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Vulnerable' kids going country: Children and young people's involvement in county lines drug dealing

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Keywords: adverse childhood experiences, county lines, drug dealing, gangs, human trafficking, safeguarding, vulnerable young people

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This article employs a range of sources to critically explore the role of children and young people in county lines drug dealing, the potential harms they are exposed to and the difficulties of protecting them. As county lines centre upon the movement and exploitation of vulnerable peoples, we utilise the human trafficking literature for further insights into the dynamics of county lines and current policy responses. The article concludes by discussing the challenges of safeguarding young people, particularly that over-worked and under-resourced frontline practitioners can experience difficulties identifying the vulnerability of young people caught up in county lines, particularly beneath their tough exteriors.

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Introduction

In January 2017, Councillor Joe Calouri of Islington wrote a letter warning the Home Secretary that the exploitation of children and young people as drug couriers and dealers in county lines drug dealing could be the next ‘grooming scandal’ (Islington Gazette, 2017). He later emphasised the need to urgently ‘work together on this to safeguard vulnerable young people’ (cited in Wright, 2017).

County lines drug dealing is a new, and rapidly evolving, drug supply model which sees urban drug dealers cross police borders to exploit provincial drug markets. County lines activity is defined as out-of-town dealers (OTD) ‘from a large urban area travelling to smaller locations (such as a county or coastal town) to sell class A drugs, specifically crack cocaine and heroin’ (NCA, 2017:5). The rise of county lines activity represents a new departure for British drug markets. Historically, the UKs major cities have served as national supply ‘hubs’ which provide bulk amounts to mid-level distributors in smaller cities and towns some distance from themselves (NCA, 2016; see Pearson and Hobbs, 2001). Drugs would be transported from these regional hubs to be sold by local wholesalers and filtered into the local retail market through transactions undertaken by local lower-level retail sellers (Matrix Knowledge Group, 2007) and ‘user-dealers’; often ‘born and bred’ in the area (May et al., 2005). County lines conversely

involve operators in hub cities travelling to towns and cities within a wide radius of their home area. Not only do they deliver their product to that location as a 'weight' for wholesale, but they also retail it there using a combination of controlled and controlling young sellers from the urban hub, as well as vulnerable individuals from the new locality (Coomber and Moyle, 2012; Robinson et al., 2019; Windle and Briggs, 2015a).

County lines has been widely characterised as a gang problem (e.g. Home Office, 2017; NCA 2016), and while we recognise the frequent involvement of gangs in county lines activity, in this article we have substituted gangs (used in the original NCA definition) with the term 'out-of-town dealers' (OTD) as our own work (Windle and Briggs, 2015b), and informal discussions with practitioners suggests varying levels of coordination by gangs, and that some OTD may be unconnected to gangs.[1] This said, in the three provincial drug market spaces visited by Coomber and Moyle (2018), OTD were described as being part of larger groups or organizations, often referred to as 'gangs', 'firms' or 'crews'. While there were observations of supply hierarchies, these dealers were identified by respondents as loosely structured entrepreneurial groups of similarly ranking friends, family or acquaintances.

While OTD inhabit the higher levels of the county lines structure they largely remain anonymous, organising supply from the safety of the urban locale, or at a mid-level, visiting the provincial market to drop-off stock but staying within the relative safety of the local dealing base (Coomber and Moyle, 2018). Below these OTD, however, are labourers or subcontractors who undertake the vast majority of risky street-level supply activity. In the context of county lines this includes: 'couriers' (individuals trafficking drugs out of the urban area to the new location), 'runners' (individuals delivering purchased drugs to the consumer), 'sitters' (individuals managing drug dealing houses for the enterprise) (Coomber and Moyle, 2018) and

[1] This may depend on the gang definition used. The NCA (2016:6) tend to depict county lines as a gang problem, drawing from Section 34(5) of the Policing and Crime Act 2009, which defines 'gang-related drug dealing' as 'related to the activities of a group' which 'a) consists of at least three people; and, b) has one or more characteristics that enable its members to be identified by others as a group' (cited in NCA 2016:2). This definition is purposefully much broader and more inclusive than most academic gang definition, including the influential Eurogang definition.

‘cuckooed residents’ (individuals housing dealers who sell drugs from their residence) (Coomber and Moyle, 2012; Spicer et al., 2019).

