

# How to spot

## County Lines exploitation

And where to go for help



A guide for parents, carers  
and people working with children

**Modern slavery takes many forms, including child exploitation, which is a growing problem in the UK\*.**

**This guide aims to help parents and carers spot County Lines exploitation and know how to get help.**

**Here are nine things you need to know about County Lines to help keep children safe.**

## 1. What is County Lines?

County Lines describes the mobile phone lines used by criminal gangs to organise illegal drugs to be moved and sold from one village, town or city to another across the UK.

Children are most often used to move and sell the drugs. They are recruited by gang members who pose as friends and then trap the young people into a terrifying cycle of violence, exploitation and abuse.

Children caught up in County Lines are not criminals – they are victims of exploitation at the hands of organised criminal gangs.

## 2. County Lines is big business

The criminals who run County Lines operations turn over huge amounts of drugs and money. The organised criminal gang leaders know the law inside out and they adapt their operations in response to police activity, moving from location to location to avoid detection. Using children to sell drugs acts like a smoke screen – children travelling on public transport can easily go under the radar.

For the children themselves, selling the drugs is easy – there is a constant demand for the commonly sold drugs: heroin, cocaine and ecstasy, as well as skunk and other forms of cannabis. There is an element of status and kudos that goes along with selling drugs, not to mention a lot of cash – up to £5k per day can be made by a good “runner” or “road man” selling drugs.

\* In 2020 Government figures report that 47% of potential victims of modern slavery said they were exploited as children. [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/970995/modern-slavery-national-referral-mechanism-statistics-end-year-summary-2020-hosb0821.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/970995/modern-slavery-national-referral-mechanism-statistics-end-year-summary-2020-hosb0821.pdf)  
Unseen's Modern Slavery & Exploitation Helpline also experienced an increased number of contacts concerning children – 10% of all contacts made in 2020, up from 7% in 2019 [www.modernslaveryhelpline.org/uploads/2021/04/07114600907.pdf](http://www.modernslaveryhelpline.org/uploads/2021/04/07114600907.pdf).

Any child from any background can be at risk of County Lines grooming



### 3. Who is at risk?

Without support to keep themselves safe, any child, from any type of social background, can be at risk of County Lines grooming.

Common risk factors include children who have special educational needs, or mental health challenges, those who are being bullied or have been excluded from school, children in care and those who need but have been denied or have not yet accessed, support.

In addition, children growing up in chaotic family situations including domestic violence, neglect or abuse, unstable housing and/or substance or alcohol misuse in the home are at higher risk of being targeted by County Lines gangs.

While gangs often target vulnerable children, this is not the full picture. Children from all classes and all backgrounds are at risk. There can be an additional financial incentive for exploiters to recruit middle class children. Often due to feelings of shame and embarrassment, middle class families will try to settle the situation themselves.

For example, Unseen is aware of instances where families pay a ransom to release their child from the gang – only to find that the gang doesn't keep its end of the bargain. Instead, the exploiters intimidate the family and continue to extort money from the parents in order to keep their child "safe", while the young person continues to be forced to transport and sell drugs all over the country.

### 4. How are children recruited into County Lines?

Gang members groom children as young as 11, from all socio-economic backgrounds, and in particular teenage boys – although a growing number of girls and young women are being caught up in County Lines, too.

A gang member will befriend the young person, buying them gifts like designer trainers, expensive clothing and food. They will spend a lot of time with them, making them feel

special and give them a high status within the group. The gang member will take as much time as needed to build trust.

Once trust is achieved, a common recruitment tactic involves a staged mugging. The victim will be entrusted with something of value, for example a watch, belonging to the gang member. They will then be mugged, losing the watch. The gang member will get angry, possibly violent, when they find out their watch has been “stolen”. They will then tell the victim they need to pay back the value of the watch, and give them packages to deliver.

These packages will usually contain drugs and the child will become trapped in a cycle of forced criminal exploitation. This often begins by being told to deliver packages, and often extends into selling the drugs contained in the packages, travelling across the UK on public transport at all times of day and night.

