

County lines: information for parents





Introduction

As young people become more independent and spend more time with their peers and away from home, parents might worry about them becoming involved in drug dealing and violence associated with “county lines”. For many young people, becoming involved in county lines happens because they are being exploited by others.



This leaflet provides parents with information on county lines, the signs that your child may be being exploited and what to do to get help.



What is county lines and criminal exploitation?

County lines is when gangs and organised crime groups exploit children to transport and sell drugs, normally between big cities where the exploiters are based to smaller towns, sometimes across county boundaries but also locally and within the borough. The children have dedicated mobile phone 'lines' for taking orders for drugs; children are used as they are less likely to be stopped by police, allowing adult dealers to avoid the risk of arrest.

County lines is a form of criminal exploitation; this occurs where a person or a group of people takes advantage of their contact with and influence over a young person to coerce or manipulate them into carrying out a criminal act.

Other examples of criminal exploitation are:



benefit fraud



forced theft



forced begging



cannabis cultivation



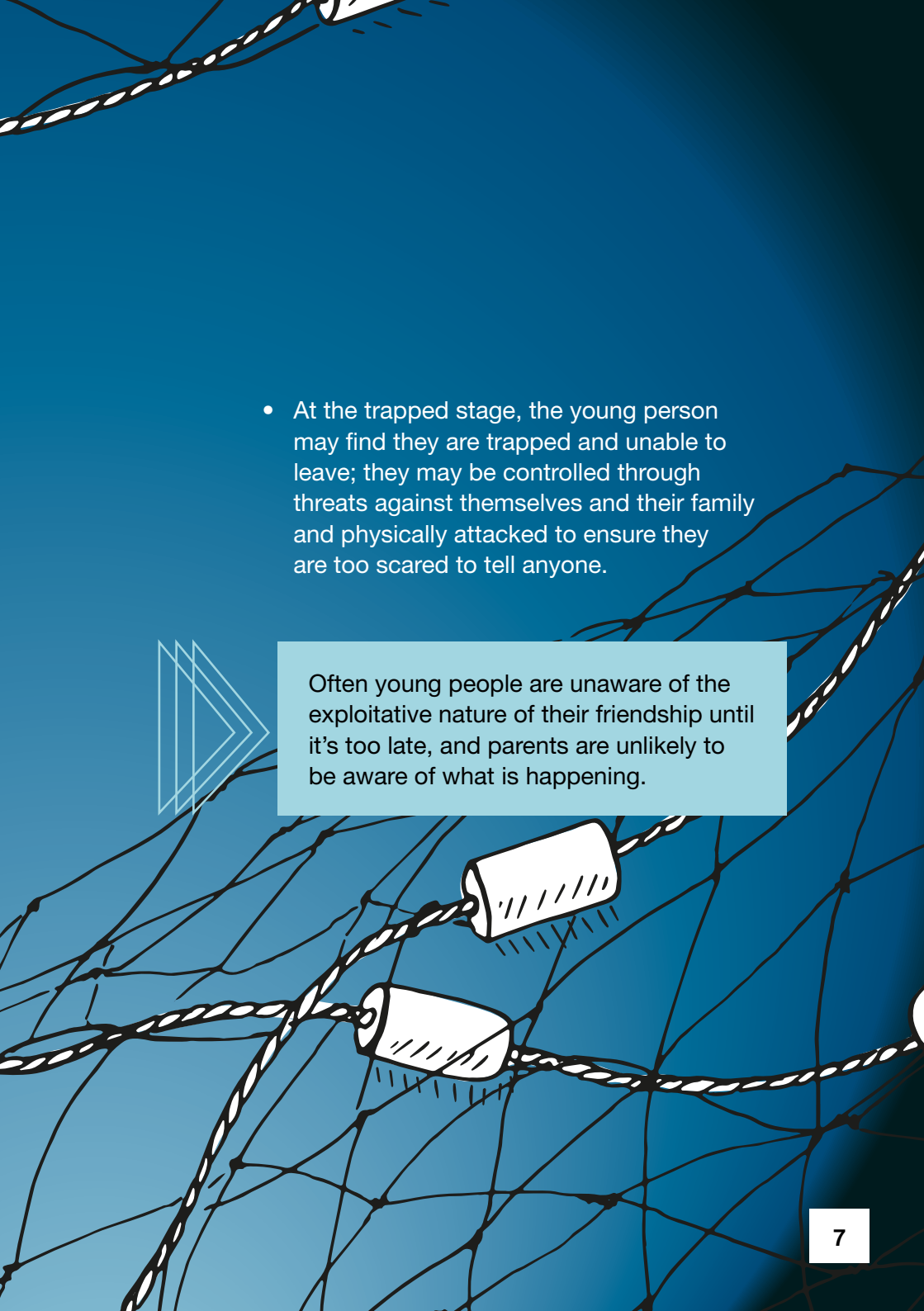
money mule (where the young person's bank account is used by others for money laundering).