Since 2016, the NCA (2016, 2017, 2018) have surveyed police forces in England and Wales on the prevalence of county lines in their areas. In 2016, 83% of forces reported county lines activity (71% forces reported established county line activity and 12% reported an emerging issue), rising to 88% in 2017 and 100% in 2018. While the scope and spread of this phenomenon is alarming in itself, it is the *systematic* use of predatory recruitment and exploitation which render it distinct and have led to appeals for an urgent national response built around safeguarding vulnerable populations (HM Government, 2016; NCA, 2015, 2016).

The exact reason for the formation of county lines is unclear. It has been suggested that some OTD left urban areas due to the saturation of local drug markets (Windle and Briggs, 2015b; Robinson et al., 2019; Spicer, 2019). Many urban drug markets have, however, previously experienced periods of saturation that did not cause a push to explore new markets. It is, thus, likely that a number of factors converged at a particular time, notably the rehousing of gang members outside of London (see Windle and Briggs, 2015b): the model may then have been imitated and spread once its usefulness was recognised (see Spicer et al., 2019). The choice of location can be informed by gang members having family or intimate relationships in the new locations (HM Government, 2015), through partnerships developed in prison (Windle and Briggs, 2015b) or intelligence gathered in prison on the laxity of law enforcement or range of opportunities in target areas (RUSI, 2016). These factors echo Allum’s (2017) research on Italian mafia migration and move beyond the stale ‘balloon effect’ argument (see Windle and Farrell, 2010) to suggest that illicit entrepreneurs and markets adapt mainly through a combination of push and pull factors.

There is less clarity around when the exploitation of young people, and vulnerable adults, became an integral element of the county lines model. There is a long history of young people being used in some open drug markets before the emergence of county lines, most often as runners (see Lupton et al., 2002), although this was a rarity in most local markets. We would suggest that there has been a step-change from such sporadic exploitation, likely from within family and friendship networks, to more widespread and systematic exploitation employing techniques of coercive control discussed below. Our understanding of county lines would,

however, be much developed by an in-depth and contextualised tracing of this historical process.

County lines are an emerging phenomena and consequently have only recently begun to receive research attention. The relatively small number of academic studies represent a useful starting point, but have all been limited by relatively small participant numbers. Published reports by state bodies, notably the annual NCA intelligence reports, are an important data source. Government publications are, however, limited by partiality (Windle and Silke, 2019) and, there are significant gaps between police intelligence and drug market realities (see Windle and Briggs, 2015b; Coomber 2006; Dorn et al., 1990). The limitations of numerical police data are well documented. They can be influenced by numerous economic, political and institutional factors, including: resource availability, public reporting (see Maguire, 2007), the 'zealousness with which law enforcement agencies pursue drug offenders' (Ousey and Lee, 2002: 81) and changes to reporting categories. All of which can be influenced by political or media pressure (Windle, 2018).

While acknowledging these limitations, this paper draws from a review of the academic, governmental and non-governmental literature, and police data focused on 'children involved in county lines' obtained from the South East Regional Crime Unit (SECRU) (period 01/01/18 – 31/07/18) covering Surrey, Sussex, Hampshire and Thames Valley force areas. This literature is supported by our own previously published empirical research (Coomber et al., 2014; Coomber and Moyle, 2012, 2018; Coomber and Pyke, 2015; Moyle, 2019; Windle and Briggs, 2015a,b) and recent discussions with practitioners from law enforcement and the third sector (RUSI, 2016).[2]

[2] In-depth methodological discussions can be found in our respective papers, however, a combined 170 semi-structured interviews were undertaken with a broad range of practitioners and drug market participants. The studies by Coomber and Moyle also involved ethnographic observation and analysis of police data.

In 2016, two of the authors (Moyle and Windle) participated in an academic-practitioner workshop, hosted by the Royal United Service Institute's (RUSI). Representatives from the NCA, Metropolitan Police and regional police forces identified county lines as a 'leading research priority'. All three authors have since had a number of meetings with various practitioners from the police and third

Drawing on these available data sources, this article will provide an overview of children and young people's involvement in county lines, outlining how they are utilised by county lines groups or OTD to enable this supply model. It will explore the harms associated with outreach street-level supply, outline the risk factors associated with participation and, critically explore the policy responses designed to protect young people and children from county lines. As the literature on county lines is relatively slim, the final two sections will draw lessons from the abundant human trafficking literature.