## 5. Why don't young people leave County Lines?

Children will be rewarded by County Lines gangs' high-status items, like designer clothes, jewellery and enough cash to give them an increased feeling of status among their peers outside the gang. There is a lot of money to be made, and this access to cash can be a strong incentive to stay.

However, behind closed doors, gang members will also use ruthless tactics to keep children trapped and controlled. Physical and mental abuse of the victim is common along with threats of violence or death to their family members if they try to leave the gang.

Despite this fact, child victims may not even realise that they are being exploited. They may believe that the members of the gang are their friends and that they are being looked after.

## 6. Is it only boys who are targeted?

Increasingly young girls are being groomed as “girlfriends” of gang members, only to suffer sexual exploitation as their “boyfriend” pimps them out to other gang members as a favour or an element of coercive control to keep young men hooked in the criminal exploitation.

The web of coercive control and exploitation is complex, tangled and very difficult to escape without help.

## 7. How to spot the signs

It can be hard sometimes to know if a child is just being a typical teenager, or whether there is something to be concerned about.

The list of signs below gives an indication of what to look out for. No single item on the list necessarily suggests there is a problem. You might not observe every single item either. However, if you are experiencing two or more of the items on this list, then you should consider seeking help.



**More than one phone**



**Gang affiliations**



**Large amounts of cash**



**Lots of travel tickets**



**New, expensive belongings**



**Becoming withdrawn and secretive**



**Staying out regularly with "friends"**



**Challenging, manipulative or aggressive behaviour**



**Unexplained absences at school**



**Regularly going missing without explanation**



**Presence of unexplained items (knife, dongles, cash)**



**Sudden change in appearance and/or language usage**



**Drug paraphernalia (baggies, cling film, scales, baby wipes)**

Children caught up in County Lines are not criminals – they are victims of exploitation



## 8. How to talk to a child/young person who you think may be at risk of County Lines

- **Try taking an indirect approach to raise your concerns.**

You could say a friend at work was talking about child exploitation/County Lines/gangs and give a few details – for example you could describe what County Lines is, or talk about the ways gangs groom children and make it hard for them to walk away. You could ask whether your child knows about it. Do they think any of their friends or school mates might be involved and need help?

- **Alternatively, you could choose a quiet time and ask directly.**

Ask them if you can talk. Tell them that you care about them and you are worried that they are showing signs of being caught up in some activity that might not be safe.

Let them know that you can help them, that you understand they might be frightened but that you are there to help them make different choices if they want to and you will help them, and the rest of your family, to stay safe, no matter what is going on.

Remember, your child may be being coerced into doing things they feel embarrassed or uncomfortable about. The control mechanisms used by gangs are sophisticated. So much so that your child may not think they are being exploited.

They might believe they are being respected and looked out for by gang members. They might feel pleased to have their own money and associated belongings. They might reject the idea that people in the gang are not their friends.

If your child reacts with anger or other strong emotions, reiterate that you are there to help them and they can talk to you if they ever need to. They might be very worried about your safety if they tell the truth or ask for help. It might take them a while to decide to tell you what is happening. So try to stay calm and open and let your child know that you are always there.

## 9. How to get help



Call the Modern Slavery & Exploitation Helpline on

 **08000 121 700**

You can also report online at  
**[www.modernslaveryhelpline.org](http://www.modernslaveryhelpline.org)**

The Helpline is free, confidential, open 24 hours a day and available in more than 200 languages.

Unseen's expert call advisors are trained to provide emotional and practical support regarding County Lines exploitation. Calls are also anonymous unless callers want to share their identity.

Please be aware that if calls concern a child under the age of 18 and there is a clear and significant risk to them, the Helpline has a legal obligation to refer information about the young person to the local safeguarding board or to the police, where there is enough identifying information to do so.

And remember, children caught up in County Lines are not criminals – they are victims of exploitation at the hands of organised criminal gangs.

### Other sources of help:

- In an emergency call **999**.
- If you see something suspicious on a train, text **British Transport Police** on **61016**.
- To connect with other parents who have experience of County Lines, contact:
  - **Pace (Parents Against Child Exploitation)** [www.paceuk.info](http://www.paceuk.info)
  - **St Giles Trust** [www.stgilestrust.org.uk](http://www.stgilestrust.org.uk)