The background of the page is a deep blue color. It features several white fishing floats, which are cylindrical with a pointed top and a small hole at the bottom. These floats are attached to dark brown fishing lines that form a net. The lines are drawn with simple, sketchy strokes, giving the illustration a hand-drawn appearance. The floats are positioned at various points: one near the top right, one on the left side, and one near the bottom right. The overall composition suggests a theme of catching or trapping, which metaphorically relates to the text about recruitment and grooming.

How do young people become involved?

Young people may be recruited for county lines and other forms of criminal exploitation by a process of grooming:

- At the targeting stage, the exploiter befriends the young person and gains their trust. Young people may also be recruited through social media and/or through their peer group
- At the experience stage, the young person is initiated into the lifestyle by being offered gifts, money, drugs or alcohol as a way of gaining control over them.
- At the hooked stage, the young person becomes more involved in criminal activities and taking on more responsibility within the group. Young people may initially feel like they are undertaking activities by choice.

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- At the trapped stage, the young person may find they are trapped and unable to leave; they may be controlled through threats against themselves and their family and physically attacked to ensure they are too scared to tell anyone.



Often young people are unaware of the exploitative nature of their friendship until it's too late, and parents are unlikely to be aware of what is happening.



What are the risks?

The nature of county lines means that young people may be at risk from a number of issues:

- Young people may have to travel long distances to places they do not know, visiting or staying at unsafe properties (trap houses or bandos) to deliver and/or sell drugs and return the proceeds of the sale. They may be missing from home for several days as a result.
- Exploiters are known to stage “muggings” where young people are robbed of these drugs or money and can be subsequently punished through violence; this is to instil fear and create a debt to the exploiter. The use of threats and violence to control young people is a major feature of county lines exploitation.
- County lines exploitation is often carried out by organised crime gangs and the young person may need to become a member of this gang.
- Many young people who are being exploited through involvement in county lines will carry knives and weapons for protection, raising the risk of serious injury or being a perpetrator of a serious assault.



Possible signs a young person is being exploited

Some parents of young people who have been exploited through county lines involvement have reported that they went through a sudden change in behaviour. Possible indicators of involvement include:

Unexplained money, clothes or gifts

Having several mobile phones, balaclavas, weapons or digital scales

Frequent, unexplained phone calls, seeming edgy and anxious after receiving calls and texts

dropping old friends, hobbies and interests

having a new friendship circle including older youth/adults

unexplained injuries

carrying
weapons

not going to
school/college

appearing in
online (music)
videos with
weapons

returning from
being away from
home looking
tired and dirty

staying out
overnight or going
missing for days

being in trouble
with the police
and/or found in
possession of
drugs

sudden and
uncharacteristic
changes in behaviour
or interests (e.g.
interests in postcodes,
boundaries)

being found in an
area or at an address
a distance from home
that they have no
connection with

What do you do?

As a parent, it is important to remember that you are not to blame and that although your child may be breaking the law, they are a victim of their exploiters. Here are some of the things you could do:



Talk to your child

Stay calm, ask them questions about what's going on, tell them that you want to help them and keep them safe; try to get them to see the reality of their situation; be open, honest and non-judgemental; remember they may be scared.

Report if necessary

If you have any concerns that your child is being exploited by criminals, you should report this to the Police as this can help them end the situation; remember, they are victims and should be treated as such. If your child stays away from home you should report them as missing to the Police immediately. If you are worried about your child's safety report these fears to the Children and Families Contact Service.

Gather evidence

If your child is picked up in a car or has rail or bus tickets, keep a record of these for the Police.

Get help and support from professionals and organisations

Talk to other parents who have gone through the same thing. Talk to your child's school – they may have more information about what's going on.

If your child is facing criminal charges and you believe they are being exploited by others, they may have a legal defence to those charges under the Modern Slavery Act; it may be a good idea to get legal advice on this.



To report concerns call the Children and Families Contact Service on **020 7974 3317**

Notes

For more information visit the following:

The Children's Society

www.childrenssociety.org.uk/what-we-do/our-work/tackling-criminal-exploitation-and-county-lines/county-lines-resources

Safe4me

www.safe4me.co.uk/portfolio/child-criminal-exploitation-county-lines

NSPCC

www.nspcc.org.uk/what-is-child-abuse/types-of-abuse/gangs-criminal-exploitation

National Crime Agency

www.nationalcrimeagency.gov.uk/what-we-do/crime-threats/drug-trafficking/county-lines