Young people's participation in county lines

Although dealers migrating to other areas is not a wholly novel phenomenon in itself (Spicer, 2019; see Hales and Hobbs, 2009), as the county lines supply model is designed to operationalise daily 'outreach' dealing from urban hub to provincial town, novel supply practices have emerged to operationalise this cross-border drug distribution. 'Commuting' describes dealers routinely traveling to satellite dealing locales and selling throughout the course of the day, with the seller returning to their urban hub at close of business or living in the area until their supply is sold (Coomber and Moyle, 2012; Windle and Briggs, 2015a). To maximise profit (Spicer, 2019) longer stays are required so sellers can operate on a 24/7 basis (Coomber and Moyle, 2018). Consequently, 'cuckooing' has emerged as a method that enables urban sellers to set up the supply operation for a protracted period (Spicer et al., 2019). Cuckooing refers to the practice of OTD taking over a local property in the host market and using it as a temporary supply base for dispensing and reloading drugs (Coomber and Moyle, 2012).

Though vulnerable groups have long populated street-level supply roles in the drug market, another distinctive aspect of the county lines model relates to the *systematic* targeting and harnessing of vulnerable populations (Moyle, 2019) to transport drugs across regional borders and undertake the supply operation at street-level in these host towns as 'drug runners' (Windle and Briggs, 2015b), 'commuters' and for 'cuckooing' (Coomber and Moyle, 2012). Research and informal discussions with practitioners have identified the exploitation of the following vulnerable peoples: dependent and/or indebted drug consumers, vulnerable adults and young

sector while designing a programme of research into county lines. While we cannot disclose the contents of these meetings, they have informed our view of the impact of county lines.

people with welfare needs, looked after children and children of parents or caregivers with mental health issues and, people experiencing alcohol or drug dependency (see Coomber and Moyle, 2012; NCA, 2017; Sturrock and Holmes, 2015; Windle and Briggs, 2015b).

Children and young people may be exploited because they represent a cheap, easily recruited workforce who can absorb the risks related to street-level sales and are considered disposable to OTD (Coomber and Moyle, 2018), whose goal is commonly viewed by law enforcement as profit maximisation (Spicer, 2019). Police intelligence indicates that young people targeted by OTD are typically 14-17 year-old boys (NCA, 2016; also Cohen, 2018) and often looked after children or, known to child social care or Youth Offending Teams (YOT) (HM Government, 2016; see Andell and Pitts, 2018).

At a regional level, data obtained from SECRU report that between 260-300 children were recorded as being involved in county lines across Hampshire, Sussex, Thames Valley and Surrey between January and July 2018. The use of young boys - particularly those recruited in the urban base to transport drugs to provincial markets - is now commonly accepted by police and practitioners as an established methodology (see Coomber and Moyle, 2018; Robinson et al., 2019). This was reflected in further data extracted from SECRU which reports that 86% of children involved were male and that children from London made up the highest area of origin of the children recorded. Most offences were recorded in Thames Valley, followed by Buckinghamshire and Berkshire.

Though only 14% of those recorded as linked to county lines by SECRU were girls, the overall level of girls' involvement in county lines is currently unknown and has received much less research attention. The NCA (2018:6) suggest that only 9% of county lines offences are recorded for females, which may be associated with gender bias where women and girls are less likely to be viewed as offenders, thereby reducing police suspicion and producing 'fewer opportunities for identification'. However, in 2017 nearly 500 girls under the age of 18 were reported as suspected victims of sexual exploitation, an increase from 250 in three years (NCA, 2017). These figures have been attributed to the rise of county lines activity. In one of the only studies capturing some of these important themes, Storrod and Densley (2017:12) suggest that girls were subject to extensive surveillance and 'might be told to go to some boy's house and be ready to beat (have sex)' and if they did not comply, there would be 'sanctions in the form of physical or sexual violence'.

