMICFRS has called on the police and Government to model their response to violence against women and girls on the success disrupting county lines drug dealing.

4.3

Modern slavery legislation

The Modern Slavery Act 2015 includes two substantive offences: “human trafficking” and “slavery, servitude and forced compulsory labour”.⁹¹

Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) guidance encourages prosecutors to consider prosecuting county lines cases under the Modern Slavery Act “in circumstances where there has been deliberate targeting, recruitment and significant exploitation of young and vulnerable people”. However, it also

⁸⁵ NCA, NPCC & ROCUs, [NCLCC County Lines Strategic Assessment 2020/21](#), undated, p2

⁸⁶ Ibid, P8

⁸⁷ [PQ36809: Drugs: Organised Crime](#), 20 July 2021

⁸⁸ NCA, NPCC & ROCUs, [NCLCC County Lines Strategic Assessment 2020/21](#), undated, p2

⁸⁹ [PQ36809: Drugs: Organised Crime](#), 20 July 2021

⁹⁰ HMICFRS, [Police response to violence against women and girls: Final inspection report](#), 17 September 2021

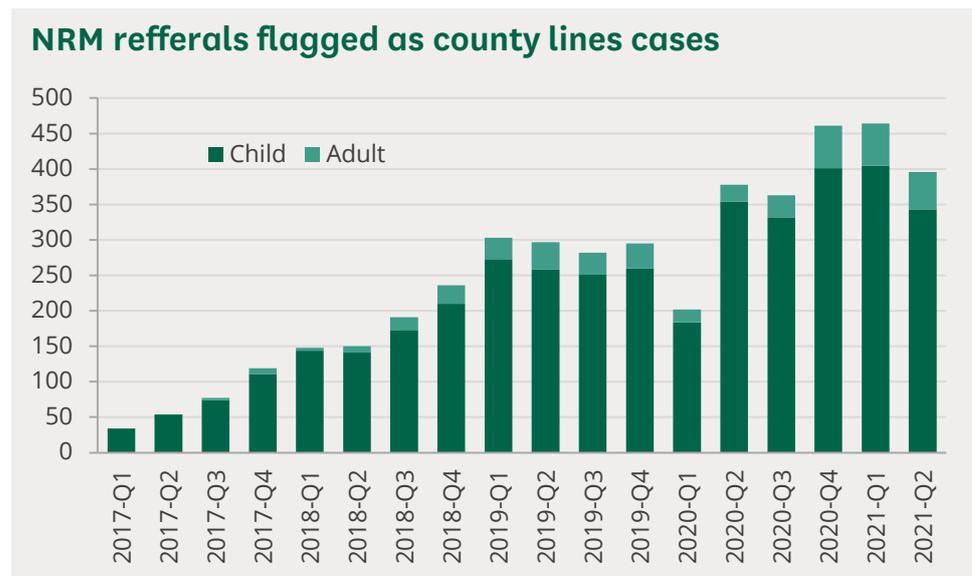
⁹¹ [s1-s4](#), Modern Slavery Act 2015

says prosecutors should be “alert to the challenge of securing a conviction for a Modern Slavery Act offence”.⁹²

Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS) has said forces should pursue modern slavery offences “whenever possible in county lines cases, because they better reflect how vulnerable people are being exploited”.⁹³ The NCA says law enforcement partners are increasing their focus on “the vulnerable that are being exploited” by county lines. It says law enforcement will pursue “modern day slavery changes where appropriate” against those operating county lines drug gangs.⁹⁴

Duty to notify

Those investigating county lines cases must follow [statutory guidance on identifying and supporting victims of Modern Slavery](#) when they believe someone involved in county lines is a victim of modern slavery.⁹⁵ This provides guidance on identifying victims and the duty to notify the Secretary of State of victims. The “duty to notify” is organised through the [National Referral Mechanism](#). In 2020 (the last full year of data) there were 1,404 modern slavery referrals flagged as county lines cases; 1,271 of which were children.



Section 45 defence

[Section 45](#) of the Modern Slavery Act 2015 provides victims of modern slavery a statutory defence. HMICFRS says the availability of the defence “may

⁹² CPS, [Human Trafficking, Smuggling and Slavery](#): Children: Modern Slavery and Drug Offences, April 2020

⁹³ HMICFRS, [Both sides of the coin: The police and National Crime Agency’s response to vulnerable people in ‘county lines’ drug offending](#), January 2020, p5

⁹⁴ NCA, NPCC & ROCUs, [NCLCC County Lines Strategic Assessment 2020/21](#), undated, p3

⁹⁵ Home Office, [Modern Slavery: Statutory Guidance for England and Wales \(under s49 of the Modern Slavery Act 2015\) and Non-Statutory Guidance for Scotland and Northern Ireland](#), June 2021, para 9.40

increase the risk exploitation” because county lines operators are instructing runners to raise the defence if caught, telling them that it will ensure they are not charged with drug dealing offences. HMICFRS said this was giving vulnerable people a “false sense of security”.⁹⁶

Police forces have reported an increase use of the section 45 defence. The service is now adapting its approach to county lines cases accordingly. The NCA has identified that

Best practise relating to the section 45 defence is for investigators to remain alive to it, considering all material in an investigation. Investigators must ensure that if the investigation strategy determines that a defendant has wilfully committed an offence, and therefore the Section 45 defence should not apply, police must ensure they conduct all relevant enquires, at the earliest opportunity to ensure a robust rebuttal of the defence can be made if necessary.⁹⁷

Operation Orochi

Operation Orochi is a Metropolitan Police Service (MPS) investigation unit. Its objective is to identify, arrest and charge county lines line holders. Pursuing modern slavery charges is a key aspect of the Operation Orochi’s approach. Investigators in Operation Orochi focus on demonstrating exploitation and trafficking through communications evidence rather than victim testimony.⁹⁸

Operation Orochi has arrested at least 300-line holders.⁹⁹ They have also successfully secured prosecutions for modern slavery offences. In July 2021, following an Operation Orochi investigation, five men were sentenced for their involvement in the ‘Gino Line’. Four of the men were convicted of human trafficking offences.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁶ HMICFRS, [Both sides of the coin: The police and National Crime Agency’s response to vulnerable people in ‘county lines’ drug offending](#), January 2020, p32

⁹⁷ NCA, NPCC & ROCUs, [NCLCC County Lines Strategic Assessment 2020/21](#), undated, p30

⁹⁸ NCA, NPCC & ROCUs, [NCLCC County Lines Strategic Assessment 2020/21](#), undated, p14-17

⁹⁹ Ibid, p15

¹⁰⁰ MPS, [County lines gang jailed for trafficking and exploiting a child as a drug runner](#), 31 July 2021

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