The harms associated with county lines

This section will explore the potential harms that young people and children involved in county lines may be exposed to. A theme running through the discussion on harms below is that, for many young people, immersion in county lines may have longer-term impacts associated with experiencing cumulative adverse childhood experiences (ACEs). There are nine broad ACEs,[3] and children and young people immersed in county lines may be at risk of experiencing any combination. While over half of the population will experience at least one of these as a child, the culmination of multiple ACEs has been identified as a risk factor for various physical and mental health issues across the life-course. Dube and colleagues (2003:389) found that people with more than five ACEs were '7- to 10-fold more likely to report illicit drug use problems, addiction to illicit drugs, and parenteral drug use'. While Reid and colleagues (2017) found that experiencing a combination of ACEs increased the risk of being a victim of human trafficking for sexual exploitation. It may be that many of those recruited in county lines have already experienced a range of ACEs at home or in care (see for example Coomber and Moyle, 2012; NCA, 2017; Robinson et al., 2019; Sturrock and Holmes, 2015; Windle and Briggs, 2015b), while involvement accentuates the harm already caused.

The young people involved in county lines are known to be involved in visible and high-risk selling practices (NCA, 2018; Robinson et al., 2019; Coomber and Moyle, 2018). Data from SECRU suggests that the vast majority of county lines children identified in this area (238 children) were connected to just one 'line' or selling operation; although a further 32 children

[3] Verbal abuse, substance abuse in the family, physical abuse, emotional neglect, mental illness in the family, loss of a parent, domestic violence, sexual abuse, incarcerated family member and physical neglect.

We acknowledge the recent debates in the literature around the limitations of ACEs, including the counting issues related to conceptualising adversity, the lack of consideration for wider structural issues in some earlier studies, the narrow utilisation of ACEs within policy discussion and the lack of consideration for protective factors (McEwen and Gregerson, 2019). More recent studies have, however, begun to connect family and individual experiences with community adversity. This is well represented by Ellis and Dietz's (2017) 'pair of ACEs tree': here structural issues (i.e. poverty, discrimination, lack of social capital) represent the 'soil' out of which individual experiences develop.

were linked to two or more lines. Children involved in county lines subsequently become exposed to a range of dangers, which can be understood as characterised by a 'spectrum of harm' (Moyle, 2019). Some young people who have acted as 'runners' have described experiences of physical violence, intimidation and emotional abuse by OTD (HM Government 2016; also Sturrock and Holmes, 2015). Elsewhere, research by Storrod and Densley (2016) identified a process of emotional manipulation whereby young people were controlled by the threat of posting harmful comments or sexual photos on social media. Research in Merseyside and Glasgow has also identified a link between drug dealing and sexual exploitation with some female drug runners being coerced into sex work by OTD (Robinson et al., 2019; also NCA, 2017).

Young people who leave urban hubs and relocate to provincial drug markets are often essentially child runways (Sturrock and Holmes, 2015; Windle and Briggs, 2015a; see Gayle, 2018). The Children's Society (2018:2) missing from home services suggest that, on average, 'boys went missing for two weeks, whereas girls went missing for two-three days'. In general, child runways are in a precarious situation: an estimated one in nine children are hurt while away from home (Reece, 2011), while one in nine children (and adults) have reported sexual assault (Biehal *et al*., 2003). Being away from home also strains family relationships and diminishes educational attainment (Evans *et al*., 2007).

Additionally, young people visibly selling drugs face a heightened risk of arrest and violent robbery (see Densley, 2013; Robinson et al. 2019; Windle and Briggs, 2015a). Drugs that have been confiscated by the police or stolen may have to be repaid by the young people, which can result in physical harm (Whittaker et al., 2019; see Topalli et al. 2002; Windle and Briggs, 2015b) and debt bondage. Indeed, Robinson and colleagues (2019:9) found debt bondage from buying drugs can also feature as an important means of recruitment and control (also NCA, 2017).

Those young people, whether from the locality or commuting from the urban hub, who live or work in drug selling houses may suffer additional harms. Their residence/place of work may be unhygienic, uncomfortable and result in them observing and interacting with normalised crack/heroin consumption and sexual acts (see Briggs, 2010, 2013). Detective Inspector Tom Hadley of West Midlands Police reported in a recent court case against an OTD that three children who had been transported from Birmingham to Lincolnshire were:

> … inside a one-bed flat alongside two Class A drug users surrounded by used syringes … The place was filthy, cold and there was no food in the kitchen. The children looked drawn, tired and hungry (Davies, 2018, no page).

The harms associated with county lines may extend beyond those involved in the distribution of drugs. The NCA (2017:15) reported that 'some younger children (including pre-school) were found residing at addresses believed to have been cuckooed by county lines nominals' (also NCA, 2016). This would place children of vulnerable women in a potentially dangerous position during their formative years, and may accentuate the risk of them experiencing a range of ACEs and trauma. That cuckooed homes are often used to facilitate late-night and early-morning drug sales (Coomber and Moyle, 2018) provides an indication of the disruption these children face: drug sales may disturb the young person's sleep and rest, which can limit educational attainment, influence mood and consequently strain relationships.

On a more general level, the involvement of gangs may increase the likelihood of victimisation. A significant body of empirical research suggests that gang involvement, as affiliates or active members, can negatively impact young people in multiple ways, including: diminished educational attainment and, increased likelihood of both offending and victimisation (see Curry et al. 2013): Pyrooz and colleagues (2014) estimate that gang members are twice as likely as non-gang members to be both an offender and victim of crime, while Wood and Dennard (2017) suggest that exposure to violence undermines gang members mental health, with many presenting with post-traumatic stress. As such, while the political and media focus has been on those framed as victims of OTD, many gang members are themselves young people leading precarious lives (Beresford and Wood, 2016); even if they are perceived as having a more entrepreneurial and predatory role in county lines.

In summary, young people involved in county lines, as active participants or vicariously through parental involvement, may face any number of harms. These young people will likely already have been made vulnerable by ACEs, accentuated by structural inequalities within their communities, a topic discussed in greater detail below.

Risk and protective factors for exploitation

While the literature on county lines is relatively slim, there is an abundant literature on human trafficking which can be usefully drawn upon for insights into the dynamics of county lines and policy responses. Human trafficking and county lines both involve the movement and exploitation of vulnerable peoples[4] and, as such, can be defined as human trafficking under the Palermo Protocol and UKs Modern Slavery Act (2015). Indeed, the Crown Prosecution Service (2017) has defined county lines as human trafficking by advising that the Modern Slavery Act can be used to secure conviction against OTD; as applied in two separate cases bought against OTD in 2018 (Davies, 2018; Dearden, 2018; Gayle, 2018).

Human trafficking victims are seldom kidnapped, but rather a number of factors converge to push and pull individuals into the traffickers' snare (Di Nicola, 2005):

> The lowest common denominator of all trafficking and smuggling victims is their vulnerability, which may depend on a set of variables deriving from the fact that a person has no physical, material, social, or psychological resources with which to resist the blandishments of traffickers/smugglers. Such vulnerable personas are desperate to escape from dire socioeconomic and socio-political circumstances (Di Nicola, 2005:194).

Many human trafficking victims are not fully passive and at some point decide to move location, even if their decision is limited by circumstance. Many actively and consensually go along with their recruiter, to be more overtly coerced at a later stage (Hoyle et al., 2011; Di Nicola, 2005).

[4] While the Palermo Protocol is somewhat vague on what exploitation means, the Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention (1999, Article 3) defines child exploitation as including:

> … debt bondage and serfdom, forced or compulsory labour… *The use, planning or offering of a child for illicit activities, in particular for the production and trafficking of drugs* … [and] Work, which by its very nature or the circumstances in which it is carried out, *is likely to harm the health, safety or morals of children* (italics added).

Existing research has clearly established that those exploited by county lines are pushed by economic insecurity and/or, disruptive and chaotic home lives (see Coomber and Moyle, 2012; NCA, 2017; Robinson et al., 2019; Sturrock and Holmes, 2015; Windle and Briggs, 2015b). Young people may be pulled by profit (Windle and Briggs, 2015a, 2015b), access to drugs (Coomber and Moyle, 2018; Robinson et al., 2019) or the lure of attaining the trappings of consumer culture exhibited by OTD (Briggs, 2013). On a more personal level they may be drawn by the excitement and status of being associated with particular OTD (Andell and Pitts, 2018; Robinson et al., 2019; Storrod and Densely, 2016) or, in personal or romantic relationships with them (Coomber and Moyle, 2012; Storrod and Densely, 2016).

In some cases, and paralleling human trafficking, children and young people are groomed or trapped through the imposition of gifts, or accumulation of drug debts (NCA, 2016, 2017; Coomber and Moyle, 2012, 2018; Robinson et al., 2019). This control may be overt, through violence and threats of violence, or through more psychological coercion. For example, Storrod and Densley (2016) exposed the practice of 'hostage taking': girls are groomed online and the threat of posting harmful comments or pictures on social media is used as a means of control. These themes are drawn together in a recent county lines case: two OTD from London met a 19-year-old girl via social media and promised her work. They drove her to Swansea where 'her mobile phone was destroyed and she was held in a flat'. She was also 'beaten, punched in the face and forced to conceal Class A drugs inside her' (Dearden, 2018:no page).

While law enforcement narratives portray the county lines model as inherently exploitative (NCA 2015; 2016), adult cuckooed residents reported to Moyle (2019) that they initially considered renting arrangements and drug running a 'mutually beneficial relationship' that would fund their addiction and, they could drift in and out of (also Spicer et al., 2019). This arrangement, however, almost always became more exploitative over time. Similar dynamics may be at play for young people involved in other roles and, significantly, the Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention (1999, Article 3) defines all involvement of children in crime as exploitative. Indeed, policy guidance for practitioners now advise that descriptive terms such as 'drug running' should be avoided and replaced with 'Child Criminal Exploitation' (CCE) (see CSE Police and Prevention, no date).

The county lines experience of vulnerability therefore presents a situation in which actors might not necessarily meet the parameters of 'traditional' notions of vulnerability, with numerous

individuals recruited as runners or sellers falling into the category of both ‘victims’ and ‘perpetrators’ (Coliandris, 2015; Appleton, 2014). As the next section will outline, these features make for a ‘messy’ intractable policing problem which goes beyond violence and coercion (Coliandris, 2015, Moyle, 2019).

Policy responses

The YOT and police officers we have spoken to over the course of the last seven years demonstrate an awareness of, and empathy for, young people’s vulnerability and exploitation in relation to county lines. This is reflected in recent government policies such as the Serious Violence Strategy (HM Government, 2018:51-52), and also NCA reports, in which diversion, prevention and safeguarding are highlighted as important strategic aims when dealing with young people. There are also several examples of good practice, for example, Reading Police’s use of Trauma Informed Policing and, referrals to NHS Youth Liaison and Diversion Teams (Cohen, 2018; also ATCM, 2018; Ofsted, 2018).

Young people involved in county lines may, however, be criminalized rather than safeguarded, and their complex needs and risks may not be recognized (Sturrock and Holmes, 2015). This may partly reflect the British Government’s increasingly conservative and punitive youth justice approach, which tends to ignore or downplay structural conditions facilitating youth offending whilst assuming rational choice as the main explanatory factor for offending; therefore shifting the entire responsibility for these choices on to them (Ellis, 2018; also Swirak, 2016). It may also be because abstract concepts of vulnerability and exploitation can be difficult to identify in practice, especially when police officers and other frontline youth justice workers are under-resourced (Haines and Case, 2018) and, lack sufficient training in identifying and dealing with the issues these young people present.

The labels ‘victim’ and ‘exploited’ are social constructs produced not just by the experience of harm but also the perception of various actors, including the media, third sector and state agencies applying the label (Hoyle et al., 2011). Christie (1986:18-19) argued that ‘ideal victims’ - those who ‘most readily are given the complete and legitimate status of victim’ - will be: weak (often the very old or very young), blameless, carry out ‘a respectable project’ and victimized by a ‘big and bad’ offender who is unknown to the victim. The young people working in county lines miss the mark on all but one (or at best two) of these criteria: They are young, but seldom that young and innocence recedes with each passing year. They are involved

in the sale of the most demonised of drugs (crack cocaine and heroin) and their drug sales do cause harm to others. Many are known to authorities before their engagement in county lines, and they may exhibit the dress and vernacular of 'road culture' (see Gunter, 2008). While they are often victimized by 'big and bad' OTD (even 'bigger' and 'badder' when labelled gang members), the offender is often known to the victim. As such, while policies may demand safeguarding, it can be difficult for some frontline practitioners to identify these young people as victims. While policies are changing, the history of human trafficking responses (see Hoyle et al. 2011; also Appleton, 2014) suggest that we cannot assume that official policies translate into actual practice and some frontline practitioners will move slowly in their reconceptualization of victim/perpetrator.

The challenges of safeguarding these young people are well illustrated in reports by ATCM (2018) and Ofsted (2018). YOT and social care workers reported to ATCM (2018:9-10) that county lines was 'challenging the child protection system'. Frontline police reported sending young people home without adequate support from social services and, social care practitioners reported that diminished resources and the 'interpretation of child protection policy' as limited to protecting children from abuse and neglect were barriers to protecting children from exploitation. The Ofsted (2018:17) report concluded that 'not all frontline police officers will have had the training to help them identify a vulnerable child' and called for a 'shift in culture' whilst identifying a lack of interagency cooperation as a barrier to dealing with exploitation.

Some participants reported to ATCM (2018:10) that some frontline staff:

> Viewed young people's behavior, especially in the case of young boys, as a sign of criminality, almost a lifestyle choice, rather than of a vulnerable child in need of protection.

While others were concerned that young people 'only receive a slap on the wrist' which 'sends a message to young people that the consequences of drug dealing and violence are minimal' and '(very) young people thinking they can do whatever they like with impunity' (ATCM, 2018:7).

Related to this, many vulnerable young people interviewed collectively by us, in various research sites, did not necessarily see themselves as victims, nor did young people interviewed

by Robinson and colleagues (2019) in Glasgow and Merseyside. For example, one young person ('Luke', 17, interviewed by LM in September 2016) was sent to Weymouth from Ealing to sell crack cocaine. While Luke was considered by YOT workers to represent a 'textbook' exploitation case, his narrative differed considerably: Luke emphasized that he 'wanted cash' and had actively approached the brother of a school friend known to be involved in county lines because he had 'seen a lot of people do it before'. Luke was arrested whilst selling drugs in Weymouth and again stressed his perceived agency by refusing to give evidence when the police decided to prosecute the OTD for kidnapping. This case is in keeping with findings taken from Robinson and colleagues (2019:710) study of county lines in Glasgow and Merseyside where some young people were found to 'justify or neutralise' their exploitation. Research by Ellis (2018) provides insight into possible reasons for this: young girls in secure care interviewed by Ellis rejected the 'vulnerable' label as undermining their more positive perception of themselves as survivors.

The demographics of those involved in county lines suggest that most come from socially and economically disadvantaged backgrounds. As such, and as suggested in Luke's case, engaging in county lines for either money or drugs may demonstrate a certain level of resilience, in that young people are 'instrumental in providing shelter and sustenance for themselves' (Ellis, 2018:161). This is not to say they necessarily made wise choices but rather that they made what they felt were the best choices, at the time and under difficult circumstances.

The label vulnerable may then, in itself, be a double edged sword: it can protect these young people from the excesses of the criminal justice system while simultaneously preventing them engaging fully with rehabilitative agencies. Indeed, Ellis (2018:161) suggests that state agencies need to understand 'vulnerability in a structural sense' in order to 'enable girls [or boys] to celebrate their success and plan a pathway for their future based on professional knowledge and support'. This may be especially valid for those young people, girls and boys, enmeshed in hyper-masculine road cultures where signs of vulnerability signal to friends and foes alike that they are open to victimization and predation (see Densley, 2013; Harding, 2014). The same may be true of the victim label: It can validate experiences, which 'allow' individuals to feel justified in their feelings of anger, fear or sadness, and opens doors to services and compensation (Hoyle et al., 2011). The label may, however, be a bitter pill to swallow for those who have spent their life avoiding labels which signal weakness.

Conclusion

The vulnerable children and young people caught up in county lines may become, in the eyes of the authorities, less of a victim through their protection of older OTD, unwillingness to cooperate and general attitude. These young people may, however, be disempowered by circumstances (minimal income, nowhere to live, no friends or family to call on), untrusting of authority (a byproduct of road culture and exaggerated by controlling OTD), rejecting of vulnerable or victim labels and, may feel connected or indebted to OTD. They may simply like the OTD or want to emulate their conspicuous consumption. The research and policy literature suggests that despite the good intentions of local services, these characteristics may still make it difficult for over-worked and under-supported frontline practitioners to empathise with the young person or see vulnerability beneath tough exteriors.

This article has drawn on the available data scoping children and young people's involvement in county lines. Our review, however, highlights that the current literature base is limited and partial. It is vital that further research can explore both the bigger data pertaining to arrest, victimization and patterns in participation, and also the lived experiences of young people caught up in county lines. As Robinson and colleagues (2019) suggest, ultimately, engaging positively with children and young people and drawing upon their unique insights is key to informing policy related discussion and reducing harm for vulnerable groups.

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